



Is it possible to run a company or a corporation without a boss?

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AcTVism Munich (AcTV): Thanks for joining us today. Will you start by introducing yourself?

Michael Albert (MA): Sure. My name is Mike Albert and I've been around for a while. All the way from the 60s to now, involved in activism and also a lot of publishing work, a lot of writing. And I guess relevant for this session, I'm the author of a new book titled "No Bosses: A New Economy for A Better World". And it's about participatory economics and participatory society. A vision.

AcTV: You are the author of the book, "No Bosses". What is it about and what inspired you to write it?

MA: Well, the why- why write this book goes back to why I write this topic, why I write about economic vision. And that goes way back. So when I was active in the late 60s, we were very aggressive in doing all sorts of things, and we would frequently run into people who would say, What do you want? They would be asking us, basically, Look, I get it. I get that you don't like what we have. I get that you don't like capitalism, you don't like racism, you know, I get it. You know, I hear you. And not only that, I don't like it either. But what do you want? What's the posite? And we used to feel at the time, like there was a sense in which that was like your parents asking you, What do you want? Hoping that you have no answer. And then they can tell you to shut up, because since you have no alternative, you have no right to be complaining. That's the way we took it. And so what we did is we said things like, Oh, I don't know, you know, slaves didn't have to have an alternative, you know, an entire alternative to slavery in order to be abolitionist. It was true. It was a correct answer, but we began to feel that it was strategically stupid because a lot of people who were asking that question meant it sincerely. They weren't like a parent telling you, Shut up. They were actually like an interested person. Doubtful that there was any alternative saying, OK, well,

what's the alternative? And so that's when we began. And so on for a long period of time, and this is not the first writing on participatory economics by any means. A partner and I, Robin Hahnel, developed it a long time ago. Many people have written about it, et cetera. The book "No Bosses", I think, I like to think, I hope, is about the most succinct and tightly argued and evidenced and presentation that I've done. And I thought it was time for a new one because all the time is right for vision. And so I recently wrote this book.

AcTV: In "No Bosses", you propose several new features. Can you explain the most important of them and why they would make a difference?

MA: Sure. I mean, the most important list and the entire list are not that different. Because the book takes the view that- we don't need a blueprint, not only don't we need a blueprint, but there's no such thing as a blueprint. You can't blueprint the future. You can't fill in every nook and cranny. And not only that- because we don't know enough- and not only that, it's not right. It's not our job to decide future people's choices. It's their job. So what our job is, is to figure out what are the changes, what are the institutional features that we have to hand to them to future people so that they can then fill out the vision based on their experience and their desires and their capacities and so on and so forth. And when you do it that way, it turns out that the vision becomes like a scaffold, which in the future gets filled out. And so key features are the features that we say are part of that scaffold. And they really are only a very few. Obviously, I shouldn't say obviously, but for people on the left and who are critics of capitalism, you don't want people owning the means of production anymore, you don't want people owning factories and resources and so on. So that's one thing. And then if you get rid of them, you have to have some mechanism not only for remuneration, for who gets what, but also for who decides what, because you just got rid of the people who were making all the decisions. We're making a lot of the decisions inside the workplace. So the next feature is what are called workers and consumers self-managing councils. We can talk about what it means, but it's basically a mechanism for workers and consumers to express their desires and to manifest them in the economy. And then there is a question of, well, if everybody is going to participate and that's what this envisions, if everybody is going to participate and essentially have a say in outcomes in proportion to the degree that they're effected, which is what we mean by self-management, then people have to be able to. It doesn't do any good to have lots and lots of people participating poorly because they're not prepared, because they don't have the knowledge and the skills and so on. And so when we thought about that, it seemed to us that society is structured in such a way to intentionally prevent people from having that, to prevent people from having confidence and skills and knowledge that are requisite to making decisions. And one of the places that you see that, is in what's called the division of labour or the corporate division of labour, I like to call it. And that's where you have about 20 percent of the people who work doing all the empowering tasks and 80 percent doing only disempowering tasks. And so the 80 percent at their work, during their workday, and also previously in their education, but at work in the economy, are de-skilled. They are made less confident. Their connections to others are sundered rather than enriched. And

