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Debate: Reply to Swinney

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Debate: Reply to Swinney

Abstract
[Excerpt] Dan Swinney's response to my article is flawed in three respects. First, Dan doesn't adequately address the theoretical arguments and empirical data I presented to support my position. Second, he misrepresents my views at several points in his article. Third, his notion of worker ownership as a tactic begs the question of what sort of strategy or general direction the labor movement needs.

Keywords
Dan Swinney, strategy, tactics, worker ownership

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3 Reply to Swinney

■ *Mike Slott*

Dan Swinney's response to my article is flawed in three respects. First, Dan doesn't adequately address the theoretical arguments and empirical data I presented to support my position. Second, he misrepresents my views at several points in his article. Third, his notion of worker ownership as a tactic begs the question of what sort of strategy or general direction the labor movement needs.

A central theme in Dan's article is that my approach toward worker ownership ignores the complexities of the real world and is thus overly abstract. According to Dan, worker ownership must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis; in particular circumstances, it can have a beneficial impact on the labor movement. I wholeheartedly agree that worker-owned businesses are not all the same. My survey of worker-owned businesses in the United States, however, showed that they are either economic failures or are divisive to the labor movement. Even the best example of worker ownership, such as the O & O supermarkets are detrimental to labor. Dan never responds to my specific criticisms of worker-owned businesses nor does he offer counter-examples to support his arguments.

Similarly, I argued that the capitalist system severely constrains the potential for worker ownership and tends to co-opt or weaken the worker-owned businesses which do survive. Despite ample evidence which supports this view, Dan claims that conflicts within the capitalist class and the growth of progressive, social forces creates a space within which worker ownership can develop. I don't doubt that these factors create some space, but does Dan seriously believe that liberal foundations, socially conscious churches, and sympathetic local agencies constitute an alternative source of funds for worker ownership sufficient to invalidate my basic claim? I was making an argument about the macro-level of the economy—not claiming that every single instance of worker ownership must fail for lack of funds or from the pressure of capitalist institutions. When I said that worker ownership is limited to the "crumbs" of the capitalist economy, I wasn't asserting that every worker-owned business is an economic crumb.

Even though worker ownership is, on the whole, limited to the least profitable and least dynamic sector of the economy, it does not follow "that traditional capitalists are the most efficient and capable

managers and initiators of companies and the means of production," a view that Dan misrepresents as mine. Doesn't Dan think I know that a crucial problem in our economy is the transfer of capital from productive investment to financial speculation and mergers? It is in fact a basic premise of my article that capitalists control the economy not because they're more efficient, but because they have the power and resources to do so. And when the labor movement develops a viable strategy for challenging that power, we'll be step closer to an economic system which is both more efficient and humane.

Dan completely misrepresents my proposal for an alternative strategy for the labor movement. My emphasis on the centrality of workers' struggle stems from my belief that there exists a fundamental conflict between workers and capitalists. To further their interests, workers need to fight aggressively against their employers. That is my starting-point and I think that it is a sound one. But in my article I do much more than recite class struggle slogans from the past. In discussing specific tactics, I point out that unions have to gain a more in-depth understanding of particular companies and general economic trends. Unions also must forge alliances with unorganized workers, the unemployed, and progressive community groups in order to fight effectively against plant closings. Most important, the labor movement must influence economic policy at the national level, something no union local, however militant, can do.

Dan assumes that because my general orientation or strategy emphasizes conflict, I am opposed to any tactic that doesn't cause a head-on confontration between workers and bosses. That's nonsense. Labor does need a broad range of tactics, including those that allow us to take advantage of conflicts within the capitalist class and those that create a breathing spell through a "negotiated peace." It does not take much experience in the labor movement to realize that tactics must be flexible. The issue is not whether labor needs, as Dan puts it, a "toolbox of tactics," but to what end those tools (tactics) should be used. That is why I discussed worker ownership with respect to its strategic implications for the labor movement. I wanted to evaluate the over-all effect of worker ownership on the general direction of labor.

Dan entirely avoids this issue. He says that when worker ownership is "used effectively it strengthens the union, its members, and the labor movement." But Dan provides no criteria for judging whether a tactic is really effective. The reason for this is that Dan never explicitly spells out what he thinks the labor movement's goals are or should be. I do: the labor movement must be strengthened by making it more powerful, united, and self-conscious in its struggle against employers. Because workers ownership does not strengthen labor in these ways, it should be kept out of labor's toolbox and discarded. ✦