Shop stewards' leadership, left-wing activism and collective workplace union organisation

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The essence of Marx's understanding of society involves the unity of *objective* and *subjective* factors throughout history, examining the process by which people are both moulded by the world around them and at the same time react back upon the world to change it. In other words, 'social structure' and 'social action' are intimately related, with each continuously affecting the other in a dynamic fashion. Whilst social structures contain and condition what can be achieved through individual or collective human action, human action itself constitutes and in some circumstances transforms social structures. These arguments have obvious relevance for industrial relations researchers interested in an understanding of the multi-dimensional factors that need to be taken into account to explain such things as the nature of workers' bargaining power, how collective trade union organisation is created and maintained, and why strikes occur.

Yet ironically, there has always been a strong tradition within industrial relations to emphasise 'social structure' and downplay 'agency'. This can be illustrated with reference to the classic one-sided structural explanation provided by Kerr and Siegel (1954) for why some industries and occupations (such as mining and the docks) are more strike-prone than others. Such structural explanations concentrate partly on the character of the job and the worker (including the danger and physical effort involved, and the form of the production process and its technology) together with the fact that workers work in groups and often live in close occupational communities, forming an 'isolated mass', almost 'a race apart' from others. More recently, Stirling and Fitzgerald (1999a; 1999b) have put forward a similar explanation for the level of union solidarity displayed within the fire service,

namely the dangers of the job, and the strong occupational culture and identity, combined with the distinctive 'watch' system of small-group organisation within the fire stations. In both cases, it is argued distinctive structural and organisational factors are responsible for encouraging workers to develop a consciousness of collective grievance and form a strong emotional attachment to their unions.

But such explanations, on their own, are inadequate, for they fail to explain why the structural opportunities and limitations they illuminate become realised or missed by those involved on the shopfloor, as well as why union solidarity and strike propensity in similar structural conditions can often vary considerably both between similar workplaces in the same industry and between similar industries in different countries (Eldridge, 1969, Edwards, 1977). This is not to say that such factors are unimportant, but that structural characteristics have to be considered in combination with other factors concerned with how social actors actually intervene within these circumstances; what happens in practice can only be understood by reference to how different forms of collective organisation and activity are affected by the perceptions, intentions and strategies of the workers involved in particular workplaces. (Kimeldorf, 1988; Edwards, 1988; Blyton and Turnbull, 1998). Utilising different levels of analysis - namely (apart from class) industry and the workplace – it is possible to see the way in which the interplay between structure and agency can operate in highly variable ways.

In attempting to assess the balance of power between workers and managers generally within society Martin (1992) has provided a useful check-list of possible environmental influences which provide resources which either side can mobilise to

their advantage. These include the degree of product market competition; the firm's ability to pay; the type of product (especially perishability); the overall level of economic activity; the scope of the labour market; the absolute size of employment unit; technology and capital intensity; type of payments system; and the role of the government, the law and the media. No single feature in the environment is the dominant influence upon the balance of power between workers and management, and the different elements are linked to each other both directly and indirectly. But significantly, Martin also recognises that workers and management do not respond automatically to environmental pressures – there is no inevitable logic of power relations. Exercising bargaining power is a conscious act, and workers and managers respond to environmental pressures in the light of their own values, beliefs and objectives in relation to industrial relations. Absolutely central to the articulation of workers' views in terms relevant to the process of collective bargaining, Martin argues, is the role of union representatives, namely shop stewards and full-time union officials. There is a need for leadership to focus workers' varied grievances upon common goals and to ensure united action. Thus, whilst environmental (or what might be termed objective) factors provide potential power resources within the bargaining process, it is the subjective factor which is also important in terms of the forms to which they are mobilised.

To take a practical and contemporary example of this dual process, we can consider the relatively adversarial nature of worker-management relations within Royal Mail during much of the 1990s (Darlington, 1993; Gall, 1995, 2001; Beale, 1999). Clearly, there have been a number of objective features that explain the high level of shopfloor militancy displayed by postal workers, albeit unevenly displayed

across the country. These include, the relatively poor terms and conditions of employment, with unsociable hours, low levels of pay and heavy dependence of high overtime to compensate; the fairly monotonous and labour-intensive factory-like work routine for many groups of staff concentrated inside the large city-based process centres; Royal Mail's drive for increased efficiency and more flexible working practices, accompanied by a somewhat authoritarian style of supervision and management; the product market boom and monopoly position, which has meant that, despite moves towards commercialisation, the realities of viability and job loss, common to many private and public industries, have been felt less acutely within Royal Mail (although this is currently changing). But in addition to these objective features, the scale of workers' militancy has also been dependent upon a crucial subjective factor – the extent to which there has been a layer of workplace union activists and militants capable of standing up and arguing with their fellow workers, and providing rank-and-file leadership often independently of full-time union officials. Only by including the subjective dimension, of worker consciousness and the interrelations of workers' definitions and responses, is it possible to obtain a multi-dimensional picture of industrial relations in the Royal Mail or anywhere else. Workers are not the passive recipients or objects of structural processes but are constructively engaged in the processes of collective mobilisation.

