CONTROL AND COHERANCE IN SERVICE DELIVERY: THE YUGOSLAV EXPERIENCE

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This narrative comments on the influence of worker "self-management" on the organization and delivery of social services in the former Yugoslavia. The author focuses on how the system affected the accountability of social workers and service delivery, as well as on worker, community, and client involvement in decision-making. She concludes that social workers' control over their work life and involvement in decision-making is a necessary—but not a sufficient—requirement for implementing social work values and meeting life goals.

In the United States, social services are generally administered by either not-for-profit or governmental agencies. In both cases (excluding very small agencies) the structure is typically hierarchical: with direct service personnel, supervisors, administrator(s), and, in the case of not-for-profit agencies, a board of directors. A personnel department, the board, or the administrator makes hiring decisions, and policies come from the top down. Those served are referred to as "clients," or by the term "customers," though the implied ability to refuse service in favor of another provider is not usually available. In any event, they are external to the provider agency.

Some organizations have upended this relationship to varying degrees, with regard to both the providers and the users of services. This narrative describes my experience with one such agency, the municipal Center for Social Work (or Zavod za socialni rad) in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (now Croatia).

The former Yugoslavia is the only country to have had worker-managed workplaces on a national scale (Horvat, 1981). The closest extant example is at the Mondragon Corporation in Spain. In the U.S., there have also been several timber and other enterprises based on worker-managed workplaces, including a productivity experiment at the Bureau of Motor Equipment of the New York City Department of Sanitation, where I used to be employed (Moch, 1987, 1988).

Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito initiated "samoupravljanje" (or self-management) in the economic sphere for political reasons, and it proved to be undeniably problematic. However, social workers and others in the United States can expand their vision of administrative options from Yugoslavia's experiment in worker self-management (Kras Company, 1985; Prasnikar & Svejnar, 1985; Shephard, 1983).

Yugoslavia abandoned state centrism between 1945-1950 in favor of "social" rather than state control, not only of capital, but of organizational administration. Workplaces in Yugoslavia were redesigned to consist of Basic Organizations of Associated Labor (BOALs) and ancillary support units. In diversified workplaces, the BOALs would be further broken down unto units based on function. The smallest unit was the work group, or brigade (the same term used for the work group in France). Each brigade elected its own leader and representative to the Workers' Council, which may or may not have been the same person. Brigade leaders were working team leaders while higher-level supervision was appointed by the workplace administrator with the approval of the Workers' Council.

The director of each BOAL and Support Unit formed the top of the managerial hierarchy, along with the director of the Workers' Organization (the union). The top decision-making body, the Workers' Council, elected the Business Committee and an Executive Committee from its members—one each for each BOAL. These two committees were responsible for running the organization on a daily basis. Each organization set its own

internal rules for release time to serve on the Business and Executive Committees. Where there was only one release slot, this position was that of the top administrator. The Executive Committees of the BOALs, with the approval of the Workers' Council, hired the top administrator. BOALs could hire members of their Executive Committee from outside the organization, and ads recruiting for these committees and for administrators were posted daily in the newspapers. Administrators were expected not only to be good managers, but to know business and self-management law and keep the organization running efficiently, profitably, and legally. BOALs also had standing committees and standing and temporary commissions.

While there appears to have been a dual hierarchy, the managerial hierarchy was elected to manage; the worker hierarchy was the decision-making body. After the change to self-management, decision-making at all workplaces devolved to the workers. The Workers' Council met once a month, and regular meetings of all workers (called zbor meetings) were held. Certain decisions, such as changes in the organization or in the rules, required a referendum of all the workers at the site. In theory, this worker decision-making continued beyond the workplace, but power, politics, and economics overwhelmed the system at the highest levels. In any event, the goal of this narrative is to discuss worker control of the workplace environment, so the primary focus will concentrate on self-management at the workplace.

