

*Workers and Decision Making on Production* was written in 1949 and then revised periodically over the next half century. It is published here for the first time. Lawrence B. Cohen takes as his case study a textile (carpet) factory in Connecticut in which the local union has been asked to commit to a period of overtime in order to eliminate a production backlog in one particular department. Besides the possibility of extra pay, the union committee considers the feasibility of recalling previously laid off staff. Even more, it weighs the long-term impact of the extra work. The union committee is cautious about a corporate mindset that requires overtime during one period, only to lay off employees in a subsequent one. For the union, steady and uninterrupted service for its members is a major concern. Decision-making is shown to be considerably more complex and multi-layered for the employees than for the firm's managers and owners who tend to reduce the desiderata to the sole question of extra pay. The union officials also seem to be better informed than the managers about the inner workings of the production process. Management may rely on its engineers, but the shop-floor employees and their union representatives have an intimate knowledge of the production process itself.

Following Cohen, neither management nor owners seem necessary from the point of view of production. Cohen, though, rebuts common stereotypes about narrowly-focused union prerogatives and union-based restrictions on profit-making activities without ever drawing such conclusions. For him, a strong union movement was sufficient, and he therefore never suggests that an economy without overseers might be a social good. When he admits that shop floor employees cannot handle other aspects of the production process such as engineering, planning, finances, and marketing, he does not entertain the thought that these other employees could do precisely what the shop floor workers do; that is, they could plan and execute the necessary tasks directly. Despite Cohen's hesitancy, his conclusions can easily be extended to the workforce in general.

When this manuscript was first drafted in the late-1940s, the issue on the minds of trade union officials and factory overseers everywhere was the establishment of a system of management-employee co-determination in Europe. In Germany especially, the revival of the trade union movement and the social democratic political tradition as counterweights to fascist and communistic impulses alike, meant that union officials had great access to government officials, reconstruction plans, and reeducated factory owners and managers. Union officials became members of corporate boards, despite the angst with which such developments were viewed from the United States. In the latter, the unions instead invested their pension funds in corporate bonds and thereby eschewed the type of business-labor cooperation that Cohen preferred.

*Workers and Decision Making on Production* describes a world that has been on the wane for some time now. Unions in the United States have declined dramatically in influence and extent, and they have made few inroads among the expansive sectors of the economy such as service work. Technological advances have wrought still other changes, not only reducing the relationship of labor to output but also reconfiguring the workforce in significant ways. In key fields within the modern economy, highly-skilled workers are often indistinguishable from applied engineers. Examples can be found in infrastructure construction, plastics and chemicals, and nursing, to name a few of the most obvious. These employee-managers often work independently of other employees and with few direct supervisory responsibilities. They are also empowered to make the kinds of decisions that Cohen once hoped would devolve towards union officials. Alongside these employees is a vast cadre of lower-skilled and lower-paid individuals whose supervision remains hierarchical yet separate from the independently-functioning employee-managers. The decision-making union official described by Cohen has all but disappeared.

At the end of his manuscript, Cohen draws out a few of the wider implications of his study. Chapter 14 both concludes the work and serves as an introduction that accompanies the very first pages of the manuscript. The particular system of worker self-management that was favored by

Cohen presupposed a stable, unchanging economy in which the chief variable was the volume of production elicited by the market. It was an unrealistic and unrealizable assumption, even though such ideas remain embedded within the economics profession to this day. He also used a linguistic-inspired mapping system to analyze the decision-making process, thus rendering the manuscript far more technical than need be. The inclusion of verbatim meeting transcripts, rather than lending an element of transparency, clouds the picture further since the dialogue proceeds in clipped phrases whose meaning could only be understood by the actual participants. What we have, then, is a manuscript that serves as an artifact of a point in time that itself has become an artifact. *Workers and Decision Making on Production* belongs to the field of utopian thought that has been overrun by the wider social currents that ultimately determined its fate.