With such considerations in mind, this article explores merely one (albeit highly important and much neglected) aspect of the subjective element in workplace industrial relations: namely, the complex relationship between shop stewards' leadership, left-wing activism and collective workplace union organisation. Drawing on a wide range of existing empirical evidence, it focuses attention on the crucial role

that left-wing shop stewards and activists can play in translating shop-floor discontent into a sense of injustice and in mobilising workers for collective action. An historical overview of the industrial activities of the British Communist Party is provided, followed by a comparison with the Socialist Workers Party, with some reflections on the theoretical and practical dilemmas involved. It will become apparent to the reader that, whilst attempting to anchor the discussion within a broader political economy and structural context, the article necessarily 'bends the stick' in an attempt to redress the balance of many previous studies, by concentrating attention on the role of human agency - rather than on structural factors or on the relationship between structure and agency as such. Moreover, instead of exploring agency primarily in terms of the mass of rank-and-file workers themselves, it focuses on the role of activist leadership and the part this can play in generating collective organisation and activity. It naturally follows that whilst the subjective element in industrial relations is inextricably *linked* to the role of leadership, this should not be taken to imply it is simply *reducible* to it, or that human agency can ever operate *independently* of structural constraints.

SHOP STEWARDS' LEADERSHIP

The question of how collective organisation among workers is created and maintained has attracted a good deal of attention from sociologists in recent years, although less so amongst industrial relations researchers with one or two notable exceptions. Kelly (1997; 1998) has made an important attempt to bring the contribution of mobilisation theory, derived from the sociological literature on social

movements, into the mainstream of industrial relations analysis. As an alternative conceptual framework to the dominant pluralist/HRM perspectives, Kelly's use of mobilisation theory draws on the work of the social historian Tilly (1978) who proposed a theory of collective action, as well as others who have attempted to explore particular aspects of the same phenomena (McAdam; 1988; Fantasia, 1988; Gamson, 1992; Franzosi; 1995; Klandermans, 1997).

At its heart is the fundamental question of how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organisation and engage in collective action against their employers. Utilising evidence from Fantasia's (1988) case studies, Kelly (1997; 1998) has documented how the transformation of a set of individuals into a collective actor is normally the work of a small but critical mass of workplace activists whose role in industrial relations has been seriously understated. First, they carry arguments and frame issues so as to promote a sense of grievance or injustice amongst workers by persuading them that what they have hitherto considered 'normal' or 'acceptable' is in fact unjust. Second, they encourage a high degree of group cohesion and identity, which encourages workers to think about their collective interests in opposition to management. Third, they urge the appropriateness of collective action, a process of persuasion that is thought to be essential because of the costs of such action and the inexperience of many people with its different forms and consequences. Fourth, they legitimise such action in the face of counter-mobilisation by the employer.

As Kelly (1998) has acknowledged, whilst the nature and effects of leadership on worker mobilisation have rarely been theorised in the industrial relations literature,

a number of sociologically-inspired empirically-based workplace case studies over the last 25 years (Lane and Roberts, 1971; Beynon, 1973, second edn 1984; Nichols and Armstrong, 1976; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Batstone *et al*, 1977, 1978, Armstrong *et al*, 1981; Pollert 1981; Edwards and Scullion 1982; Darlington, 1994a) have provided rich narrative accounts of the events, actions and arguments that take place between shop stewards and their members about management, their jobs, the union and strikes. These studies, whilst not ignoring structural factors and institutional collective bargaining arrangements, focus attention on the social processes of workplace industrial relations. Most of them confirm that activist leadership is crucial in articulating workers' sense of grievance, targeting it at employers and organising rank-and-file action. Even though the majority of these studies were concerned with workers in private manufacturing industries (often male) in which the sectional shop steward plays a pivotal role, as opposed to workers in the public sector (often female) where shopfloor collective bargaining is less well established, they raised some important common issues.

Undoubtedly, one of the most detailed examinations of the processes through which workplace union leaders can foster collective organisation and action was provided by Batstone *et al* (1977; 1978) in their study of a large manufacturing plant. At the heart of their analysis was the notion of a 'sophisticated' shop stewards' organisation, a centralised organisational structure which co-ordinates the activities of sectional groups by formulating the most effective bargaining strategy in the light of the unions' relative power position. The focus of attention was placed on the relatively small number of 'leader' (as opposed to 'populist') shop stewards who seek to shape a strategic workplace-wide perspective supportive of 'trade union principles'

of unity and collectivism. The preparedness of the members to act in accordance with these principles, Batstone *et al* made clear, was uncertain and depended, in large part, on the continued educational role of the steward leadership to channel and control the unsystematic discontent of the rank-and-file. This often involves the shop stewards in a protracted process of communication, 'mobilisation of bias' and 'systems of argument' to reinforce the collective interests of the group.