To a greater extent than in the U.S., eligibility for and the nature of social services available were tied to the workplace. As a result, what constituted one's workplace was much broader than in the U.S. If a worker left a workplace for any reason (laid off, sick, injured, fired), the last place of employment was still legally considered the workplace until the worker began work at another site. Since the tie would be broken if the worker simply quit without cause, most workers would not quit without first securing another job offer.

The "Zavod za socialni rad" was organized internally in a manner similar to other workplaces, but externally had to market itself

for funding and clients either to public sources ultimately funded by worksites, or be hired directly by a BOAL or a Workers' Council as a support unit to provide services.

The Act of Associated Labor of Yugoslavia provided special help for women, the young, disabled, and other "at-risk" workers. The Zavod was established to coordinate the work funded by the Town Council of Zagreb following a proposal submitted by the Institute for Social Welfare to provide "social aid and social protection" for at-risk workers. The Town Council consisted of representatives elected from all Workers' Councils plus additional town units, so the services of the Zavod were available to the general public for counseling and other assistance without charge. However, worksites had to allocate additional monies to obtain on-site social workers. The Zavod provided specialists in psychology, special education, delinquency, and other areas, but most of its workers were placed on jobsites—what we would refer to as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or Industrial Social Welfare. Some, but by no means all, Workers' Councils hired one or more social workers to comply with or go beyond the requirements of the Act of Associated Labor. In Zagreb, there were 58 such social workers in factories—for the most part one to a factory—who received services and coordination from the Institute for Social Welfare. The following discussion comes from my placement in the social work unit of a large electric company, Nicola Tesla.

Tesla had three social workers. As employees of the workers in the company, we were answerable to them through the grievance and disciplinary procedures already described, not to our agency, the Zavod. Our position was more precarious than that of most workers because we were a support unit, not a BOAL. Our head was a chief (one notch below a director) so we had no direct representation on the Executive Committee. Our job security was completely dependent upon whether or not the workers valued our services enough to keep budgeting for our unit. While their co-workers may suggest they come to us, such could only be to help them with a problem, never as a requirement from

their foreman or director without their consent. While the written job description for the social workers read like any of our Industrial Social Welfare units, our job specifics were set by the Workers' Council. This often made for awkward exchanges. For example, as social workers we understood issues of confidentiality. However, workers would not only talk about their problems when other social workers were present, but would often continue to talk when co-workers walked in. Attempts on my part to get them to move to a more private location were usually fruitless. Therefore, I became privy to the unusual range of assistance provided by the Tesla social workers, including:

1. Ordering flowers for a funeral, attending the funeral, and making financial arrangements or the family.

2. Purchasing basic school books in bulk and making them available to the workers at cost. We would also provide financial aid to lower paid workers to purchase school supplies for their children.

3. Issuing funds to meet basic needs, such as rent and winter coats, based on a request for aid form.

4. Advancing part of a worker's sick-pay to his wife due to financial need.

5. Counseling a man having trouble between his kids and his neighbor. The police had been involved, and it was getting out of hand.

6. Referring a worker to a drug treatment program. This man was scheduled for a hearing with the Discipline Commission at work (one of the standing commissions). He admitted that he was making a mess of the job and needed help. He had used drugs all his life "with no problem," but felt it was now catching up with him and he needed help.

7. Counseling a man having trouble coping with his elderly parents and with his own aging.

8. Occasional issuance of condoms from a large cardboard box above the coat closet.

Workers walked in and out of our office all day to obtain information, major and minor, and to utilize the services provided by the unit.

There were often timid inquiries from workers trying to find out how to get help. These were either helped on site or referred to the Zavod as appropriate.

The social workers often went onto the factory floor to make ourselves available to more workers. We would answer brief questions, agree to follow-up on a problem, and make appointments for larger issues or those requiring paperwork. We worked later hours than the production workers to make ourselves available to them.

