
Workers' control in Ethiopian libraries

The revolutionary events in Ethiopia that were set in motion by an army mutiny last January, and culminated in the overthrow of Haile Sellassie two days into the Ethiopian new year in September, have had their impact in the fast-changing library scene. The *Ethiopian Library Association bulletin* has carried some bitter *ad hominem* polemics, libraries have been closed by strikes, and long-felt grievances have been aired in leaflets.

Of particular interest to non-Ethiopians, however, has been the establishment of what amounts to a kind of workers' control in the library network of the national university in Addis Ababa. In the summer of 1974, at a general meeting of library staff including typists, clerks, guards, library assistants, and professionals, it was decided to do away with the traditional autocratic administrative system, and to set up an executive Library Commission, including *ex-officio* the Director of Libraries. The other four members are elected by the entire staff of about 150 individuals.

The Commission's main area of responsibility has been in the always controversial area of personnel administration, where it has replaced a largely toothless advisory Personnel Committee. The Commission has the power to overrule the Director, who will in future be appointed for a three-year period by the University President, on the recommendation of the general assembly of library employees.

In addition to the Commission, the staff assembly decided to set up a Grievance Committee. Previously, as is commonly the case throughout the world, an employee who felt that he had been unjustly treated could only seek redress from the very administration that had made the decision in the first place. The Grievance Committee, however, consists of one directly elected representative from each of six groups—guards, library assistants, and professionals—and it is not answerable to the library administration. Technically a sub-committee of the Commission, the Grievance Committee has found itself more than once in direct conflict with

the parent body, and has managed to extract minor victories and concessions.

The Commission, deriving its powers and its legitimacy from a general assembly of all staff in the libraries, provides continuity in policy. The Director and the Library Committee, a sub-committee of the legislative Faculty Council, only receive the powers that are delegated to them. In other words, power to decide or to act derives from below, not from above. There is a clear

parallel between this experiment in democratic library administration and the political changes that Ethiopia has recently been undergoing with the reluctant leadership of the *Derg*—the Armed Forces Committee. In a library system of eight major branches, over 150 employees, and 300,000 volumes, it may be an experiment worth watching.

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