Whilst being a highly valuable contribution to the subject, the problem with Batstone *et al's* analysis is the tendency to assume that leadership is essentially a one-way relationship between 'leader' shop stewards and the members. Although they acknowledge the influence of other key figures on the shopfloor who transmit their concerns upwards (namely, the 'opinion-leader' and 'griever') they saw the 'leader' steward as pivotal in amending and squashing issues and knowing what was 'best' for the members. Their evaluation was based on a set of theoretical assumptions that conspicuously neglected to view rank-and-file members' *self-activity* as being absolutely central to workplace unionism. Instead, looking at stewards' organisation through the prism of the 'leader' stewards, they develop a top-down view of the steward's relationship to their members. But arguably, this conception of the relationship between stewards and members to a large extent simplifies and underestimates the complexities involved in what should be seen more as a two-way interaction. In other words, it is necessary to consider not only the stewards' attempts to influence the membership, but also members' expectations and their attempts to influence the stewards, which in turn is often directly affected by managerial behaviour (Darlington, 1994a).

Arguably, Beynon's (1973) account of shopfloor organisation and consciousness at the Ford Halewood plant provided a rather more nuanced exploration of this dynamic relationship between shop stewards and their members. On the one hand, he explained that whilst the experience of working at Ford's, with its particularly aggressive managerial approach nurtured active workplace collectivism amongst workers, this was necessarily an uneven process. Crucially, it was the shop stewards who were the catalysts of effective workplace struggle. The stewards, who had collectively learned distinctive lessons from their struggles with management, developed a more consistent, penetrating and critical analyses of class relations than existed generally in the factory. Thus, the stewards did not simply express the sentiments of the ordinary worker, but articulated a sophisticated 'factory class consciousness'. On the other hand, the perspectives of the stewards were developed jointly in a process that actively involved the mass of workers through the day-to-day shopfloor struggles they engaged in. It was only in the active interplay between steward leadership and membership sentiments that effective collective organisation and action was developed and sustained. This involved the stewards both listening to 'the lads' *and* arguing with them, it meant both sharing the experience of assembly work and giving a lead.

Darlington's later study (1994a; 1994b) of Ford Halewood also provided evidence of the way in which the rank-and-file themselves played a crucial role in terms of 'framing' issues, translating grievances into a sense of injustice, blaming management, engaging in tactical considerations to do with whether the case could be won, and taking collective forms of activity aimed at protecting their immediate interests. This involved discussions and arguments with their shop steward as to

whether or not it was a 'trade union issue', whether it was *right* to make such demands, and the degree of support they could expect from their steward, the stewards' body as a whole and full-time union officials. Of course, the high level of rank-and-file activity displayed in the Ford Halewood plant during the 1970s stands in contrast with the less militant forms of union organisation (in terms of belligerency towards management and willingness to engage in industrial action) inside the manufacturing plant which was the focus of Batstone *et al*'s study. It also stands in marked contrast with the sort of bureaucratised shop stewards' organisation, with its relatively remote full-time convenors and senior stewards, that developed in many large workplaces in Britain from the mid-1970s onwards with the overall decline in workers' struggles and shift in the balance of power in favour of management (Terry, 1978; Hyman, 1979). In the context of rank-and-file demobilisation and passivity, many stewards tended to act much more *on behalf* of their members, with less incentive to *involve them* in activity or decision making, and the close links binding the stewards to the members were loosened.

Yet this was not entirely a one-way process at Ford Halewood or anywhere else. There have been important counter-pressures and informal workplace sanctions to those acting solely to bureaucratise shop stewards, ensuring stewards have been placed under direct forms of scrutiny and accountability (Darlington, 1993; 1994a; 1994b; 1995; 1998; 2001). Certainly, any adequate understanding of the nature of leadership inside the workplace has to take account not only of the more obvious role of the shop steward, but also the aspirations and activities of the members.

Therefore, shop stewards' leadership can be a crucial factor in collectivising workers' discrete experiences and aspirations in the workplace in forms which can encourage united organisation and activity, but such leadership is a dynamic two-way process with rank-and-file members who themselves can put pressures, and set limits, on stewards' leadership. In turn this will be affected by a variety of other structural and organisational features, as well as by management behaviour, the nature of the relationship between shop stewards and the wider official union and its full-time officers, and the broader balance of power between workers and employers within society (Boraston *et al*, 1975; Darlington, 1994a).

Before moving on, it should be borne in mind the above discussion of shop stewards' leadership has been confined to the parameters of the workplace, and mainly at sectional level. The question of leadership could also be considered at different levels of *union* organisation, such as the local union branch, regional committee and so on. Nonetheless, arguably by focusing attention on stewards' leadership *on the shopfloor* within the broader context of a capitalist political economy, it is possible to illuminate in graphic relief some of the dynamic processes and tensions that exist in other areas of union activity. We can now turn to the 'agitator' theory of strikes and to a consideration of the relationship between workplace union militancy and left-wing political leadership.