One observation I made was that the role and range of behaviors of these social workers were more like that of public social service workers than private agency social workers in the U.S. Only one of them had an M.S.W. The other two were educated middle-class workers. From the younger of these two there was, at times, overidentification with clients—which is also common with our younger, untrained social workers. He was sympathetic but had few skills to actually counsel workers. The other was an old-timer who knew all the ropes. At times he could behave—as do some of our older public social workers—like the bureaucrat, showing annoyance at a worker who did not know, or did not follow, all the procedures properly. (The specialized M.S.W.s worked centrally in the Zavod.)

It was also the responsibility of the social workers to organize the annual retirement party and dinner, planned by a committee of retirees. This committee also planned picnics, bus trips, and Red Cross drives, all of which the retirees planned and the social workers organized.

The major difference between the role of the social worker at Tesla and in workplaces in the U.S. was that, while the social workers did have an administrative chief, they were responsible to the four BOALs when it came to decision-making. Each BOAL had a Commission for Social Aid. Reports of money spent were made to this Commission, and larger or undefined grants had to be approved by it. These Commissions met every month, prior to the Workers' Council. The consumers of service were thus also the source of funding. At the meetings I attended, the social workers had petitioned for an increase in funds due to

increased usage of their services by the workers and were able to report to the Commission that funds were administratively available. Though the Council had to ratify the funds for increased services, the Commission recommendation would most likely be approved.

In the U.S., the social worker often sees him/herself as a professional: a person with a unique body of knowledge who should be respected for that knowledge, listened to, and followed by those (s)he serves. I did not experience this bias among the social workers I got to know in Zagreb. But the bias was quite evident among some professionals and other technocrats who resented, sometimes with great vehemence, their dependence on workers who they felt should be dependent on them. A surgeon I spoke with resented that a chairwoman on the hospital Workers' Council should have a vote on whether or not he could purchase a new M.R.I. machine. Others such as doctors, lawyers, and technology experts felt that they were privileged by virtue of their training and should not consider themselves superior. (Such professionals, as well as higher-level managers, could not earn more than 3:1 salary ratio over the lowest paid worker at the workplace.)

A word about supervision. While the specialized workers at the Zavod were supervised from that workplace, outplaced social workers were in support units headed by a chief. "Supervised" is not quite the right word, since the responsibilities of the leaders are clearly stated in the rules and differ in many respects from our notion of supervision. If a worker broke the rules, (s)he was referred to the Discipline Commission. Not enforcing the rules was unacceptable, whether by "looking the other way" or by leaders disciplining workers directly. The minutes recording the decisions of the Workers' Council are interesting. While delving into these records would get us off of the subject of this narrative, one decision worth noting reads: "The meeting accepted the petition of A. Selak to the decision of the Discipline Commission, thus rescinding the disciplinary action of the 'warning.' The BOAL is embarrassed that in the Electronic

plant, the radio workshop reviewed and held onto carrying out disciplinary actions."

Part of each worker's salary depended on his/her team production, and all of it depended on the organization's profit (or, in the case of Zavod, designated budget). The three basic criteria for a leader to keep his/her standing were (1) enforce the rules; (2) help the unit work efficiently; and (3) maintain a pleasant work atmosphere. If the leader were successful, the workers would be "zadovoljne," meaning satisfied. Satisfied social workers at Tesla hustled to be more productive, which could increase their budget and therefore their paycheck. Perhaps because the workers select—or at higher levels ratify— leaders whose ability and personality they respect, this part of the system seemed to work well. When one of the social workers at Tesla could not be located, our chief instructed her co-workers to find her. They did—at home, preparing her bed-and-breakfast for overnight guests. She came in quickly, and she and her colleagues found it appropriate that she was immediately called in to the office of the chief for a disciplinary discussion. The sense of being treated fairly was pervasive and important and was probably the main reason why, as *samoupravljanje* fell out of favor as an economic system, workers had no desire to lose their codified voice ("glas") and rights in the workplace. Kardelj wrote:

> *"It is feasible and right to direct and guide the worker in the work to see that it goes successfully, that it follows our work laws and the decisions of the work organization. In this sense, the workers have a social and political right to answers and to work together (with the leaders) because this is how, in our society, we realize the way to bring about the social function (of getting the work done)."* (Kardelj, 1978)

An example of group discipline occurred during a meeting of the Zavod Workers' Council. A worker had received partial pay while on an educational leave of absence, with the understanding that she would return to the

Zavod for at least a year to work. She returned, but left again for good after two months, so the Council voted to fine her the remaining 10 months of partial salary for time not served. Zavod only had 22 workers, so everyone was on the Council. No privacy for such disciplinary action, but all present (the worker involved could have been present, but was not) agreed the discipline was fair. With peer-based discipline such as this, there was no possibility of commiserating with a disciplined friend while secretly agreeing with the punishment. Each co-worker made a public vote.

While such a cooperative system may work well for worker creativity and productivity under the control of the individual (and zadovoljne), one of the difficulties lies in assigning responsibility when things are not going well or if there is a question as to whether or not things could be improved. Workers often did not have sufficient information or knowledge about whether or not their leaders were performing well, especially on the level of foremen and chiefs whose positions were the most under the direct control of the workers (Kardelj, 1979). If productivity was low, could workers have been reassigned? Could work have been provided? Was the foreman helpless in the situation, or was it his fault? What about the chief? Who was responsible?

Some members of our support unit approached a foreman with a suggestion to improve the flow of referrals. The tenor of the discussion was so even, so intent on problem-solving that, coming from the U.S., it was a breath of fresh air. However, the foreman ended by saying that the suggestion couldn't be implemented because it was not in accordance with the rules. Perhaps what he said was true. However, it also sounded like a convenient excuse for not being creative, not being innovative, not, perhaps, even trying very hard, not really listening. Never being the bad guy. It sounded like, "The boss wouldn't like it," was used as a way out by our supervisors.

Another incident occurred at a zbor meeting when the workers voted to work on three Saturdays during the year when their wages would go directly to a fund for making much-needed building repairs in town in preparation for the city, which was hosting a major sports event the following summer. I was impressed until one of the directors told me that it was the responsibility of the leaders of the firm to explain the need in the correct way, so that the workers would vote to contribute to the fund. It was important for the workers to believe that they make the decisions, but it was also important for the leaders to manipulate them into making the right decision. Workers often discussed this process of "manipulare."

Of course the workers could also manipulate the system. One day at Tesla, the workers were called to the shop floor, not for a zbor (decision-making) meeting, for which there would have to be advance notice, but for an informational one. While everyone stood in a cramped space at a relatively open end of the shop floor, the chief explained for 20 minutes the Tesla and Yugoslavian economic reasons for the lack of work, what was being done, what the outlook was. Of greatest concern to these workers was that lack of work meant lower incomes, which, as the chief confirmed, showed no indication of getting better soon. Yugoslavia was caught in a period of low productivity and high inflation. The chief explained the need to "stimulate" improvements. He referred to the various strikes throughout the country and expressed his hopes that Tesla could avoid this problem by everyone working together.

One of the working team leaders then spoke up. Though the lengthy speech seemed designed to tire the workers and avoid a debate, both the status of the team leader and the fact that the chief's speech fed into an ongoing discussion on the shop floor kept everyone's attention while she spoke for another 15 minutes. In her work unit, the idle units were the wire winders, who were being phased out as computerized wire-winding was instituted. As computerized units were brought on line, the younger workers were retrained while her unit had little work to do. She argued that "workers want to work" and the older workers should be sent to school and retrained so that their work flexibility would not only be lateral, but upward. "Ne zadovoljan when someone is

