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FROM WORKING ON VALUES TO TRANSFORMING
SOCIAL ACTIVITIES: HOW TO UPDATE
THE PRINCIPLE OF “BY AND FOR ALL”?

Dominique Efros

Introduction

Problems relating to the collective organisation of work and the occupational lives of employees working at firms in what has come to be known as “the social and solidarity-based economy” are nothing new. It is necessary for these firms to adopt a specific legal status to be able to function on “participative democracy” lines, but it is not sufficient (Chaniel and Laville, 2000). It is worth noting that the very terms “democracy” and “participation” are highly ambiguous when used in connection with work performed in exchange for wages (Efros, 2002). The aim of the present contribution is to discuss an idea which seems to be a basic axiom: that it is possible to invent another form of economic action only if other ways of working are also invented at the same time; it can also be said that it is only possible to test other ways of working if the main persons involved are included in the process.

The following general question will be taken here as a starting-point: “How is it possible to involve employees in planning, organising and managing their own work to enable them to work differently?”. Planning work is far from being a purely technical affair, as can be seen whenever workers resist the principles of work organisation set up by F.W. Taylor. Work is a human activity which mobilises everything that goes to make up human beings. The way the concept of activity is defined in the fields of anthropology and philosophy stresses the fact that activity in the living reign is a constant struggle against “inertia and indifference” (Canguilhem, 1966). It is a tense dynamic process which involves dealing with the limitations imposed by standardization of all kinds and grasping various opportunities for living, despite all forms of rigid heterodetermination (Schwartz, 2006). There will always be a gap between prescribed work, the formulation of a goal, and the real or actual work involved in reaching that goal. Whether or not the firms in question belong to the profit-making sector, this also means that the ethical values and ideals proclaimed when political goals are launched have to be reworked when it comes to putting them into practice, and the ways they are implemented may even run contrary to the goals initially set.

In other words, working is never very straightforward. It is therefore necessary to analyse occupational activities to understand what the work involved consists of, and to design tools that could be used to manage and organize the activities and situations of the workers at social enterprises differently. To address this question, it is proposed to present a case study on a trade union establishment of a special kind, at which many social innovations have been introduced in terms of the conditions of work and the employees’ membership of the wage-earners’ community. The term “social innovation” is used here as a practical approach designed to improve social situations or solve social problems, which has proved its social relevance (Lévesque, 2007).

After describing the history of this experiment and the huge social challenge it involved, it is proposed to examine how this organisation views the transformations it is about to introduce, and how the employees were called upon to think about these transformations. As we will see, when employees are invited to participate in designing changes, standard methods of staff consultation do not suffice to incite them to express themselves: it is necessary to create a space where they can think about and discuss their problems and learn to voice their personal opinions.

A multi-facet experiment in trade union action

The history of trade unionism in the French gas and electricity industries began in 1890 with the demand for gas supplies to be handled municipally and for all the employees working in this sector to be given an equal status. The legislation passed in 1946 met this demand, since it nationalized the private firms and combined them into two public companies, “Electricité de France” (EDF) and “Gaz de France” (GDF). The trade unions then continued to thrive for many decades and to fight many battles, stressing the need to either produce an economic supply of energy or provide a public service.

The goals of the French electricity and gas workers’ trade unions have also been quite specifically designed. The aim of the “multi-base trade unionism” which developed in the late 20s at the instigation of the minority “unitary” faction after the schism undergone by the trade union known as the “Confédération Générale du Travail” improved employees’ lives both at work and in society (Dreyfus, 2002). Trade unions were expected to defend workers’ interests in terms of their wages and working conditions, as well as providing support in case of accidents, illness and death and promoting “Popular Education”. This was a mixture between trade unions acting as representatives to defend workers’ rights and trade unions providing services by catering for the social requirements of those in working spheres. In practical terms, this led to the trade unions investing in fields of action for which mutual societies and employers’ social departments had previously catered, while continuing their traditional efforts to improve “Popular Education”.