THE 'AGITATOR' THEORY OF STRIKES

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In the past some commentators went much further than merely agreeing that shop stewards and other workplace union activists play a crucial role in collectivising workers' discrete experiences and aspirations in forms which can encourage united activity. They suggested that industrial conflict was directly attributable to the role of 'agitators' and 'troublemakers', invariably of a left-wing political persuasion. Certainly, during the Cold War climate of the 1950s and 1960s, government ministers, employers and national trade union leaders alike, encouraged by prominent media reports, tried to pin the blame for the outbreak of unofficial strikes on agitation by Communist Party industrial militants (Stevens, 1999). As Jeffrey and Hennessey (1983: 220-1) commented: '[During the early 1950s] the government became almost obsessed with the domestic threat of Communism…[it] convinced itself that virtually all industrial unrest stemmed from a subversive challenge to established order'. This hysterical anti-Communism was also partly orchestrated by the TUC. In October 1948 the General Council accused the British Communist Party of pursuing a strategy of industrial disruption on orders from Moscow. 'Communist influences are everywhere at work to frame industrial demands for purposes of political agitation and to magnify industrial grievances and bring about stoppages in industry'. It warned that the Communist Party through its use of 'underground methods' was exercising 'in certain trade union organisations a degree of influence which is out of all proportion either to its membership or support'. The Congress overwhelmingly backed the TUC's anti-Communist position (Taylor, 1993).

Some leading British industrial relations academics, such as Roberts (1953) and Flanders (1968), also tended to stress the importance of agitators and what was dubbed 'Communist penetration' of the unions (Kelly, 1999). During the industrial unrest that swept Britain between 1969-1974 similar arguments were displayed about (what Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, speaking about the 1966 seamen's strike had called) 'politically motivated men' (and women), and resurfaced in one form or another during major local disputes in various industries. During the 1970s blame for the high strike rate at the British Leyland Longbridge and Cowley car plants was firmly placed on respective Communist and Trotskyist shop stewards' influence, dubbed by the tabloid press 'Red Robbo' (Derek Robinson) in the former and 'The Mole' (Alan Thornett) in the latter. During the 1980s, it was Derek Hatton and members of the Militant Tendency within the GMB manual workers shop stewards' committee and local Labour Party that became the focus of blame for the alleged havoc brought about by Liverpool City Council's defiance of Conservative government policy. Elsewhere the finger of blame was pointed at members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Roger Rosewall, a former industrial organiser of the International Socialists (forerunners of the SWP), who renounced his past and converted to the task of countering the alleged 'Marxist threat' posed to managers on behalf of the right-wing free enterprise organisation Aims of Industry, claimed:

> Unlike ordinary trade unionists, they don't want increased pay for its own sake; they want it in order to stir up trouble and weaken the economies of capitalist countries. For Marxists strikes are what Lenin called 'Schools of War' and every pay claim is a battle for Communism. For Marxists, conflict and grievances are the means to a political end. The language they use, the comparisons they draw, the emotions they tap, and the agitation they are trained to spread, can all inflame dissatisfaction and manufacture discontent (1982: 1-2).

Emphasis is placed almost entirely on the alleged covert political objectives of strike leaders who appear to have a charismatic appeal capable of inducing blind obedience from otherwise rational workers The implication is that if only these 'subversives' were not stirring things up workers would establish a harmonious relationship with management from which there would be mutual advantage.

Of course, this 'agitator theory' to explain strikes reveals a fundamental ignorance of the manner in which workers take action in opposition to management. If it were true, as is implied, that left-wing militants were really unconcerned with the immediate demands and needs of union members and were using strikes for their own ulterior motives, it seems likely this would soon become apparent to workers themselves, particularly as the media often portrays left-wing organisations in this light. Moreover, agitation is unlikely to fall on receptive ears unless there are genuine widespread grievances and justifiable demands to agitate about. In adapting one of Mao Zedong's famous sayings, Cockburn (1976) explained that agitators must 'swim like fishes in the sea', which necessarily implies there is a suitable sea already there for them to swim in. Therefore, to wholly attribute industrial disputes to agitators, effectively explaining complex social processes exclusively in terms of the intervention of key individuals, is to exaggerate their influence. Hyman (1989a: 61) even went so far as to suggest they were 'the instrument of conflict rather than its cause'.

ROLE OF LEFT-WING ACTIVISTS

Nonetheless, in dismissing the 'agitator' theory of strikes there is the danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater (Kelly, 1995) by downplaying the role of left-wing political activists in workplace union activity and mobilisation. Ironically, during the 1960s and 1970s many industrial relations researchers, in an understandable attempt to refute the popular 'agitator theory' of strikes, fell into the alternative danger of considerably underestimating the influence of Communist Party shop stewards and activists in industrial relations. In effect, by stressing the role of structural, organisational and institutional factors in shop stewards' behaviour, there was a 'conspiracy of silence' on the issue of Communist influence. The Donovan Commission's Report (1968) and its associated research papers (McCarthy, 1967; McCarthy and Parker, 1968), as well as Brown (1973) and Goodman and Whittingham's (1973) studies of shop stewards provide vivid examples of this. So, paradoxically, did Hyman's (1975, 1989a) pioneering Marxist analysis of industrial relations. Similarly, Taylor's (1993) broad historical survey of unions and politics in the post-war years made no real attempt to relate industrial militancy, particularly the strike wave of 1969-1974, to the role of the left, notably the Communist Party. Such neglect seems remarkable given that the British Communist Party during the 1960s and 1970s, an organisation with between 25-30,000 members and with a network of shop stewards in a number of industries and unions, appears to have been influential in many important workers' struggles (Thompson, 1992; McIlroy, 1999a, 2000b; McIlroy and Campbell, 1999; Darlington and Lyddon, 2001).

