

The Role of Participation in the Class Struggle —
the Example of „Mitbestimmung“ in the Federal
Republic of Germany

Klaus Pickshaus

Frankfurt

The meaning of "participation" is in no way unambiguous, also the degree of influence and the degree of participation of workers in the management of capitalist firms and the degree of influence in the organs of the state varies widely. The different terminology in which in various capitalist countries their form of participation is described, reflects the different national ideological traditions in the working class movement and the balance of class forces in a given country.¹

More important however than a clarification of terminology is the analysis of the real movement of struggle of the working class and its forms of expression and demands. In this context the system of "Mitbestimmung" in the FRG, which probably should rather be translated with the term "co-determination", is surely of interest, especially because it is internationally praised by representatives of West German Social democracy and the trade unions as a model of functioning class cooperation.

In the FRG, as a result of the working class struggle and also of the attempts by the ruling circles to integrate the working class into the capitalist system, there is now a ramified and differentiated system giving the trade unions and other organizations of the working class the right to obtain information, state their views, exercise a veto, and take part in drafting decisions in big enterprises. These rights are ensured mainly by the 1972 law on the status of enterprises, the law on participation in the management of the mining and steel industries, and the so-called law on worker participation in production management, adopted in 1976, which determines the composition of supervisory boards in big enterprises. None of these laws were proposed by the employers federations or the state, and none of them were accepted voluntarily.

In the FRG about 6.1 million wage earners, that is 26.5 per cent of all employees, presently work in forms, where representatives of the workers and the trade unions are part of the supervisory board. Only 0.6 million workers in about 30 firms are affected by the most advanced regulation of "Mitbestim-

¹ An interesting discussion report about the different approaches of Marxists towards the problem of participation in several capitalist countries has been published in "World Marxist Review", *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, № 5, 7, 1980.

nung" in the mining and steel industries. When the law was passed in 1951, 105 firms were governed by it — an example even then of the enormous process of capital concentration. 4.5 million employees in 500 large enterprises fall within the law of "Mitbestimmung" of 1976. Altogether more than 4,000 representatives of workers and trade unions are delegates to the supervisory boards of the big companies.

The material basis of this type of institutionalized participation in capitalist firms is to be sought in the structural changes of capital itself. Especially the socialisation of the management process and the separation of capital ownership and capital function created preconditions to involve representatives of the working class in organs of management, and also to create organs which are composed both of representatives of the workers and capital. As the present practice shows the range and possibility of influence of such committees is limited, because the centres of state monopoly power are not affected by this type of control. On the other hand these committees present capital with the opportunity to involve the forces of the working class in the activity of capitalist management, if they succeed in making "Mitbestimmung" a method of integration. This is also true not just for big enterprises but also for committees at higher industrial levels and committees of the state.

Also at this level there is a broad possibility to integrate representatives of the working class into a system of bureaucratic control representing the capital system as a whole. The growth of the socialisation of capital created the material precondition for the various forms of participation. This general socialisation of capital is also the reason for the growing weight of the working class. The capitalist managements are trying by these forms of integration to take account of this growing importance.

As the historical analysis shows the granting of this type of participation rights has always been the result of the pressure and the struggle of the working class which generally aimed at further-reaching goals; that is the control and socialisation of the means of production. They are concessions of state and monopoly capital and as long as the system is not modified or questioned they can turn into institutions of conflict absorption and stabilisation of the capitalist system as such.²

The precondition for the success of such a policy is indeed the existence of a strong right wing of the working class movement and also the domineering influence of the ideology of "social partnership" and class collaboration within the working

² In the FRG the importance of "Mitbestimmung" for the struggle of the working class movement has been discussed intensively, especially at the beginning of the 70s, in the trade union movement and the Left. An analysis of the aspects mentioned but also various political and ideological concepts of "Mitbestimmung" had been published by the Institut für Marxistische Studien und Forschungen: Autorenkollektiv, *Mitbestimmung als Kampfaufgabe*, Frankfurt-Köln 1971.

class. This right wing in Social Democracy interprets the achievement of participation rights as an equality of capital and labour. A further precondition for a successful policy of "social partnership" is the favourable development of capitalist accumulation which makes it possible for capital to grant considerable economic and social concessions to the working class and thereby help to minimize the intensity of class conflicts.

