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Theory of Politics

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Should workplaces be run democratically?

The Global Climate Strike that took place across the world in mid-September offers insight into the topic at hand; that democratically run workplaces, with overwhelming pressure from employees, can change policy for good. Included in this global walkout were employees from large tech companies such as Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Facebook and many others. The widespread walkouts across all of these companies became a catalyst for a modification in the companies’ respective policies towards climate change. Most notably, in response to the walkout, the CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, announced an initiative that would not only shift the company to entirely renewable energy by 2030, but would also make Amazon carbon neutral by 2040.[[1]](#footnote-1) The policy changes did not stop there, Amazon shared the company’s carbon footprint for the first time, and introduced a plan that would make the delivery fleet more environmentally friendly through the purchase of 100,000 electric vans.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although these walkouts did not alter the hierarchical structure of Amazon or companies of the like, they were a catalyst in shifting the position of the company to create an objectively more transparent, and sustainable policy on an issue where companies share as much of the burden as do governments and individuals.

Through this example alone it is evident that there are benefits to democratically run workplaces. One might wonder why then would people be opposed to workplaces being under democratic rule? With the aim of proving workplaces should be under democratic rule, this analysis will look into arguments that oppose this mindset only to demonstrate why those same arguments are not sufficient in disproving this thesis.

The first of these arguments is one that is held and influenced by classicists such as Milton Friedman. The claim is that a firm or corporation is most interested in the “bottom line” by increasing profits and efficiency, whereas a state is concerned with the maximization of the welfare of the citizen.[[3]](#footnote-3) The reason why the state is brought into this discussion is because of the notion that states should be held to a democratic standard due to the focus on the citizen through welfare programs. Following this thought process, citizens should be allowed the opportunity to have some sort of a say in the policies that are meant to be implemented for their own benefit. Such liberty is not afforded to the worker. That notion does not exist for the operation of corporations because they are meant to focus on profitability, not on the welfare of the worker. However, what is often overlooked by these classicists is the fact that in order to ensure welfare to citizens, such as education, healthcare, social security, affordable housing and so on, the state must have a budget that can sustain such welfare promises to citizens. Therefore, on the state level as well as the firm level, profitability is a necessity to maintain stability and find success. Hélène Landemore and Isabelle Ferreras discuss this in their work entitled *In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm-State Analogy.* They write, “one could say that the same way that the primary goal of a firm is to seek levels of profit that ensure its competitive survival, the primary goal of a state is to ensure a minimally stable budget, essentially through economic growth in the long run.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This section of the analysis discredits a pivotal argument that claims that states and firms are fundamentally different. Therefore, it also discredits the idea that the two institutions should be held to fundamentally different standards regarding the hierarchical structure and the dissemination of power.

In order to prove why states and firms should then be held to the same standard of democratic governance, this argument must be taken further. In the same way that states are dependent on profitability as a means to guaranteeing welfare programs for citizens, the welfare of any given firm’s workers is imperative to the overall success and profitability of the company. The welfare of the worker should then be taken into consideration by the employer. The welfare for a worker should consist of job security, adequate working conditions, and opportunities for increased benefits to ensure satisfaction and in return, high performance from employees. Although the welfare that should be guaranteed to an employee differs from that of citizens, the firm should be held to the same standard as states because of the sheer fact that welfare is necessary to increase overall productivity of the firm.

This essay will now turn to another reason as to why firms should be held to the same democratic standard as states. That reason being that both the state and the workplace can infringe upon a citizen’s or employee’s negative, positive, and republican liberties respectively. Therefore, they should be subject to the same democratic system of governance. Elizabeth Anderson, in her book *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don’t Talk about It)*, outlines this theory. Anderson claims that there is a precedence where a state should place restraints upon employers in the event that employers are infringing upon an employee’s liberties.[[5]](#footnote-5) Her example goes as follows, “a state’s imposition of a requirement on employers that they refrain from discriminating against employees on the basis of their sexual orientation or identity enhances the republican and negative freedom of workers to express their sexual identities and choose their sexual and life partners.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Essentially, Anderson is implying that if the state did not intervene in this scenario, an employer could restrict certain liberties from his or her employees, which would be inherently unjust. I would take Anderson’s argument one step further, and ask the question, why should the state have to intervene in workplace policy? If the firm were subject to democratic rule, such intervention would, in theory, be unnecessary. Thus, solely because a firm or corporation has the ability to infringe upon an employee’s liberties, firms should be subject to democratic rule.

Those who argue workplaces need not be placed under democratic rule would point to the ability to leave your job. Their argument is that “employees are always free to leave at any point in time. In other words, workers need not be given a voice, because, unlike members of a state, they already and always have an exit.”[[7]](#footnote-7) I would contend that the freedom to leave one’s job is similar to the freedom to leave one’s state. Landemore and Ferreras agree, they assert that “Except for employees with high salaries or jobs attached to a certain category of benefits … many employees simply do not have the economic freedom to quit their job even when they profoundly resent the rules under which they have to work.”[[8]](#footnote-8) They go on to also point out that in times of an economic recession or times of the like, this is especially true because of the availability and necessity of work. Thus, this argument cannot be used to discredit the theory that workplaces should be run democratically, because this argument is flawed and is, itself, discredited.

The benefits to a democratically run workplace have not yet been fully realized. The example of the Amazon employee walkout during the Global Climate Strike demonstrated the capability to produce effective change for the good in the company’s policy. The employees enacted this change without democratic rule in place, thus, the question is raised, what could a democratically run workplace accomplish for other humanitarian causes? If not for this reason, then democratic rule should also be established in the workplace because of the similarities it shares with the state in providing welfare for its subjects. In addition, the fact that both states and firms are able to restrict liberties from citizens and employees respectively demonstrates a clear need for democratic rule to be implemented in the workplace. For these reasons, if a state is held to a democratic standard, why should the workplace not be held to the same standard?

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4. Ibid. p 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. Ibid. p 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)