SAVE THE TATA STEELWORKS

The workers at the TATA steel-works in South Wales are making a vain attempt to appeal to the government to save their jobs. However the government is unlikely to promote effective action such as nationalisation and instead is half-heartedly trying to find a new buyer. Apparently an Indian Steel conglomerate may be interested. Despite these rumours of salvation, the most effective action that the steel workers could carry out in order to try and save their jobs is to occupy their plant. They should try to determine the conditions under which their future is discussed and negotiated. It would be argued that occupation represents militant action that will only alienate the public from their cause. Nothing can be further from the truth. The public are waiting for someone to take a lead in the struggle against austerity and unemployment. The morale of working people throughout the UK could be raised if someone decided to establish their own destiny and refused to be beholden to the 'good-will' of the government and millionaires. The whole trade union movement could unite behind this action and consider it as an expression of how the government can be opposed and an alternative established that can inspire the struggle for a different and better type of society.

It will be argued that occupation represents an impractical approach that has little chance of success. The very laws of capitalist political economy will have been defied and opposed. The chances of making a profit by the occupied plant will be minimal. We should refuse to listen to these reactionary doom mongers. It is true that if the occupied plan remains isolated it will have little chance of economic success. But this is not the major point. Instead occupation will indicate what working people can do. It will show that workplaces and factories can be administered and organised by the workers without the dominating role of the management acting under the instructions and imperatives of the forces of capital. In a microscopic sense the workers of the TATA plan could indicate the possibility of an alternative to the alienating and profit making system of capitalism. However this cannot happen if they continue to act in a deferential manner and rely on the supposed goodwill of the government and transnational companies for a rescue plan. We predict that they are likely to be disappointed in this regard and the prospect of salvation is unlikely to materialise. Furthermore, if a rescue plain is produced it will be on the basis of many job losses in terms of making the plan more 'efficient'. The workers should not have any illusions. The aim of the government is profit and not the welfare and livelihood of working people. To rely on them for a reasonable economic plan of survival is a fools' errand. Only occupation would establish the ability of working people to determine their own future and to begin to establish the conditions under which the plant could be rescued from closure.

One possibility is the formation of a workers' co-operative on the basis of the highest forms of industrial democracy. This policy is credible because the alternative of nationalisation under this present government is unlikely to happen. We would suggest that the workers develop their own plan for survival, and demand that the government contribute funds in order to ensure economic viability. It is feasible that the workers could find markets for their products, and so promote the possibility that the firm can be more successful than it has been in the past. It will be argued that workers co-operatives in the past have been failures, but this was because of a lack of financial and governmental support. Tony Benn was one of the few ministers supporting the Meridian co-operative in the 1970's. The lack of enthusiasm at the time undermined the possibility for Meridian to become a viable and effective co-operative. However, we do not evaluate workers co-operatives primarily in terms of their ability, or otherwise, to sell products and make money. Instead we consider that they could represent an alternative form of meeting material needs. The present capitalist system is based on the primacy of profit instead of the realisation of need. This is why industry is being closed down, despite the vital necessity for production in order to provide the material goods that contribute to the meeting of the needs of society. The UK, like many other capitalist countries, is oriented to the making of quick profit in terms of an emphasis on the role of finance. This is why many industries are deemed to be economically unviable, that is they do not make adequate profits. The result of this situation is that many societies have tremendous wealth and yet are unable to adequately realise material needs. However the steel workers of Wales can begin to provide an alternative to this irrational and wasteful economic system. They can occupy their plants and so indicate a determination to define their own future. The result of this situation could be the development of production in order to provide steel that meets the needs of society. If there is no capital available for this task, the company books should be opened in order to determine where past investment has been utilised, and so provide answers about what capital is available for new investment. If viable production is not possible, the plant should still be occupied, with the support of the local and wider working class communities in order to indicate that the workers do not support the indifference of government and big business concerning their future. This action would be one of defiance that could still generate support for working class opposition to future closures of workplaces.

The point we have been making is that the question of future economic success is secondary when placed in the context of what is possible in relation to the workers of the steel plant taking militant action. This viewpoint will be criticised as putting dogma before the welfare of workers. This is an unfair criticism because we would argue that only militant action is the basis to establish any possible future that does not result in unemployment. The present passivity of the TATA workforce is only a guarantee that the government will be encouraged to support the closure of the steel plant. It is possible that a wealthy capitalist could provide salvation, but the realisation of this option is also problematical. Instead the only genuine recipe for saving jobs is by occupation. This action will force government and capitalist companies to act. Furthermore, the workers would also be able to provide their own plans about their future in these circumstances. They could outline the idea of a workers' co-operative, or of nationalisation under workers control, or even of private ownership with enhanced development of industrial democracy. Primarily, occupation will encourage the working class in general to understand that struggle for a better future is possible and not futile. The morale of working people will be enhanced, and the defensive mentality of the recent period can be challenged. Hence the steel workers of TATA could be in the vanguard of the revival of class struggle, and the beginning of a process that results in the overthrow of capitalism and the promotion of a socialist alternative.