This approach to trade unionism was incorporated into the 1946 legislation on nationalisation, which defined the nation-wide status of workers in the French electricity and gas industries: this was quite an innovative status from the wage-earners’ point of view. It proved them with job security and solidarity, including paid maternity leave and paid long-term medical leave, and the principles on which retirement pensions were based shifted from a system of accumulated rights to one whereby people at retirement were awarded 75% of their previous earnings. A mandatory bargaining process was also introduced: employees’ representatives were henceforth allowed to attend company board meetings and those of various commissions. Wage differentials were reduced by introducing a single wage scale based on a basic wage on which agreements had to be signed between the management and trade unions; the Ministry in charge could be consulted if any long-term conflicts and disagreements arose. “Mixed production committees” were appointed so that decisions about the content of the work and the organization of the departments could be taken near the actual production sites. In addition, the unions were to become officially responsible for providing employees with cultural, sport and leisure activities as well as holidays. All the work involved in providing employees with social protection and handling the activities mentioned

above was to be funded by the company EDF-GDF and administered by a board composed entirely of employees' trade union representatives ¹.

Trade unionists in this branch have therefore acquired a great deal of experience. Some of the practices involved are fairly classical, since they were designed to create a balance of power by defending workers' financial interests and improve their working conditions; however, the fact that workers are responsible for managing their own social action is extremely original, since this means acquiring various skills, such as the ability to define social policies with humanly emancipating objectives and handling the economic and organisational aspects of the structures designed to implement these policies.

A gigantic social undertaking

It was decreed by law that in order to provide these services, the administrators of the "central social activities fund" (CCAS) would receive a budget amounting to 1% of the EDF-GDF company's sales. Indexing this budget on the company's sales in this way amounts to recognizing the efforts made by all the employees. At the same time, it serves as an incitement to make further efforts to develop the supply network and give all French citizens equal access to these facilities. The French legislation defined the conditions ensuring that the CCAS would serve truly social ends: its statutes prevent the unions' activities from being dictated by the company's capital holders and proclaim that the budget of the CCAS is intended for the development and use of a "tool by and for human beings" (Jantet and Verdier, 1982).

This motto, "by and for all", which was inscribed in the French law of 1946, has resulted in the beneficiaries of the company's social policies, the employees, being also the policy-makers as well as being involved in the implementation of these policies ². It is frequently referred to in the discourse of the employees working at the CCAS and applied in relation to topics such as equal working conditions, solidarity, prevention of occupational accidents and diseases, healthcare. The main efforts made in 2006 to improve employees' individual and collective quality of life focused on access to holidays and culture, promoting artistic expression and sport, and the social integration of disabled persons. In terms of their commitment to "macro-social" issues, policies have been adopted promoting sustainable development, fair trade and international solidarity with the victims of natural disasters.

During the year 2006-7, the potential direct beneficiaries of the services proposed by the CCAS numbered 660,000, including 150,000 employees in activity, 145,000 not in activity and 365,000 spouses and children ³. Apart from dealing with social protection and insurance, the CCAS organizes family holidays and arranged for 420 000 persons to stay at holiday centres that year. The real estate owned by the CCAS includes 215 holiday centres and 27 jointly owned apartment buildings. The demand is nevertheless greater than the capacity. Leisure and socio-cultural activities are still mostly organized by and for the workers of electricity and gas industries, although some of the products on offer are sub-contracted

¹ A hard battle was fought between 1946 and 1964 to maintain this principle of self-management.

² In 2006 and 2007, a conflict about criteria was waged with the Public Audit Office, which objected to the fact that the CCAS had opted for a system of self-management, i.e., activities produced by and for the employees, because this system was said to increase the running and production costs. This was probably more of a battle about economic criteria than anything else.

³ CCAS, the Annual activity report for 2006-2007.

elsewhere. The term “gigantic” applied to these social activities is certainly justified in view of the fact that the CCAS is the main purveyor of social tourism, the main producer of shows (it organizes travelling performances and supports local cultural initiatives), as well as being the largest non-profit provider of collective meals in France. In 2006, the 125 midday canteens set up near the group’s workplaces produced as many as 6 million meals. These activities have naturally had beneficial effects on the economic and social life of the places where the CCAS has set up its canteens and holiday centres.