This tendency to disregard the role of left-wing political activists and shop stewards (either from the Communist Party or other left-wing groups) continued to affect much industrial relations research throughout the 1980s and 1990s (and the same could be said about right-wing activism, such as Catholic Action). Thus, the vast majority of IR textbooks produced during this period, with some exceptions (McIlroy, 1995), either completely ignored their influence within the workplace or unions or referred to it only in passing (for example, see Gospel and Palmer, 1993; Farnham and Pimlott, 1995; Edwards, 1995; Beardwell, 1996; Salaman, 1998; Burchill, 1997; Kessler and Bayliss, 1998; Blyton and Turnbull (1998). Equally, there is little literature on the influence of organised left-wing political factions within the unions' policy making bodies (again with some exceptions: Lipset, 1956; Undy *et al*, 1981; 1996; Seifert, 1984; Carter, 1997; McIlroy, 2000a, 2000b; Gall, 2001). Yet trade unions are often the site of intense ideological struggles between different groups of activists about the definition of members' interests and the most appropriate means for their pursuit. Moreover, such ideological struggles are also to be found within the collective bargaining arena, related to different strategies of how to react to and confront employers.

Even Batstone *et al's* (1977; 1978) detailed case study into the nature of collective trade union organisation and strike mobilisation revealed the same limitations. Their fleeting recognition of the existence of 'hardliners' within the leading group of shop stewards, who adopt a *militant* stance towards management (as opposed to a more pragmatic or *moderate* 'strong bargaining relationship'), illustrates how it is possible to have quite different assessments of the appropriate strategy to pursue vis-à-vis management based on different *political* sympathies and

allegiances. Yet this internal faction-fighting that sometimes takes place amongst stewards, reflecting differing currents of concern and activity amongst rank-and-file workers, was an aspect of workplace unionism which Batstone *et al's* work did not explore.

More recent studies have also been inattentive to the politics of workplace representation. Thus, Fosh (1993), Fosh and Cohen (1990) and Fairbrother (1990; 1994; 1996; 2000), in their attempt to highlight the possibilities for the 'renewal' of workplace union organisation towards more active and participative forms, have emphasised the importance of local leaders' commitment to traditions of collectivism and solidarity. But like Batstone *et al*, such commentators either ignore or completely downplay the significance of the fact that some of the main individuals involved are left-wing activists of one description or another, whether this is defined in terms of fixed affiliation to a political party or in the broader sense of a form of 'quasi-syndicalism' reflecting an emphasis on industrial struggle rather than political generalisation but with a consistently antagonistic attitude towards management. Even though Fairbrother (1996: 114) has acknowledged that the processes of union renewal 'require a direct engagement and consideration of the politics of trade unionism', he does not draw out the distinctive ways in which left-wing union activists have attempted to contribute to generating the type of collective participation and democratic accountability from below which he views as necessary for such workplace union 'renewal' (Gall, 1998).

In fact during the last 25 years there have only been a handful of studies that have explicitly attempted to understand the way in which the political inclination of

activists and shop stewards can be an extremely influential, although by no means exclusive, factor shaping the nature of workplace relations (including Beynon, 1973; Foster and Woolfson, 1986; Spencer, 1989). For example, Nichols and Beynon (1977) documented the profound differences that existed between two shop stewards, Alfie and Greg, in the ChemCo plant they studied. Alfie, was a trade union 'loyalist' with a moral condemnation of his members 'selfish' demands, whereas Greg, a Communist Party sympathiser, stressed not so much the strength gained from the bureaucratic use of 'constitutional action' by shop stewards but rather the autonomous collective action of the members themselves. Nichols and Beynon attributed such differences about union organisation, the source of its strength, and of their fellow workers, to the different political traditions that exist within the working class movement. Similarly, recent case studies by Darlington (1993; 1994a; 1994b; 1995; 1998; 2001) have revealed the significance of shop stewards' political affiliations, and the influence and leadership that groups of political activists can exert on workplace activity in the Royal Mail, Fire Brigade, London Underground, and airport and car industries.

Although industrial action on occasion occurs relatively spontaneously, in terms of the initiative being taken by rank-and-file workers rather than shop stewards, it is often the leadership provided by shop stewards and other union activists that provides an organised collective form to workers' discrete grievances. Indeed, shop stewards' dedication to building and sustaining workplace trade union organisation, and their bargaining skills and appreciation of strategy and tactics acquired through previous experience, and the networks of support provided by union organisation generally, can often prove crucial to the effectiveness of a strike

and its eventual outcome. In this sense, there *is* an element of truth in the agitator thesis: industrial conflict occurs only where real grievances exist, but to take an organised form it often requires the articulation of shop stewards and other union activists whose commitment to collectivist principles of trade unionism is potentially deeper rooted. Whilst most are neither necessarily militant nor left-wing, it seems clear that politically conscious shop stewards and union activists with an overtly ideological and solidaristic (rather than instrumental and individualistic) commitment to trade unionism, *can* play a crucial role in mobilising workers to take militant action.