basically, they're prepared to endure boredom and take orders, which is also what happens in their prior education. And then 20 percent are empowered. They're made more knowledgeable, more aware of the issues and the factors that bear upon them, more confident, more connected to others, more in touch with day to day decisions and so on. So that division of labour has to go. Well, that's what we felt, if we really are serious about self-management, if we're really serious about participation, you've got to get rid of that. So in its place, we proposed something called balanced job complexes. So that's another key feature. And balanced job complexes is basically that the work we do should be comparably empowering. The work I do should be comparably empowering to the work you do, should be complementary empowering to work everybody else does. So you have to divide up tasks into jobs in such a way that jobs are comparably empowering and we're all prepared to participate. And then beyond that, there's remuneration. There's only two more. Remuneration is basically what we get, what's our share of the social product. Instead of being for property, like profits or bargaining power. You get what you can take. Or even for output. If you happen to be born with some incredible talent or skill or capacity, and you can produce more and produce more value, you don't get more back. You don't get enriched for having been lucky in the genetic lottery. So what we propose instead is we call it equitable remuneration. And the idea is you get for how long you work, how hard you work, the onerousness of the conditions under which you work, and, if as long as you're doing socially valued labour. And then the last step is allocation, it's a big one, and typically, that's either the central planning, for instance in the economies that have been called socialists, but I would prefer to call them by a different name, we'll probably get to as we go. And markets, which are also in some of those so-called socialist economies and in capitalism clearly. Those two features of modern economies also have to go because those two features violate the values that we seek. They violate self-management, they violate equity, they destroy diversity and so on. It's a longer discussion and we propose something in their place called participatory planning, which is a mechanism by which instead workers and consumers councils cooperatively plan what the society's economy does. And that's the whole thing. Of course, there's more to say about each component, but that's all the key components of participatory economics.

AcTV: Can you give real life examples of companies that don't have bosses but have self-managed councils? If so, can you talk about these examples and then tell us how they compare in terms of efficiency and profitability to companies with bosses?

MA: OK, so it's a difficult, fair question. The reason is difficult because there weren't very many, depending upon how you define a self-managed company. What I've said is that a self-managed company is not just one in which you have workers councils, let's say, but one in which the people in the workers count. Which is, say the workers are all participants in decision making. What's the alternative to that? The alternative to that is not so different from what we have now. What we have now in the workplace is that 20 percent are empowered, 80 percent aren't. And so 20 percent are bossing around 80 percent. There's an owner on top, and

the owner included is able to boss around the 20 percent, too. But if you remove the owner and you leave the 20 percent and you leave the 80 percent effectively as they've been, then what you'll have is the 20 percent ruling over the 80 percent. I call it the coordinator class and the working class, and I think that's what we've had in the thing called 20th century socialism. We've had workplaces who's division of labour is just like capitalism, but we don't have the capitalist. And so this class that was between labour and capital, rises to the ruling position, which has been sort of vacated by removing the capitalists. And so the same thing can happen in the most well-meaning attempt to take over a factory. And I often use as an example, about 20 years ago, ballpark, in Argentina there was an economic crisis. And during that economic crisis, a lot of capitalists punted. Now it's an American term: They gave up. They left their workplaces. And when they left, most of the 20 percent left also. Because the 20 percent looked around and said, This is ridiculous. The workplace wasn't working. It wasn't producing sufficiently or efficiently enough or whatever words you want to use to be viable with the capitalists here. Now the capitalist is gone. Right? So that's going to reduce our ability to borrow and so on and so forth. So I want to get out of here, too. So they all left. The workers looked around and said, We got no place to go. Right? We can't pack up and start over. So they took over the workplaces. And this is lots and lots of workplaces in Argentina. And when they took over, they instituted what I call the workers council. Sometimes they called it an assembly, sometimes a council. They instituted democracy. And in some places they refined that further going toward what I would call self-management. They pretty much levelled wages so that people were earning the same. They made slight variations, sometimes having to do with family situations, sometimes having to do with working longer or harder, et cetera, et cetera. And I was in Argentina to give a talk, and I was at a session with about 50 or so representatives from places that had been occupied around the country. There were more than that, but that's what was there. And at the beginning, we had a sort of a loose going around. And before that started, everybody was lively and engaged and talking with each other because we were meeting people like themselves who were taking over factories and were dealing and were making those factories viable. And so we started going around the room. Actually we were sitting in a circle, a big circle, and I asked people to describe something about their circumstances that they were now experiencing. And by the time we got to, and it's literally the seventh person, the room was no longer animated. It was almost maudlin. Some of the people, I mean, people were clearly hurting. Some of them had tears. What was happening is that each person was telling a very similar story. And the seventh person, and that's when I cut this off before we all, you know, unravelled, basically said, I thought I would never say anything like this. I can't imagine I would ever say anything like this. But maybe Margaret Thatcher was right. Maybe there is no alternatives. We took over our workplace. We instituted democracy. We equalled our wages. We held meetings. We actually did the work. We got things to happen. The thing is working successfully, but all the old crap, I don't know what I can use, all the old craps coming back. It just feels alienated again. And then I intervened and I asked. And at first, they did not understand the question. I asked, When you took over the workplace, what did you do about the old jobs? And they said, Well, we did them, we had to do them. And I said, But did you change them at all? Of

