THE TROJAN HORSE:
WORKERS' DEMOCRACY IN THE CITADEL OF CAPITALISM

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INTRODUCTION

History does repeat itself. Americans today find ourselves in a struggle that closely mirrors that epic clash waged between the Trojans and Greeks millennia ago. The "Trojans" of today are the defenders of the status quo: capitalists, managers, labor unions and the government. The "Greeks" are those disparate groups of reformists who historically raised the banners of populism and workers' socialism and who today bear allegiance to the Citizens Party or to the Rainbow Coalition. The Trojans want to make the system "more profitable"; the Greeks want to make the system "more humane." On with the metaphor . . .

For over a century the Greeks have been assaulting the Trojan's citadel of capitalism, hurling volleys of fiery rhetoric and barbs of criticism at its sturdy walls, and once in a while, catapulting one of their spokespersons into the ephemeral national political spotlight: William Jennings Bryan, Jesse Jackson, and who knows, Jane Fonda?! But by and large, the engagement has been dominated by the Trojans, and the Greeks have retreated, leaving behind the equivalent of a graven horse as an honorium to the apparent victors.

WORKERS' DEMOCRACY

The label on today's Trojan horse is "Workers' Democracy," that form of industrial organization where all workers are direct shareholders of the firm for which they work and collectively have power over strategic and mundane decisions of that enterprise. Workers' democracy has three key components: ownership, participation and power.
The thesis here, as in the ancient story, is that today's Trojans will greedily embrace this apparent "gift" because they believe it is in their own self-interest to do so. By accepting this gift they will be radically altered in ways that the modern reformist Greeks could never accomplish by a direct frontal assault. The Trojan Horse of Workers' Democracy will be, indeed, the "gift that keeps on giving."

The metaphor of the Trojan War used here is not perfect however: no contemporary character has been found to play the role of Helen of Troy. Nancy Reagan was considered briefly but it was hard to imagine anyone wanting to steal her away . . . on the other hand, given her husband's plans for a massive naval build up, it could be fairly said that she has "the face that launched a thousand ships."

The initial claim of this analysis is that the Trojans (i.e., the defenders of the status quo who want to make the system more profitable) will willingly accept the Greeks' gift of workers' democracy because they believe it serves their own short-run interest to do so. More specifically, managers and capitalists see it as a means for enhancing worker productivity while unions and government see it as a means for preserving jobs.

Managers and capitalists see the Trojan horse as an attractive gift because it is a potential means of enhancing productivity, perhaps even the only way to survive in an increasingly competitive international economy. Professors Derek Jones and Jan Svejnar set the stage in their 1982 book, Participatory and Self-Managed Firms (p. 14):

. . . The productivity and unemployment crises faced by Western industrialized nations in the 1970s and early 1980s . . . loom large [in explaining the sustained recent interest in participation and labor-managed firms]. In Britain and in the United States, recent years have seen first a deceleration and then a fall in productivity. Unemployment and inflation have been both reached at what many regard as intolerably high levels . . . . There is a search for alternative organizational models that might . . . improve national productivity and employment.