This does not mean left-wing union representatives are hell-bent on any sinister or manipulative intent. Most shop stewards, including their left-wing varieties, are elected by the members because of their commitment to fighting to improve workers' pay and conditions within the workplace. The generally more adversarial approach to management which is adopted by left-wing stewards can fits the needs and aspirations of the members who elect them, sometimes irrespective of the steward's expressed broader political beliefs and affiliation. By contrast, in the building industry the casual nature of the work and notorious widespread use of the 'blacklist' by employers, has often meant that only the most determined left-wing inclined militants have been prepared to take up the position of shop steward (Austrin, 1978). Whatever the circumstances of their election, such shop stewards are responsible to their members on a day-to-day basis, and come under direct and regular pressure not to run too far ahead (or behind) them in terms of what forms of action they may or may not propose, and the type of leadership they provide. Of course, it is possible for left-wing shop stewards to become removed from their members on ideological and political grounds (as it is for their right-wing

counterparts), but they are unlikely to retain influence unless their leadership reflects the immediate concerns and objectives of rank-and-file members. They may be forced to resign by an *ad hoc* vote of members or removed informally, if not by loss of office, by others who command wider support. Similar pressures of accountability operate on left-wing union activists who hold no representative function inside the workplace.

Nonetheless, despite such constraints it is clear that left-wing stewards and activists inevitably carry a distinctive type of political outlook inside the workplace. As a result, the politics of union leadership can be an important ingredient, amongst other factors, to an understanding of the dynamics of workplace industrial relations and trade unionism. Of course, there have always been wide divergences between members/supporters of different left-wing political parties such as the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Labour Party left. There are also differences between members/supporters of such parties and the much larger numbers of non-aligned but politically conscious union militants (including syndicalist-inclined activists). But there are some general characteristics they *all* share in common. For example, there is a conscious recognition that management's role as a servant of capital accumulation means there is a constant drive to exploit workers and intensify the pressure of work. There is a commitment to building the strength of union organisation through opposition to managerial intransigence, in the process challenging alternative more pragmatic and moderate strategies advocated by other leading activists inside the workplace, as well as encouraging their members who might not share all their political ideas to be prepared to engage in militant collective action. There is a commitment to show their fellow workers how

their specific grievances are related to the concerns of other workers both in the same workplace and more generally inside the working class movement in Britain and internationally. And there is a commitment to a basic socialist belief in the redistribution of wealth and power in society.

However, left-wing activists who *are* members of political parties can be further identified from either their organised supporters or other non-aligned militants in the following ways (which are explored further in the next two sections of the paper). They are likely to have access to highly sophisticated national and locally based resources of communication and co-ordination of both a political and organisational nature; to be especially conscious of the history of working class struggle and the process of revolutionary change; to be committed to the tasks of distributing agitational leaflets and selling socialist newspapers with the explicit aim of winning political influence and new adherents to their party; and to be concerned with building socialist leadership inside the workplace and unions that can develop workers' struggles from defensive battles into an offensive challenge to the very nature of capitalism.

Whether left-wing activists are members of a political party or not, and whether they are shop stewards or not, their distinctive view of the nature of worker-management relations, of how to build shopfloor union organisation, and the merits of industrial action, can be an important factor in helping to influence their fellow workers ideas and activity, and in challenging alternative strategies and tactics. (Of course, we should not assume this is an unproblematic process. For example, not only can sections of the rank-and-file be sectional, sexist and racist, features which

can also shape the role of the shop steward, but also some left-wing stewards may alienate themselves or become marginalised from many workers precisely because of their left-wing political beliefs). In order to make a more practical assessment of the role of left-wing activists inside the workplace it is useful to make a brief historical consideration of the activities of the Communist Party, followed by an examination of contemporary left-wing groups such as the Socialist Workers Party.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Throughout the period of its existence, from its formation in 1920 until its demise in 1991, the British Communist Party (CP) played an important role in industrial relations, particularly in terms of providing leadership to workers' struggles against the employers and government. The arrest and imprisonment of twelve of the leaders of the Communist Party prior to the General Strike of 1926 was evidence of its perceived threat by the establishment, although this did not prevent CP members playing a crucial role during the strike. The CP were also pivotal to the union recognition disputes and the rebuilding of shop stewards' organisation in the the re-armament years of the late 1930s, to the joint production committees established during the second world war, and to the spread of unofficial strikes and growing power of shop stewards' organisation in the immediate post-war period (Croucher, 1982; Thompson, 1992; Fishman, 1995; Campbell *et al*, 1999; McIlroy, 2000b; McIlroy *et al*, 1999).

During the 1960s and 1970s there were between 25-30,000 Communist Party members, with a network of shop stewards in a number of industries and unions. This meant they were able to act as a focus for the industrial activities of other militants whose politics were those of the Labour left, albeit mostly without any formal political affiliation. Thus, literally hundreds of thousands of workers who would never have voted Communist or read its *Morning Star* newspaper willingly accepted the leadership of Communist shop stewards and union officials for their role in fighting to improve wages and conditions through militant union organisation. Although the party's programme *The British Road to Socialism* committed the party to the parliamentary road to socialism through the election of a left-wing Labour government, there was still considerable emphasis placed on industrial and trade union activity, including the building of factory party branches.