In the fifties and sixties in the FRG such a situation existed and among other things guaranteed the stability of the integrationist policy. Because of the growing difficulties for the utilisation of capital and the development of crisis and the intensification of social conflicts in the seventies, conditions emerged, which weakened the ideas of "social partnership" within the working class and trade unions, so that their influence was somewhat diminished. This situation also brought about a change in attitude towards "Mitbestimmung": criticism of the practice of "social partnership" relating to "Mitbestimmung" grew in sections of the trade union movement; ideas which consider "Mitbestimmung" as an instrument of democratic control over capital and an instrument of fighting for workers' interests became stronger.

But the practice of "social partnership", i.e. "Mitbestimmung", could not abolish the class conflict and generally could not prevent strikes. It is bound to fail sooner or later because of the reality of the conflict of interests in capitalist firms. The spontaneous strikes in 1969 in the mining and steel industries proved this as does the steel workers' strike in 1978/79. In these cases the limits of integrationist "Mitbestimmung" became obvious and also the possibility of using these committees for the representation of the interests of workers.

Thus the central point to be seen in an analysis of "Mitbestimmung" in the FRG and for the practical future policy becomes clear: decisive is not the institutionalised aspect of participation and the legal obligations to "social partnership" but the question why these limits are accepted by the trade unions. Consequently the decisive handicap is the integrationist influence in the trade unions and the working class movement, which must be understood in connection with the intensity of conflict, the level of class struggle and class consciousness.

An empirical analysis of "Mitbestimmung" in the FRG shows, that different types of the representation of interests can be found at shop floor level and in trade unions³. In some areas the legal institutional framework is accepted as an absolute limit to activity which cannot be overcome, in others this framework is seen as a starting point for the enlargement of real positions of influence of the working class. This last conception of "Mitbestimmung" is understood as a means of democratic

³ Results of one such empirical analysis is included in the study of the IMSF mentioned above. Compare as well: Frank Deppe, *Das Bewußtsein der Arbeiter*, Köln 1971.

control and a counterforce in relation to capital. In the tradition of the German working class movement this struggle for control is expressed in the form of demands for "Mitbestimmung".

Demands for "Mitbestimmung" have therefore to be seen as a special and as yet undeveloped form of the more general and far-reaching demand for democratic and workers' control. Only in periods, when the class struggle sharpens can they be expressed in their deep and complex form. Now they are a reflection of the present-day alignment of forces, historical experience, and the conditions of struggle in our country.

During the November 1918 revolution in Germany and the subsequent battles, the struggle for workers' control or for participation in management was of great significance as a factor of the class struggle waged by the workers and their organizations to extend their rights and influence. It was closely linked with the movement for setting up workers' councils and the demands for nationalisation. After the defeat of the revolution and as a result of the changed balance of class forces, the militant struggle for workers' control, which reflected the striving for all-embracing and effective control over production, became, in the main, a struggle in defence of the trade union rights that had been won.

After 1945 the demands for nationalisation and participation in management were included in practically all policy statements. The reason for this was that the people realised that big capital was mainly to blame for the fascists coming to power and for the fascist war of aggression. In the statements issued by workers' organizations at that time the demand for "Mitbestimmung" in running enterprises was put forward not as a substitute for nationalisation, but as a special factor giving workers direct participation in the control and management of enterprises.

However, as big capital regained its power it launched a counter-offensive. When the FRG was formed and its Constitution proclaimed, the democratic rights won by the working class were attacked from all directions. The trade unions responded by demanding legislation on the status of enterprises. The legislation enacted after this bore the stamp of integrationist "social partnership". But the countless attempts to nullify these rights through various manipulations show that monopoly capital sees even provision on participation orientated towards "social partnership" as certain threat. Take the legislative action by big capital to dispute the law of 1976, which the trade unions feel does not even merit being called a law on participation in production management. The same attitude is mirrored by the list of bans, which amount to a declaration by the employers' federations of their uncompromising stand against any attempt to extend the right to participation in economic management.