The CCAS has to deal with several problems, however. Some of them are encountered by all social organisations of this kind: for example, whether or not to adopt the more individual forms of retribution for employees (by regularly distributing restaurant coupons and cinema coupons and proposing holiday packages) or how to professionalise volunteers. Other problems are more specific to the CCAS because of the turbulent history of the relations between public authorities, companies belonging to gas and electricity sector and employees’ trade unions (Wieviorka and Trinh, 1991; Bérout, 2005) ⁴.

The budgetary resources available to finance all these social activities amounted in December 2006 to 497,585 million euros, and the CCAS had 3440 employees on its payroll that year. One third of these employees are over 46 years of age and 53% of them are women. These employees do not all have the same status: some of them have steady jobs, while others work only occasionally or at certain times of year. Some of those with steady jobs are employed by the energy-producing companies in the group, but have been transferred from their previous employment on the production side to deal with social activities, whereas others are engaged directly by the CCAS. The members of the Board of Administration, who are elected by all the employees of the electricity and gas industries, therefore have the status of employers with respect to the workers employed by the CCAS.

Setting up a project

Among the many changes in the management and organization of the social activities introduced by the Board of Administration of the CCAS in response to the changes in the environment which have occurred during the last twenty years or so, especially since the turn of the century, recent events focusing on the midday canteens constitute a particularly sensitive issue involving several aspects ⁵.

Canteen meals constitute a strategic branch of trade union activity, since the group’s canteens form a network of local structures which come into contact every day with the electricity and gas workers, in addition to the special events and exhibitions held on their premises. This is also a sector of activity where the accountancy is a highly complex and demanding task: it occupies one third of all the permanent employees, who numbered 1015 in 2006-2007; if one includes the seasonal and occasional workers, the canteen accounts for 42% of all the staff

⁴ The European energy production market has meanwhile been privatised: the two establishments have been separated and have become limited liability trading companies. The integration of the CCAS into the framework of common law would mean that representatives of the heads of firms would be present on the Board of Administration and that the budget allocated to social activities would probably be decreased.

⁵ A distinction is made between the works canteens (known as "restauration méridienne") and the canteens serving meals at leisure and holiday centres. The former serve midday meals from Mondays to Fridays.

expenditure at the CCAS. The employees of the CCAS have their own trade union system and their own collective agreement.

The aims for which these changes were introduced at the group's canteens were two-fold. First, they were intended to improve social efficiency by reducing the numbers of electricity and gas industries employees having no access to canteens and distributing their services more evenly over the country; by carrying out awareness campaigns about the effects of food on health; and by using fair trade products and combating the predominance of the food processing industries by adopting specific purchasing policies. The other aim was to boost productivity by re-designing practices and structures; by giving all the links in the chain of actors greater levels of responsibility; by reducing the production costs via new purchasing policies; and by adapting the numbers of employees to match the real needs and making employees more professional. The aims pursued were therefore social efficiency and productivity.

A "project for the development of the occupations involved in the work of the canteens" was therefore set up by a team composed of members of the general management of the CCAS in charge of canteen activities and members of the "operational hierarchy" assisted by a group of consultants specialised in human resource management ⁶. In order to transform these occupations, it was proposed to draw up a system of occupational classification based on the set of competences required rather than on an exhaustive list of necessary functions. This led to a proposal for a new occupational nomenclature in which the number of jobs was reduced from twenty to eight. These jobs were subdivided into two categories: production staff and kitchen management staff. Each category is defined by the set of gradually acquired skills and competences required to produce and distribute meals, depending on the size of the canteen in question.

This transformation involves stakes such as the need to define and recognize qualifications, career paths and vocational training paths as well as issues focusing on the organisation of work and job contents. The fact that the job of "dish washer" no longer exists, for example, means that the head cook must arrange for the various canteen workers to deal with dish washing operations in turn. The question of associating the canteen staff in designing the project arose and it was decided that consultations would be held and action plans developed. As "local community managers", the head cooks were asked to present the project to the members of staff working at their canteen and to record the opinions expressed. Although they did not refuse to take charge of implementing these changes, some of them did not wish to present the project themselves to the canteen staff and expressed the need for methodological assistance with organising this consultation and collecting the opinions expressed by the members of staff.

Employees regain the Right of Speech

⁶ The elected members of the Board of Administration define general policy orientations which are translated at the three "operational" levels of the CCAS (the general management, the regional management and the operational sectors) into concrete objectives.

