

Labor organization changes in a participative context. An approach in Venezuelan metallurgical industries

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1. Introduction

The new model of Venezuelan democracy (i.e. participatory democracy), (ANC 1999) demands on more people participation in all spheres of social life. This allows communities wider organization capacity for giving them the right to translate their wishes into reality. In this context, workers demand the same rights in firms not only for better working conditions but for direct participation in decision making and promote it in different ways: through unions, taken broken conflictive industries or by workers' council movement.

Participation in organization has been studied deeply in different approaches. The two main are "participative management" and "industrial democracy". The first has been developed mainly in United States and the second in Europe (Bonavía and Quintanilla 1999).

Under participative management is grouped those firm which carry out the follows characteristics:

- Participation is promote from above, managers have the control over participative activities
- Decision making not necessary involve beyond workers natural activities. They give their opinions managers decide

Industrial democracy is referred to direct participation democracy with its origin in Swedish (Bonavía and Quintanilla 1999) and presented in United States industries at the end of nineteenth century (Summers 2000).

The goal of industrial democracy is related to "introduce democracy into the government of industry" (Summers 2000) and its principles are:

- It comes from below. Workers promote participation increasing their control

- Collective agreement established rules instead imposing them from above
- Participation is structural and promote organizational changes

The viewpoint in this research is more closer to industrial democracy where workers are fighting for a major participation in labor planning and decision making. But in Venezuelan participative context they have goals beyond their enterprise: conquer socialistic system.

Those goals has been pointed out by (Feenberg 2002) in order to achieve a transition to socialism: “socialization, democratization and innovation”. Now, Venezuelan workers fight in order to conquer a radical democratic labor organization and brake down work dominant relations and minimizing or disappear “operational autonomy” from managers.

From Taylor to the Japanese new labor organization (quality circles, kaizen, JIT, lean manufacture) models have controlled workers freedom and their knowledge. Workers knowledge has been taken in order to reinforce the capitalist system.

Now in South America, specially in Argentina and Uruguay workers occupied many bankrupted enterprises in order to keep their jobs with the support of a social movement that include students, customers, communities and in some cases government institutions. They organize a social movement called *Empresas Recuperadas* and after legal solutions create cooperatives for self-manage the enterprises (Hille 2008). Others, in countries like Venezuela, where government support enterprise nationalization, workers and a few unions promote co-management in first experiences (Vera 2006) or internal workers’ council against the executive bureaucracy control from state, more recently (Lanz 2005). There are in both, Argentina and Venezuelan movement, workers with the political aim of increasing democracy in their organizations in all fields of decision making: production planning, financial, marketing and technological changes. This is called minimizing “*managers operational autonomy*” (Feenberg 2002) or participation level (Albalate 2004).

In others words, there are a Latin America workers movement that want to take the control of the work process against the domination of the owners or representative who decide without considering their and the community interests (Feenberg 2006).

Located south of Venezuela on the right margin of the Orinoco river, Puerto Ordaz is a metallurgical industrialized city. There are enterprises for iron extraction and processing (*Ferrominera*), steelmakers (*Sidor*) and aluminum processing (*Alcasa, Venalum, Carbonorca, Cabelum*) and small business which give service to them (*Grafitos del Orinoco*). Workers interested in promote workers’ council and *Control Obrero* comes from these enterprises.

Workers who promote Workers’ Council give me the opportunity to investigate as a participant observer following the process conducting by them in a collective decision making formulated the following research questions:

- What kind of labor organization do they want? Or what does “*control obrero*” mean?
- How is the real labor organization process in a participative context? What are the main contradictions/deviations presented in changing labor organization at those industries? And why?
- How do they go ahead to achieve more democratic labor process in those industries?

Research questions are based on the assumption that Workers prefer participation in the sense of Industrial democracy instead participative management but in practice they notice contradictions/deviations from this viewpoint because of these they have research interest

2. Methodology

This research was based under qualitative point of view Participatory Action Research (PAR). The epistemological framework of a PAR research place emphasis upon the critical insights, interests, need for changing of the communities collaborators under the principles remarked by (Udas 1998): participation, action and socio-political agenda. This research serves to the systematization of workers experience in their fight against domination in industry.