In the process, the Communist Party became the major activist force in the engineering industry in Sheffield and Manchester, in shipbuilding on the Clyde, and in the Scottish, Welsh and Kent coalfields. It was also an influential force in a number of other areas, including Fleet Street in London, the British Leyland Longbridge plant in Birmingham, the Ford plant in Dagenham, in engineering plants throughout Scotland and London, the building industry in London and Birmingham, and the docks in London (Harman, 1988). Communist Party members played a prominent role in the leadership of many of the local and national industrial disputes that took place, for example the Roberts-Arundel strike of 1967-8 (Arnison, 1970) and the sit-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in 1971-2 (Foster and Woolfson, 1986). Through the CP-dominated Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions it also brought together militants from different industries and unions into a national movement that

was able to call one-day unofficial strikes involving half-a-million workers against Labour's In *Place of Strife* in 1969, and the Tories' Industrial Relations Bill in 1970, and which was crucial to the unofficial strike movement in protest at the imprisonment of the Pentonville dockers which forced the TUC General Council to call a general strike in 1972 (Lindop, 1998; McIlroy and Campbell, 1999; Darlington and Lyddon, 2001). Meanwhile, the party's Broad Left electoral strategy, of forming electoral alliances of Communist and left Labour activists, with the aim of replacing right-wing union officials with left-wingers, successfully led to CP members gaining national executive and full-time official positions in a number of different trade unions (Shipley, 1976, Baker, 1981; Harman, 1985; McIlroy, 2000b; McIlroy *et al,* 1999).

Of course, the industrial influence the CP had amongst the *mass* of workers should not be exaggerated. Certainly, if by 'influence' we mean the ability of Communists to persuade fellow workers of their ultimate objective of a socialist transformation of society, then the CP's industrial influence was small as the number of party members suggests. In fact, only a minority of shop stewards in Britain could be regarded as being consciously and actively political. In 1968, only 17 per cent belonged to a political party, and in most cases this was the Labour Party (McCarthy and Parker, 1968). However, if by Communist influence we mean the ability to persuade workers to adopt attitudes or take action on day-to-day union issues, then it was clearly a force to be reckoned with amongst a significant minority (as was also the case with the CP in the United States; see Keeran, 1980).

Two easily overlooked characteristics of the party contributed to its influence in this second sense. First, though the party was small, its influence reached far

beyond its membership. Part of this influence was due to the relatively large number of people who joined but then left the party (although usually not because of disagreement with its politics) and remained supporters. Partly it was due to a wide layer of other activists who, although they never joined, sympathised and were prepared to work with the party. Second, the Communists had certain qualities by virtue of their political philosophy as well as their experience and organisational connections that enabled them to play an important role in building effective shopfloor union organisation. Put simply, they knew how to recruit workers to trade unionism, to fight for improved wages and conditions, to build strong shop stewards' organisation, to conduct strikes, to mobilise resources and support outside their particular workplace amongst other party members and trade unionists. Indeed, in many respects, Communist industrial influence appears to have stemmed from the correspondence of their ideas of working class defiance to the aspirations of many workers and to the requirements of union organisation, and their blue-print for advance compared with alternative right-wing Labour strategies (Stevens, 1999).

Nonetheless, there were a number of organisational and political dilemmas with the CP's approach to building influence on the shopfloor. First, the party's industrial work was unevenly and unsystematically organised. In theory, the party's factory branches would meet regularly, bringing together Communists militants from across the workplace to exchange news about conditions on the shopfloor, to agree on strategies to fight for amongst the members and within the shop stewards' committee, to hold general political education discussions, to organise the sale of the their newspaper *Morning Star*, and to recruit workers to the party. However, in practice, many workplace party branches did not meet regularly, the majority of party

members were inactive, and few sold the *Morning Star* at work (McIlroy, 1999a, 2000b). Second, although CP members led strikes against government imposed incomes policies and anti-union legislation, the party's industrial intervention often tended to lack a sharp political cutting edge in terms of an explicit attempt to link shopfloor agitation with socialist politics. The pull of syndicalism was especially strong, with many party members operating more as industrial, as opposed to, political militants. Paradoxically it was less the Communists' *politics* that counted, in terms of their influence on the shopfloor, than their determination to pursue rank-and-file workers' grievances and uphold their interests against employers and the government (Stevens, 1999; McIlroy, 1999a, 2000b).

Third, there was the negative impact of the process of maturation of the CP's influence within many shop stewards' bodies. Thus, in the larger factories and workplaces, CP militants increasingly became caught up in the process whereby convenors and senior stewards came to occupy full-time positions. In these circumstances, managers learnt to work with, and accommodate to, their influence, attempting to avoid stoppages of work by engaging in 'pragmatic' bargaining relations of give-and-take. In response, the nature of the CP stewards' hitherto militant relationship with management changed, and some leading party figures increasingly became bureauractically remote from the experience of the shopfloor workers they represented (Lyddon, 1977). Fourth, despite the widespread industrial militancy and political generalisation of the early 1970s the CP generally proved unable to recruit large numbers of workers, and continued on its long-established path of a declining and ageing membership. Arguably, the main reason for this decline was *political* rather than organisational. From the early 1950s the CP had

formally abandoned revolutionary socialist politics for a strategy based essentially on changing society through a left parliamentary government. But there was already a large and well-established social democratic party in the shape of the Labour Party, and faced with a choice between a large social democratic organisation and a small one, most of the so-called 'progressives' the CP aimed to win tended to opt for Labour.