Our research group was therefore requested by one of the eleven regions to help set up this consultation with the canteen staff⁷. The management of the CCAS wanted each member of staff to “understand the significance of the project and measure its consequences for themselves and the team to which they belonged, which would possibly have some influence on its future development”. We were therefore asked to analyse the occupational activities conducted at the various canteens and draw up a kind of inventory which would shed light on the context in which these changes were occurring, as well as to provide the heads of the kitchen staff with assistance prior to and during the consultation. In the first place, this request had to be analysed in order to define its limits and its content.

Analysing the occupational activities carried out at many very different canteens is a time-consuming task and the deadlines were rather short. Secondly, even if we attended these consultations as simple observers, we were liable to be unjustly suspected of supporting the project. We therefore proposed to organise discussion groups with the canteen staff upstream of the actual consultation, to discuss the content of the work and what the project was going to change and to encourage the workers to think about it and express their opinions.

Groups were set up for this purpose on the basis of three main principles: they should consist of specific categories of employees (canteen workers, cooks, and head cooks) in order to prevent self-censoring processes, they should include people from different canteens in order to dynamise the process of elucidation by making comparisons, and all the participants should cooperate of their own free will. Because of the short deadlines, each group could hold only four meetings. In order to root the discussions firmly in reality and formulate questions based on concrete situations, we adopted an alternating approach consisting in leading discussion groups outside the occupational context as well as going round four canteens on two occasions, observing how the activities were being carried out, once at the beginning of the operation and again in the middle⁸. A concluding report was presented, in which the common problems, the comments made about the present distribution of the work, the questions and opinions about the future canteen-workers’ occupations and the criteria for defining career paths were listed.

The flood of words triggered at these meetings shows that there was a real need for discussions of this kind and that some worries were felt about how these occupations were likely to evolve: was the project going to improve or degrade people’s occupational situations? The humanist values defended by the CCAS did not seem to provide a sufficiently strong guarantee. These hesitations reflecting the “occupational activity point of view” are understandable if we examine what working really means. Generally speaking, occupational activities require arbitration and micro-decision-making to reduce the gap between work as it is planned and prescribed and work as it is actually carried out under the conditions pertaining at the moment with the people present (Schwartz, 2000). These arrangements are made by juggling

⁷ Since 1982, our group has developed a special approach to analysing occupational activities and situations. The idea is to set up dialogues between professionals in various branches of the human and social sciences and professional representatives of various occupations and hierarchical levels who are familiar with these situations. Our approach is based on training, research and action projects carried out in work environments. In this particular case, three specialists were involved: a sociologist, an ergonomist and a philosopher.

⁸ There were twelve of these meetings in all, each lasting 2 ½ hours, eight one-day tours of canteens, two 3-hour meetings with head cooks, heads of operational sectors and regional managers to link up our action plan with the modes whereby the consultation was to be carried out, and two follow-up meetings with regional managers’ and national managers’ representatives. Our final report on all these discussions was widely distributed so that it could be consulted by all. All these activities were accomplished within three months (from 16th. April to 13th. July 2007).

with various objectives, such as safety/productivity, speed/quality, health/performances, individual economy/collective well-being, etc. They are made at various levels, ranging from the more or less unconscious movements made by the body to save energy to applying social and cultural ideas. Working means assessing and weighing up standards and values which can be contradictory, and therefore make it necessary to take decisions before acting.

Encouraging employees to start speaking up brought these various tensions to light. In order to promote public health, for example, the CCAS puts up posters at its canteens informing employees about the risks associated with poor eating habits; its menus are drawn up on the basis of food programmes established with the help of qualified nutritionists. However, the type of activities carried out at canteens depends directly on the type of produce used. The term “assembly cooking” has been coined to denote the use of pre-cooked products which are ready to use or serve (Mériot, 2002). The use of these effort-saving and time-saving products makes it possible to cope with various problems, such as late delivery by a supplier, or many deliveries occurring on the same day, which disturbs the routine work, or the absence of a member of the team. These products are more expensive than fresh, preserved or deep-frozen products, however, and they have a high salt and sugar content. They all tend to have rather a neutral taste. So, the more fresh products a cook uses, the more he will therefore feel he is providing a quality service, whereas the more ready-processed products he uses, the more he will feel he is not doing his job properly and not promoting good health principles. The decisions he will have to take every day are always rather double-edged: using ready-made products to prepare the first course can save him enough time to be able to prepare home-made desserts.