The action in Participatory Action Research is more deeply than in traditional Action Research. In that, we look for transforming social situation together with the communities or the collective involved. The researcher is another learner or participant like them who puts on his or her skills and knowledge to their service (Udas 1998).

Participatory Action Research is for doing research with people and useful for conducting knowledge manage research (Breu and Hemingway 2005) in order to preserve workers knowledge not for dominate them but for their emancipation (Rojas 1999).

Workers assume PAR more easily by means of a Venezuelan method call *Invedecor* (Lanz 2006), (Lanz 2008) which put on together research, education, communication and organization activities. Workers have learnt about this method based on action – reflection – action way (Singh 2008) and critical pedagogy (Udas 1998) through writing their experience during the process (bulletin, folder), communicating them (i.e. radio program *Control Obrero*, regional meetings), teaching and learning between them and creating organizational strategies for advancing of the movement (regional and national movement).

In this research, we follow workers action and accompanied them through *Invedecor* strategies, meetings and documents from 2005 to current 2011: weekly meeting, regional annual meeting, educational activities, radio programs, monthly news *Control Obrero*, folder, meetings documents, formal enterprise papers like *Hoja de Cogestion* (co-management bulletin) in Alcasa.

2.1. Systematization of Collective Experience

In this study we followed the systematization of communitarian experiences principles: learning and inquiring disposition, believe in people, respect and recognize diversities, coherence (Jara 2008). Systematization follows a general steps as a way for organizing and emerging knowledge: organize systematization team from participants who live the experience, select systematization route, reconstruct the history of the experience, reflection, interpretation and communication the new knowledge (Mejía 2008).

In order to take advantage from the First *Control Obrero* regional meeting following by more than 200 workers from the main Venezuelan metallurgical industries, they organize it for reflection about research questions during one and a half day distributed in 14 groups like their *mesas de trabajo* supported by the systematization team where they produce preliminary consensus.

In particular, the interpretation steps were carried out by systematization team and communicate to workers via e-mail in order to receive agreements or objection. It implied searching for patterns used to formulate answers to the research questions. These were organized in different levels of analysis as is used in qualitative researches:

- Words or statements analysis as they appear in the written records presented by collectives.
- Categories or social codes refer to an underlying aspect with meaning for workers associated to research questions eliciting from a collective reflection in the systematization team
- Synthesis and relationship between categories for appearing concepts or new learning

2.2. Systematization Team

The worker council social movement *Control Obrero* Collective organized the first regional meeting in October 2010 in order to strengthen their movement. This moment and the beginning of a learning systematization sessions with the author support were good for selecting a systematization team between workers and volunteers integrated by Milagros Isabel Cova (*UNEG* researcher), Jesús Dávila (*Venalum* worker), Oswaldo León (*Alcasa* worker), Sergio Lares (*Cabelum* worker) and Luis Primo (Social communities) all of them militants of the workers' council social movement. They were responsible for most of the recorded and systematization activities before, during and after the meeting incorporating others participants.

3. Preliminary Findings: Labor Organization Changes

Since 2005 changes have been emerging inside Venezuelan state metallurgical industries when a first co-decision experience in aluminum processor *Alcasa* gives the chance for increasing the voice to workers. This experience was irradiated to other metallurgical industries and workers initiate a social movement in order to achieve workers' council as a labor organization.