hired for a higher-level job while we sit here when we can be trained to do that job." As she spoke people murmured agreements, nodded their heads, and turned to each other to express agreement, the local equivalent of "right on" often heard. When she was finished, a popular foreman got up and spoke, this time urging belt-tightening, use of pension funds to pay salaries, or bookkeeping credits being postponed. He, too, spoke at length. Others argued with him, illustrating another norm, that of the workers having "glas" (i.e., voice.) So the meeting called by the chief merely to try to dissuade the workers from striking by providing information ended in a firestorm of suggestions for alleviating the situation. And the woman had used the magic words "ne zadovoljan," assuring that her suggestion would get serious consideration because the Executive Committee would then have to provide a resolution that would result in "zadovoljne." Otherwise, the issue could be taken to the zbor, where majority vote would rule.

The sense of equality while maintaining role responsibilities was especially noticeable at lunch time when any level of leader would join workers, or vice-versa, and the overriding—indeed the only obvious— relationship was that of co-worker. When a leader would approach workers during the day, they would continue to do what they were doing: no scrambling to get busy and no cutting short a conversation as though it were just about to end anyway. In the U.S., such relationships between supervisor and workers often do exist. However, there is a sense that they are somehow illegitimate. So there is the possibility (and often the fact) that one side or the other will "take advantage" and abuse the relationship, thereby bringing the traditional power relationship into play.

At the end of the day, walking out of the factory in the middle of a mass of workers, the sense was of people going from one responsibility, Tesla, to another—home or whatever. While I assume that Tesla workers would rather do something else if they could and still have money for living, there was no change of attitude at the factory gate or heavy sense of being drained of life during the day.

An even stronger and more unusual example of the work environment producing not only a different attitude, but an attitude that seemed to include a sense of personal control and control of work with a corresponding lack of alienation toward the work environment, was evident at the senior living center where I lived. The residents provided much of the staffing for the center. They were responsible for managing the budget set for them by the Town Council (composed of Workers' Councils and others). They set the rates they would pay as well as staff salaries, and determined how much of the discretionary budget would go for food, entertainment, etc. One evening at dinner, my seatmate complained to the waitress about the food. She gave him a puzzled look, then asked why he was complaining to her. She was not on the Workers' Council, but the resident sitting next to him was, so the complaint should be directed to him.

An interesting opportunity for social work involvement in the community was that anyone involved in any organization could request that the zbor make their representation official, that they represent their workplace in the organization. Social workers hired by Tesla could request that they represent Tesla or Zavod in their chosen organization(s). Tesla had representatives in an incredible number of political, professional, and cultural organizations, as well as child care groups, women's groups, educational institutions, etc. Such an arrangement greatly enhanced communication and understanding all around.

Housing issues are not the direct provenance of social workers in either the U.S. or the states of the former Yugoslavia, but they are so central to the needs of many users of services in both countries that it is appropriate to mention them here. In the worker-managed workplaces, funds for building new housing— usually apartment buildings—was budgeted by the Workers' Council. In most cases these funds were made available to a citywide fund to provide worker housing, with the donating workplace having apportioned apartments for its workers. Larger or more prosperous enterprises, like Tesla, often built their own worker housing. Available housing (in Zagreb, these were usually apartments) was

apportioned by the workplace Commission on Housing. Bound by rules which were constantly tweaked by the zbor and the Council, the Commission accepted applications not only for new apartments, but to evaluate worker requests for loans to maintain and repair existing housing or to renovate existing apartments or houses available to them but uninhabitable. Priority for loans was based on a point system, with a worksheet for each applicant. One day as we were slogged through 30 applications, a typist came into the room with some finished work, taking advantage of the opportunity to ask about her own application. Rather than covering their work and sending her on her way, they showed her the worksheet and told her, "You have very few points." She asked why, and they explained how she had few seniority points and that her living conditions did not justify the category she had placed herself in, so she had fewer points in that area than she had thought. She admitted as much and got depressed, shaking her head and saying that she absolutely had to do something to improve her living situation. Commission members in the room then helped her begin the process of thinking of other solutions before settling back down to work. Fair application of the rules in this case seemed to satisfy everyone. The most needy applicants got priority. There was no cynicism in the work of the Commission. The members did their job very seriously and carefully.