The fear of big capital is focused on a possible situation in the future, where existing participation rights could be used in a way to forward the interests and enlarge the power of the working class. This is proved by the current events in the FRG: During the last months the Mannesmann corporation tried to abolish in its steel section the regulations of the law of "Mitbestimmung" of 1951, which are more far-reaching than those of the 1976 law, by rearranging the firm. By this possible obstacles to a planned relocation and rationalisation process in the steel industry are supposed to be done away with. It is interesting that more than 50,000 workers in July and August 1980 went on strike in order to defend the still mainly integrationist type of "Mitbestimmung". The attempts to abolish "Mitbestimmung" in this concern are seen as limitations on trade union and democratic rights in general.

Summarizing the short historical survey: "Mitbestimmung" is thus a class demand with deep roots in the FRG working class movement; it is integrated into the objective of extending democratic rights and can by no means be reduced to institutionalised participation in management, in other words, to legally controlled relations at enterprises. "Mitbestimmung" as control of management is an objective of the class struggle in all its forms — economic, political, and ideological — and at all levels. The extent to which compliance with the demands for such participation can be enforced depends on the actual balance of strength between labour and capital, and in the final analysis, is linked to the question of power.

The demands for "Mitbestimmung" are at present a specifically limited form of expressing a broader and more far-reaching demand for democratic, for workers' control. Therefore the struggle for the rights of "Mitbestimmung" must not be limited to problems of the work place, but neither must it be limited to questions of the rules of the factory or the company. Being an integral part of the overall struggle of classes, the problem of "Mitbestimmung" assumes various forms according to the given relation of power and the aspirations of the working class movement at the time. Separated from the total strategy of the workers' movement and isolated from the system of developing antagonism of capitalist society, demands for "Mitbestimmung" may become (and are becoming) the starting point of a policy of class collaboration.

Demands for "Mitbestimmung" have to aim therefore not only at a change of the forms by which capital rules, but to strike at the very essence of capitalist rule. If the working class movement is not able to develop these dialectics, isolated demands for "Mitbestimmung" will only give rise to a sort of reformation and modernization of the forms of capitalist rule. The central problem of the struggle for "Mitbestimmung" consists in connecting the struggle for the direct interests of the masses of workers and employees with their historical class

interests. As an undeveloped and special form of the demand for workers' control the struggle for "Mitbestimmung" aims in the historical long run at the control of all centres of capitalist power at every level: from the level of the working place, the factory, the company up to the total economy and the state. Connecting the struggle for the direct interests of the working class with their historical class interests is only possible by attacking the capitalist profit sphere. Demands for "Mitbestimmung" must take this into account. But they can never replace an active wages policy and even less the goal of the nationalization of big industry, banks and insurance capital.

The struggle for an effective democratic "Mitbestimmung" is inseparable from the effort to bring about any social change and create the conditions for anti-monopoly state power backed by the working class and other democratic forces, i.e., a cardinal change in the balance of political forces. Therefore the struggle for "Mitbestimmung" and control over management must be closely linked to the campaigns for other anti-monopoly and democratic reforms, such as nationalisation of raw materials and other key industries, market-controlling enterprises, banks, insurance companies, press monopolies, and cultural concerns, and other reforms.

"Mitbestimmung" as a process of developing the power of the working class is based upon the initiative of the masses. Without the activity of the working masses the gaining of real "Mitbestimmung" is impossible. Participation of workers' and employees' representatives in carrying out capital functions — a characteristic trait of integrationist concepts — does not change the relations of power. The movement connected with and developing with the struggle for real "Mitbestimmung" is therefore an integral element of the newly gained positions.