Alcasa, a state industry, was the first enterprise where workers initiate labor organization changes activities with the support of its president Carlos Lanz in 2005-2006 years and starting with the strategy for manager selections and decision making in general meetings and mesas de trabajo where workers make daily decision for production and supplies in some cases. managers resistance and political opponents divided workers and stop changes. But workers who promote changes continue their fight against the corrupt bureaucracy and foreign interest in control of these industries. In 2008, a conflictive situation between the Union of the largest Venezuelan steelmaker (*Sidor*) and the main Argentine owner (*Ternium*) who grouped about 10000 direct and indirect workers derived in nationalization. These give the opportunity for demanding more participation beyond work benefits and in 2009 government empowered workers in order to assume the conduction of the enterprises *Alcasa*, *Venalum*, *Bauxilum*, *Carbonorca*, *Ferrominera*, *Cabelum* (state property) and *Sidor*, *Orinoco Iron* (nationalized) grouping the main metallurgical industries like steelmaker and aluminum processing. A particular small business *Grafitos Del Orinoco* under conflict was taken by their workers and with government support change labor organization to worker council by their own initiative.

The government initiative for workers empowerment create a plan called *Plan Guayana Socialista (PGS)* through which workers and government created different teams for construct together the changes. In this research, we explore if these are real labor organization changes or not and fitting workers' expectative.

3.1. The Meaning of “Control Obrero”

Labor organization changes demanded by workers are related to the meaning of "*control obrero*". The terms "*control obrero*" and workers' council have appeared in the workers' vocabulary since 2005 with ALCASA changes, but it has an explosion inside workers collectives and surrounding communities since 2009 with the "*Plan Guayana Socialista*" initiative.

Workers evoke production control, participative planning, participative decision making in supplies, technology emancipation, selling and participative financial budget as statements they relate to "*control obrero*" for changing productions relation as one category and differenced from another category, workers council that appeared in literature (Feenberg 2002) associated with industrial democracy (Bonavía and Quintanilla 1999). They relate worker council to the way they make the "*control obrero*" possible characterized by workers participation and labor organization from below through general workers meeting, *mesas de trabajo* and a whole organization council

3.2. Contradictions/Deviations in Changing Labor Organization

Contradictions and deviations were grouped in four categories: political, organizational, socio-economical and educational which correspond with workers reflection about real labor organization changes. Political: the actual dominant institutions structure, no laws framework for new labor organization, exclusion of worker that think different from bureaucracy executives in spite of the inclusion model or participative context, differences between Unions bureaucracy and workers who participate in *mesas de trabajo*. Organizational: under these category the systematization team assigned statements like the dominant organizational model that reproduce old forms of doing things, actual Unions organization for keeping control on power and domination in a few workers (dominant language and goals of unions is associated with increased benefits for the workers, not increasing their voice), representative democracy stresses on labor division of work Vs. labor participative democracy, workers keep their fidelity to old hierarchical way of process labor and they have fear of making decision by their own. Socio-economical: they recognize the contradiction between capital and work in the division of labor where bureaucracy push them to work in operational only and not in other activities traditionally reserved to managers, productivity and rent ability keep on as main purposes not socialization and innovation (Feenberg 2002) in the sense of looking for a new way of labor organization benefiting the whole society. Educational: actual educational model keep dominant relations and workers have poor socio political learning associated to workers indifference and resistance.

3.3. Strategies for more democratic labor process

Workers know that introducing changes from below is not an easy goal. Because of this they generated a wider scope of strategies in order to continue their fight. They were grouped in

socio-political, communication, education (formal and not formal) and organizational categories. Education had the major consensus to avoid their main problem: indifference and resistance that immobilize workers. They propose to developed this strategies trough Bolivarian Workers University (formal education) and socio-political education (informal volunteers who comes from militancy)

4. Emergent knowledge and learned lessons

In synthesis, a new category, *Control Obrero*, is taking place inside Venezuelan enterprises, especially metallurgical, and in general society. Society is paying attention to workers activities, fights and their results.

Because of Participatory Action Research is a cyclic process which start with each research results, in this research experience workers have enriched their skills and knowledge and generated new questions and paradoxes like the relationship between *Control Obrero* process and the Japanesse participation tools and how to differenced from them.

Workers who promote workers council have learned about the power of education in process changes. At the closing of this paper, they have been developed more than 50 educational sessions around all metallurgical enterprises and workers start constituting *mesas de trabajo* by their own.

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