Assessment

A worker managed workplace can give social workers more control over their work environment. But in a U.S. context, how would that include extending the social work principle of user self-determination, of the mission being focused on the needs and wants of the user?

Were organizing outings and parties, giving book grants, and handing out condoms making the best use of social workers at Nicola Tesla? Probably not, from the point of view of the social workers. However, they were in a position close to the workers in need of their skilled services, who saw them as helpers and came to them for help with more complicated problems. Would these workers have

voluntarily approached the social workers? Would the social workers have even been approachable, unless both parties saw social work in the service of the workers? In most cases, no. Where the users of services determine service priorities, as in this situation, the social workers could educate, negotiate, or use their status as "experts" to manipulate or to convince the users into giving them more control over rendering services.

When working for a labor union in the U.S. that provided an E.A.P. for its workers on both the Zavod model and in a "reach-out" program where social workers went onto the shop floor, the social workers (unlike those in Yugoslavia where work issues were the purview of the Workers' Council) often fielded complaints about both management and about the union representation (or lack thereof). By relaying management complaints to the union representatives and establishing relationships with them, issues involving the reps could be resolved. But the union representatives also knew that the social workers had access to the workers and could advocate for them, giving the workers more of a voice.

Another model perhaps more familiar to U.S. social workers in structure and language is that exemplified by Wellspring Family Services, "a private, non-profit organization helping families achieve self-sufficiency" (all quotes from website: www.family-services.org). Wellspring has a strong commitment to "hiring good workers, then staying out of their way," which provides its workers with control over much of their work life. But this control is subject to the core value of remaining mission-centric: "Our services have changed over the years, but our commitment to a stronger, healthier community has never wavered." Over its lifetime, this organization has maintained the user control over services that Yugoslavia tried to attain by codifying it into law. Several other organizational norms also reflect the strengths of Wellspring, such as open access to information and being a place where, at all levels, your voice is heard.

The way to user-centered practice can vary, but is not assured. When a person has little control over his/her work life, the social

worker projects a personal source of power and control—expert skills—onto the "client," who is required to accept the proffered "service" if (s)he is to be deemed "worthy." But the social worker has often acquired these skills precisely in order to gain control, power, and status. Controlling one's work life may be just another step to control, not a new mind set that would allow the user control over services. Can society provide professional training not only for social workers, but for doctors and lawyers, tech experts (oh my!) without those professionals then turning into an elite group who want a better life for themselves than for others? Fear of losing whatever power they possess causes people to behave in ways they think will keep them in control, behavior which often destroys their own efforts and undermines their best intentions and professional goals. Why do those with power forego real power—the power to grow, to learn to live a life with coherence between actions and our goals—in favor of the sham power of giving orders and being obeyed, of being in control of others (Freire,1987)? Controlling our own work life is a necessary—but not sufficient—step toward meeting the principles and values of social work, toward alleviating the damage and pain of those we are trained to help.

Perhaps if we implement a process of progress in our work rather than aiming at a static change, we can move forward: take an action, get a reaction, assess the results, take the next action based on the assessment, get a reaction...
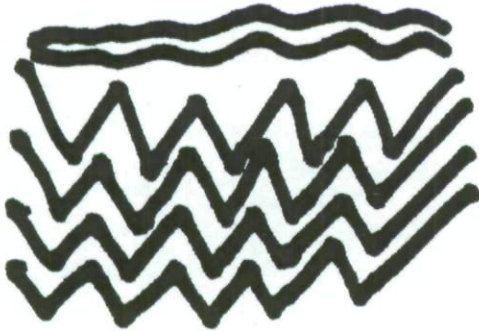
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