Manuscript Workshop

Labor in the Boardroom: The Political Theory of Workplace Democracy

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Thursday, 29 January 2026

The workshop will discuss Iñigo González Ricoy's book manuscript *Labor in the Boardroom: The Political Theory of Workplace Democracy*. For the workshop, we are planning three comments, each up to 20 minutes, each followed by a 10-minute response and a 45-minute discussion.

Organized by: Paulus Kaufmann and Hannes Kuch

Abstract

In recent years, labor-managed firms—whether in the form of codetermination, employee ownership, or worker cooperatives—have garnered growing public and scholarly attention. The European Parliament has urged the Commission and member states to ensure employee representation on corporate boards, while lawmakers across Australasia and the Americas have offered similar legislative proposals. Governments in countries such as Uruguay, France, and South Korea have passed laws supporting worker cooperatives, and the United Nations has designated 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives. Media outlets ranging from Jacobin to Bloomberg have also covered labor-managed firms in their various forms, and workers themselves have shown bipartisan support for greater control and ownership in the workplace. In response, political theorists have offered increasingly nuanced arguments for why labor-managed firms merit public support, citing reasons such as limiting corporate power, encouraging civic participation, reducing wage inequality, promoting workers' control over their social contribution and recognition, countering managerial domination, protecting occupational freedom, reducing companies' environmental footprint, and fostering meaningful work.

Labor in the Boardroom. The Political Theory of Workplace Democracy is divided into two parts. Part I takes stock of the above and further views and argues that they are unpersuasive in seeking to ground the case for workplace democracy, whether because they offer incomplete justifications of labor-managed firms, draw on flawed normative assumptions, are impermissibly perfectionist, or lean on principles that could be more efficiently served by alternatives means, such as unionization, employment legislation, labor-market policies to enhance workers' ability to quit their jobs, and self-employment. The book also argues that these views have importantly overlooked efficiency considerations or treated them merely as constraints on more principled views in favor of labor-managed firms—an oversight that is regrettable not only because firms exist and receive legal privileges like limited liability and entity shielding largely due to their ability to produce goods and services more efficiently than market transactions can. It is also regrettable because it fuels the concern that labor-managed firms sacrifice efficiency in pursuit of other values, potentially leading to worse economic outcomes that could negatively affect not just investors but also consumers, taxpayers, and workers—a concern that the recent econometric evidence has found to be largely unfounded.

Part II of the book offers a normative view of labor-managed firms that centers on efficiency as a core justification. It argues, in particular, that we have reason to hold firms to an efficiency requirement not only out of concern for capital providers and broader societal interests, but also to protect workers from domination by their employers. After examining how productive efficiency can both support and threaten this interest, the book contends that labor-managed firms are uniquely positioned to reconcile efficiency with the protection of workers' freedom from domination, offering a more robust alternative to capital-controlled enterprises. After developing the efficiency/nondomination case for workplace democracy, Part II applies this view to a range of contentious issues, including whether and how labor-managed firms may dominate their workers, how decisive workers' entitlement to control is relative to competing requirements, what the appropriate ownership structure and board composition of labor-managed firms is, and how they relate to collective bargaining and unionization, corporate and employment regulation, and property-owning democracy and democratic socialism.