As the above example shows, similar decisions to those taken at policy-making level are enacted at the “micro” level during occupational activities. Despite the local aspects of the viewpoints discussed in the context of the workplace, these discussions have much in common with the public debates which take place at a higher level. This example also shows how greatly the question of economic efficiency pervades the question of social efficiency in occupational activities, raising problems which people at work have to solve. The question of the “significance” of a project therefore becomes: how can one comply with general objectives when they have nothing to do with what occurs in actual workplace situations? Work is not just work: it always requires weighing up the values underlying the design of technical devices and the way work and social relations are organized.

How could changes “by and for all” be designed?

These discussion groups yielded some very specific questions about occupational gestures, definition of occupations and organization of multi-task work, continuing vocational training and possibility of improving one’s qualifications by replacing somebody doing more highly skilled work. These discussion also showed that the very principle of staff consultations was misunderstood, if not overtly criticized. What is the point of asking those who do the work to give their opinion when the concrete modes whereby their occupational situation is going to be transformed have already been designed by others? The principle of “by and for all” did not seem to be at all relevant here. This raises the basic problem of “driving” or “accompanying” change when it comes to designing and implementing the transformation of occupational situations and the lives of employees. What can be done to make the “by”

become a concrete reality? At what stage should the staff be directly associated in the decision-making process, and what exactly does “to associate” mean?

The “ergonomics of activity” approach made it possible to diagnose the situation, thanks to the experience previously acquired in various occupational settings. Designers all too often ignore practical reality and the unexpected factors with which operators have to constantly juggle. Now if the activity in question is not first analysed in detail with the help of those who actually carry out the work, “meetings between designers and operators at which the former ask the latter to give their opinion about the projects drawn up generally give extremely disappointing results” (Daniellou, Garrigou, 1995; Bellemare, 1994). Lack of awareness of what an occupational situation actually involves can only lead to problems in the future if the changes proposed have not been preceded by discussions at which various points of view are presented: this enriches the design process even if the arguments presented are contradictory.

Analysing occupational activities has led to developing what ergonomists have called “the occupational activity point of view” (Duraffourg, 2003). Developing this point of view is not simply a question of expressing what one has experienced at work, since there are two main problems to be overcome: acquiring the ability to look at experience from a distance so as to be able to move from feelings to analysis, and acquiring the ability to appropriate suitable means of expression. Teamwork helps to find significance as long as everyone gets a hearing, since people do not all master the art of putting reality into words to an equal extent (Faïta, 1996).

As the example of the CCAS shows, the ability to formulate an opinion at an organised consultation can be improved by introducing a preparatory stage. It also shows that the difference between undergoing and mastering a situation depends closely on the moment at which employees become involved in the design process, since this moment directly determines the importance given to knowledge acquired by experience in the definition of objectives and modes of transformation.

In conclusion, let us say that the use of standardised human resource management methods, which are impregnated with market economy management criteria, cannot but run contrary to the real “human management” of occupational situations. Nor do there exist any universal democratising procedures which can be simply applied with varying degrees of humanity. Co-building knowledge and dialogue between designers and operatives in a common quest for the meaning of “working”, or in other words, finding means of updating/implementing the principle of “by and for all” can only be done in the framework of an experimental approach. Operational and social efficiency both depend on drawing on the employees’ knowledge and experience and discussing the values involved in performing workplace activities. Practical experiments in which the transformation of workplace situations is jointly approached are essential: the challenge is in terms of occupational health and occupational relations.

As far as trade unionism and the question of work are concerned, the way the know-how of unionists is acquired and the way they take action and side with employees are questions of great importance (di Ruzza, Schwartz, 2003). The slogan “working differently” is not just a potentially mobilising formula, but corresponds to a fundamental truth: in line with the distinction made in the field of ergonomics between work as it prescribes and work effectively done, even working as one is told will also, always, mean “working differently”. How then can

we discover all the possibilities suggested by “working differently”, from changing the smallest technical details to finding organizational alternatives and possible ways of “living and producing together”, both at work and in our social lives?

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