



PROJECT MUSE®

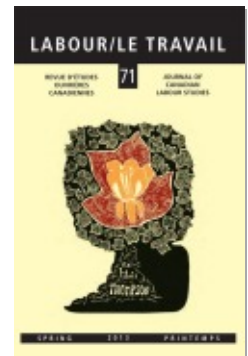
---

**Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present ed. by Dario Azzellini and Immanuel Ness (review)**

Ingo Schmidt

Labour / Le Travail, Issue 71, Spring 2013, pp. 298-300 (Article)

Published by The Canadian Committee on Labour History  
DOI: 10.1353/lt.2013.0020



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lt/summary/v071/71.schmidt.html>

the PCI from 1944 to 1991 would have benefited from much more biographical detail. Specialists in Italian history, neo-Marxism, and comparative communism will surely welcome this book. Readers looking for a sophisticated entry-level volume on the PCI would be better off with Paul Ginsborg's brilliant *A History of Contemporary Italy 1943–1980* (Penguin 1990), which presents a more coherent version of the same story (and much more besides) with all the scholarly apparatus *The Tailor of Ulm* lacks and at significantly less cost. Readers looking primarily for a synoptic history of communism in the 20th century need to look elsewhere.

JOHN MANLEY

University of Central Lancashire

**Dario Azzellini and Immanuel Ness,**  
**eds., *Ours to Master and to Own:***  
***Workers' Control from the Commune to***  
***the Present*** (Chicago: Haymarket Books  
 2011)

READING THIS BOOK is like looking into a kaleidoscope of workers' efforts to regain control over their work, workplaces, and lives more generally. As any other kaleidoscope, this one, too, displays a perplexing variety of facets and every turn produces a new image looking similar but not quite the same as the old one. The first set of images gives an overview of the history of, and theoretical reflections upon, workers' councils. The chapters in this first part of the book present the Paris Commune as a prelude to the main acts of revolution and the establishment of workers' council in Russia, Germany, and Italy from 1917 to 1920. Workers' experiences in these three cases are presented as benchmarks against which all later struggles for workers' control are measured. The centrality of these three cases is recognized by separate case studies in the second part of the book. Complemented by a chapter on

Spain, this part of the book looks at the early 20th century and shifts the focus from generalizing theoretical reflections to more detailed historical presentations. Contributors to the following parts stick to this historical focus and invite readers on a tour of workers' control in state socialist and post-colonial countries, struggles against capitalist restructuring in the 1970s, and more recent claims for workers' control from India to Latin America. Arriving at the finishing line, the reader is left with more questions than answers, questions like: What triggered recurrent outbursts of worker militancy beyond party and union organizing? Why were these outbursts crushed or channeled back into the safe waters of institutionalized politics? Are these instances closed chapters in history or is there anything to learn from them for future struggles? The editors plead for the latter, as they make clear in the introduction. The crucial question, then, is whether the kaleidoscope of historical experiences can be transformed into a theoretical guide for the future. To be sure, after reading the book the answer could be a resounding "no." Theoretical references to Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, and other members of the Marxist pantheon reflect the confidence in the "Forward March of Labour" that inspired labour activists and intellectuals from the late 19th to the early 20th century. However, the case studies in this book seem to conform to the idea that this forward march was eventually halted, as Hobsbawm, who invented the term, speculated in the late 1970s. Three decades of labour in retreat later, though, the taste for another reading of 20th-century labour has grown. It is such a reading to which the editors and authors of this book invite their readers. Actual labour hasn't developed the way activists and intellectuals had envisioned and hoped for around the turn of the 20th century. Yet, these ideas can still serve as theoretical

starting points for a reflection upon later experiences. In fact, careful reading of the case studies in the book show that many of the theoretical arguments made some 100 years ago were confirmed by later developments; just the political hopes that were attached to them were disappointed over and over again.

These arguments revolve around three themes that run as common threads, with varying nuances, through the contributions to the book. The first of them is the dynamic of workers' struggle. In their introduction, Azzellini and Ness explain that their interest is not in workers' co-ops that try to carve out market niches in a capitalist economy but in workers' efforts to replace such an economy by one kind of worker's self-administration or another. Yet, as they also point out and many of the case studies confirm, such advances are threatened by outright defeat or cooptation or both. The German revolution of 1918/19, for example, was crushed by military counterrevolution among other things, and the idea of worker's councils was then transformed into co-determination between capitalists and workers. A variation of the theme of defeat and cooptation can be found in the chapters on Poland and Yugoslavia. Both countries were nominally socialist but in the former the subordination of workers to the ruling bureaucracy was so obvious, and so much despised, that it led to recurrent workers' upheavals that made Poland in the mid-1950s and again in the early 1980s look like revolutionary Russia, Germany, or Italy. In Yugoslavia, where workers' self-management was more than empty talk, the problems of decentralized, firm-based decision-making became apparent. Notably, the government's ability to redirect funds from richer to poorer areas and thus create some level of cohesion across the country was severely curtailed by firm-level egoisms.