course not. Jobs are jobs. You know, we are catering ourselves amongst the jobs and did the work. And that is what they did. And I said, Well, I'm betting that most of you were feeling that the reason all the old craps coming back and the reason it's alienated and the reason people are, you know, some are on top and some aren't and so on and so forth, is you think it's human nature. And, you know, they didn't want to admit it, but yeah, they said, Yeah, it feels that way to us. And I said, Well, I want to propose that it's not. That it's not human nature, it's instead that you kept the old division of labour. And in keeping the old division of labour, even though you all started off day one of occupying the factory as workers with the same basic circumstances and background, you were all doing road work. Still, when about 20 percent of you began taking over and began working at those empowering tasks and the 80 percent kept doing the road tasks, a gap began to form and that gap grew over the months and it grew to the point where, you know, the 20 percent began seeing themselves as more important and more responsible, and 80 percent began seeing themselves as just cogs in a machine. And that's all the old alienation coming back. And so my answer to your question, I said it was a good question, but it's a hard question to answer. My answer to the question is: Self-management doesn't just depend on democracy in a big meeting, like is that what we have in the US with our big, big elections?! No. You know, so it depends on something more. So in the case where a firm does get rid of the owners, does change around the work relations, does institute democracy or self-management, does have equitable remuneration, and your question was, well, what happens to efficiency? You know, this all sounds humane and it all sounds moral. And this is what Thatcher would say. And I assume you're asking the question on behalf of her in some sense, right? You know, it's a devil's advocate question that's warranted, right? What good does it do us if we have this wonderful, nice workplace and there's no product. What good does that do us? So what's the reason for that? The reason is, the belief that if we sort of equalise participation, we won't get good decisions anymore. Because the great decision makers won't be making the decisions all by themselves. And if we balance the jobs, then the person who would have been the surgeon now has to do some, some road and repetitive work instead of doing only surgery. And so the assumption is that the 80 percent can't do that, that the 80 percent, that their output in those tasks, we won't measure up and our efficiency and our productivity will go down. Let me just tell you one last story for that- if it's OK. In the way I answer often, this isn't a story, this is the way I answer often in the United States, I say imagine it's 50 years ago and all of the surgeons in the country are in a big stadium. What do you see? First, the person might want to talk, the first person might... and then they realise and they say, it's all white men. I say, OK. And what's the explanation for it being all white men or virtually all white men? And they say, Well, you know, whose explanation? I said, The surgeons. Well, we're the only ones who can do it. We're here with the surgeons because we're good enough to be the surgeons. The rest of you aren't. And I say, And what about the women and the blacks who aren't surgeons? What if you ask them? Sixty years ago. And they say, Well, I think many of them would say the same thing or they would fear the same thing and feel the same thing. And I said, What do we know now? Well, we know that it was total nonsense. It was utterly ridiculous. In the United States, I think 51 percent of medical school students are women. So their whole thing is

ludicrous. We know that. And yet it looked valid because it was true. Women and blacks over here, white men over here. It was true that if you asked them questions about how you do surgery or something, you would get ignorant answers on one side and form answers, et cetera, et cetera. But the true answer was no social institutions destroyed the initiative, destroyed the capacity, held back people, and that's why you got the result. And I said, I think the same thing is true for class. The same thing is true for the 80 percent and the 20 percent. It's virtually the same dynamic. The school system, the circumstances that people have in their upbringing. And then there are, the job circumstances produce the outcome, not genetics. And still, a person would say, Oh, come on, Michael, you're acting as if everybody can be a surgeon, and that's ridiculous. And I'll say back, You're right. Not everybody. I couldn't be a surgeon. Not everybody could be a surgeon. But everybody can do empowered work of one sort or another. And here comes the story. So I'm in Argentina in a glass factory. I'm talking to a woman who is essentially what you would call the chief financial officer. She had been, before the occupation, working at an open furnace. She showed me it. I stood there for about two minutes and ran away from it. I wouldn't have lasted a day. She was doing it day in and day out, day in, day out, year in, year out. Circumstances changed. Who wants to be the financial person, because that's what they were reduced to. Nobody had prior training. Who wants to? And she volunteered. And so I'm asking her now, because it's months and months and months later, place is working well, things are successful, and I say, What was the hardest thing to learn? I mean, after all, what was the hardest thing? She did not want to answer. And so I said, What was it? Learning how to use a spreadsheet? No, I think I said, Was it learning how to use a computer? No. Was it learning how to use a spreadsheet? No. Was it learning accounting concepts? No. Was it learning how to present them? No. So I said, I'm at wit's end, I don't get it. What was most difficult for you in this transition? And she just looked at me and I can't even tell the story. She looked at me and she said, First I had to learn to read. And, you know, the notion that the reason why people don't display the capacity to do empowered tasks is because they can't is annihilated by examples like that. Just like the notion that women couldn't be surgeons is annihilated by the, you know, if you're stupid enough to have believed it 50 years ago, it's annihilated by the fact that there are surgeons all over the place. So the answer is: Things get more efficient. Why? Well, because you're not fighting, right?! You don't have 20 percent fighting against 80 percent, so you're removing that daily class struggle. Another reason, though, is because you're liberating the capacities of 80 percent of the population. You are literally, you know, nurturing and revealing and then utilising the capabilities of 80 percent of the population. There's other reasons too, but that's more than enough. So that's a full answer I guess, or a pretty full answer to that question. I hope that's OK.

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