The necessity to develop mass movements and the necessity to direct the initiative of the workers against the real centres of capitalist class rule is connected with the exposure of power distribution and power processes. Without enlarging the information basis of the working class even the beginning of real changes in the balance of power in partial sections of society is unthinkable. But an enlargement of the information basis of the working class is identical with the enlargement of the information basis of workers' and employees' representatives only, when the representatives are able to use the gained information for mobilizing the masses of workers and employees, and when they really do so.

In the FRG the discussions about "Mitbestimmung" often center on a single problem, namely, the composition of the supervisory boards. But confining this problem to equal representation on these board does not help to achieve a radical improvement of the situation. Nevertheless the struggle for these trade union demands is an opportunity for exposing the existing power structures, specifically at the level of companies

and transnational corporations, and for gradually giving prominence to more meaningful demands for democratic rights and control in the workshops and enterprises.

The extension of the power and influence of the working class cannot be identified with an extension of the institutional framework of "Mitbestimmung" as it exists in the FRG. But the extension of workers' power and influence develops within this framework and these positions can be used to extend workers' rights. In this way the struggle may be understood as a practical movement for the extension and deepening of democratic rights of the working class and for the limitation of the power of monopoly capital. But the development of the strength and influence of the working class does not mean the establishment of socialist islands in a capitalist ocean. The development of the strength and influence of the working class is nothing but the development of its level of preparedness, i.e. the level of organization, consciousness and practical ability to struggle.

As long as the historical process of conquest of political power by the working class is not yet completed, power positions of the working class are positions of counter-power against capital. But also in a situation, where the working class will for a long time to come not even be in the forefield of a direct struggle for conquering political power, its strength lies not so much and not primarily in its representation within given institutions but in its ability to develop its class power in all fields of social and political struggle.

For judging different models and concepts of "Mitbestimmung" the following criteria could help:

- 1) Does the given concept help to develop mass initiative or does it hinder it?
- 2) Does the given concept direct the impetus against the centres of capitalist power or does it rather aim at some sort of modernization of the forms of capitalist rule?
- 3) Does the given concept aim at an enlargement of the information basis of the working class or not?
- 4) Does the given concept help to develop and strengthen positions of counter-power or not?

"Mitbestimmung" not as "social partnership" but as control of management and as counter-force of the working class would therefore mean:

- making public the conditions under which decisions were taken;
- control of the apparatus, by which decisions are realized and that the interests are fulfilled, through the workers, through their directly elected representatives and organizations;
- participation in decision making and the process of formulating the demands at different levels.

Information, control, interest-fulfillment are inseparable and integrally connected to each other.

In accordance with such a conception in the FRG demands for changes in the existing practice of "Mitbestimmung" are put forward: the representatives of workers and clerks shall be accountable to the shop floor and the trade unions concerning their activities. Apart from that mandated persons shall be recallable. Furthermore the legal regulations shall be changed in a way that the duty of secrecy (existing at present) of working class representatives shall be abolished.⁴

To connect democratic activity, initiative and spontaneity of the individual groups and collectives with the combined representation in action of the shop floor and trade unions is more necessary than ever now considering the structure of present day big capitalist enterprises and state monopoly capitalism. The precondition for the transition to active control over capital or over single areas of its realm of power is the centralisation of information and the development of alternative tactics and strategies by the trade unions.

Under the conditions of our country the main task consists in organizing of the power potential of "Mitbestimmung" as an instrument of democratic control over capital; in the strengthening of the trade unions as the united mass organizations of the working class; in pushing back the influence of "social partnership" and in the struggle for a class orientated autonomous trade union policy.⁵

⁴ These are the demands of many militant trade unionists, left social democrats, socialists and of the German Communist Party.

⁵ About this task of the trade unions a discussion has developed in the FRG during the last years. Reference among others: Frank Deppe, *Autonomie und Integration. Materialien zur Gewerkschaftsanalyse*, Marburg, 1979 and Gert Hautsch/Klaus Pickshaus, "Klassenautonomie und Einheitsgewerkschaft", in: *Marxistische Studien. Jahrbuch des IMSF* 3/1980, Frankfurt/Main 1980.