This problem relates to the second theme running through the book: the relations among firms, unions, and states. Often, as in Spain in the 1930s, Algeria in the 1960s, and Argentina and Portugal in the 1970s, workers' councils originally just filled the vacuum left by collapsing state apparatuses and were thus emergency measures rather than strategically planned socialist offensives. Once in place, though, their existence came into conflict with unions and workers' parties that were built within the now defunct states but also keen on either resurrecting the old or building a new state. In this conflict, workers' councils with their decentralized social base in individual firms had a disadvantage vis-à-vis unions and parties operating on countrywide levels. A number of authors in the book refer to Gramsci, a participant in the workers' council movement in Turin in 1919/20, who developed his concept of hegemony as a possible way out of the limitations of decentralized workers' councils but sought an alternative to the centralized party-state that had developed in Soviet Russia.

The third theme in the book is the question of agency and the division of labour. An underlying premise of workers' councils is that workers possess the skills required to take over their workplaces. In the early 20th century, when these ideas were formed, this might have been the case but those days were already a period of transition towards the de-skilling of work. The impact this had on struggles for workers' control are most clearly articulated in a chapter on Italy in the 1970s where factory-centred struggles quickly gave way to community organizing, theorized as organizing the social factory. These struggles transcended factory gates and aimed at making links with other segments of the subordinated classes and thus represented a step forward. At the same time, though, they

signal the unmaking of working class, as we knew it. Interestingly enough, the chapters on workers' control since the 1990s make less use of the theoretical language that had developed with that class. They very much describe a period of transition where the old language does not fit any longer and a new, more fitting one, hasn't developed yet. *Ours to Master and to Own* is a contribution to such a development. It offers more questions than answers, lots to talk and think about, and also a perspective of progressive change. This is a refreshing change compared to the eternal truths many on the left held for some time and to the cult of undetermined identities they embraced once their assumed truths had failed the reality check.

INGO SCHMIDT

Athabasca University

**Michael Riordon, *Our Way to Fight: Peace-Work Under Siege in Israel-Palestine*** (London: Pluto Press and Toronto: Between the Lines 2011)

DOROTHY NAOR picks up Michael Riordon, author of *Our Way to Fight: Peace-Work Under Siege in Israel-Palestine*, in her green Volkswagen Passat. From Tel Aviv they head to the occupied West Bank. "Now pay attention.... We've just crossed the so-called Green Line," she warns Riordon, a Canadian investigative journalist who is neither a Jew nor a Palestinian. Naor, however, is Jewish and an American-born peace activist in Israel where she has lived for 60 years. She has a doctorate in literature and is a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. Naor is 80 years old and a peace activist. She and hundreds like her resist Israel's 45-year illegal and brutal occupation of Palestine.

So begins Riordon's excellent book that explores the dangerous lives and politics of Jews and Palestinians who are working

for peace in Israel and Palestine. In 1949, just after the founding of the Jewish state, the Green Line was drawn to divide the land between the Jews and the Arabs. The Green Line also divided Jerusalem – West Jerusalem belonged to Israel and East Jerusalem to Jordan. However in 1967, Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria. For the last 45 years, Palestinians have lived under Israeli military control. To add insult to injury, since the early 1970s, successive Israeli governments have either tolerated or encouraged the growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, especially near East Jerusalem. Today the West Bank is home to more than 500,000 Jewish settlers in scores of Jewish communities that are really settlements, with homes, schools, swimming pools, medical clinics, playgrounds, and workplaces in the occupied West Bank. More than 300,000 of the settlers live in settlements surrounding East Jerusalem – on land that does not belong to them. These settlements are illegal according to international law.

Dorothy Naor drives author Riordon across the Green Line to visit several Palestinians, including a farmer Hani Amer, and a journalist, Issa Souf. Amer's house had been demolished to make way for another illegal Israeli settlement. After bulldozing his house, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) destroyed his plant nursery, chicken coop, and goat shed – crushing his ability to earn a livelihood. Israel's "security wall" snakes through Amer's farmland, which (due to IDF checkpoints) takes him nearly two hours to get to rather than the 20-minute drive it took before the wall. A constant worry for Amer is the shortage of water: as Riordon notes, "According to a 2009 study by the World Bank, Israel controls all the water sources but allocates to Palestinians only