Fifth, the CP's parliamentary strategy, which obliged it to attempt to influence the leadership of the trade unions to help push the Labour Party to the left, was translated into trade union electoralism. Thus, primary importance was attached to trying to replace right-wing full-time trade union officials through the election of left-wingers, notably by supporting such figures as Hugh Scanlon in the AUEW and Jack Jones in the TGWU. But the price of this electoral strategy was the CP's growing reluctance to clash with the left officials. This contradiction between trying to give a lead to independent rank-and-file militancy and trying to cultivate influence amongst left-wing officials became increasingly apparent during the 1970s wave of industrial unrest, with the CP increasingly subordinating the former in favour of the latter (Lindop, 1998; Darlington and Lyddon, 2001).

Despite such dilemmas, the Communist Party's industrial base in specific regions and unions, was still influential. It offered a national pole of opposition to the employers and the government, and its network of shop stewards and lay activists meant it was able to lead or strongly influence many of the important rank-and-file struggles that took place. Although there is some literature on the CP's industrial work there is a need for more detailed studies of how the party's trade union

interventions were organised and of the relationship between union activists and the party.

THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

From 1968 onwards the revolutionary left in Britain suddenly found their ideas had acquired a much wider audience. Whilst this revolutionary left did not seriously challenge the industrial and political hegemony of the Communist Party, they were able to exercise some limited influence on workplace union activity in certain areas. For example, the Workers Revolutionary Party built a relatively strong network inside the stewards' body at the Cowley car assembly plant (Thornett, 1987; 1998; McIlroy, 1999b). But it was the International Socialists, later renamed the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who were able to build the most credible hard-left influence amongst workers during the massive upturn in workers' struggles of the early 1970s (Shipley, 1976; Callinicos, 1982; Callaghan, 1984; Harman, 1988; McIlroy, 1999b). They produced a book, *The Employers' Offensive* (Cliff, 1970), which emphasised how important productivity deals and the employers' drive from piece-work to measured day work were in undermining shopfloor strength, which sold 20,000 copies almost entirely to shop stewards. They recruited many young workers to an organisation that grew to about 4,000-strong, including some 40 workplace branches in key plants such as Chrysler's Linwood (Glasgow) and Ryton (Coventry) plants and the Royal Group of Docks (London), although most of these branches did not survive for long. And their influence extended from traditional manual workers to many different sections of white-collar workers, including teachers, civil servants, and local government office workers.

Unlike the Communist Party with its electoralist orientation on capturing left-wing control of the union machine (as part of the wider strategy of reforming society from above), the SWP placed the emphasis on the need for militant rank-and-file activity on the shopfloor (as part of a wider strategy for social revolution from below). In pursuit of this strategy it took the initiative to launch rank-and-file organisations and newspapers in a number of different industries and unions, which linked together many thousands of activists who, although not party members, recognised the need for class-wide struggle independently of the official union leadership. A national rank-and-file movement was launched which aimed to challenge the perceived subordination to official union structures by the Communist Party (Callinicos, 1982). However, the SWP's growth inside the unions did not arise merely from *industrial* agitation. The party and its paper *Socialist Worker* also placed a strong emphasis on taking *political* issues into the workplace, for example, the campaign against racism and Nazi organisations, for women's liberation, as well as on the need for a Marxist understanding of society generally. It was seen as essential to politicise the industrial struggle, to overcome the traditional separation of economics and politics, by linking the fight for workers immediate demands over wages and conditions to the overall battle to bring down the government and overthrow capitalism through mass working class action.

The general downturn in workers' struggle that occurred with the 'Social Contract' under the Labour government from the mid-1970s onwards (despite the 'winter of discontent' strike wave of 1978-9), followed by the series of defeats under the Conservatives during the 1980s, undermined the basis for a national rank-and-

file *movement*. The inhospitable objective situation led to the abandonment of the building of rank-and-file groups as an immediate strategy. Nonetheless, a more party orientated industrial intervention (involving selling *Socialist Worker*, raising general political topics and working around industrial disputes) maintained a base inside the workplace and unions. Significantly, the party's forthright anti-Stalinist stance meant the demise of the Communist Party in the early 1990s in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern European 'socialist' states, impacted positively rather than negatively on its immediate political periphery. At the same time, the political radicalisation that occurred amongst a sizeable minority of workers under Conservative governments after the defeat of the poll tax saw the SWP grow to an organisation of about 6,000 members, making it by far the largest and single most important revolutionary socialist organisation in Britain (and Europe) today. Tony's Blair's 'Third Way' pro-capitalist politics, and the collapse of the traditional Labour Party left, has merely further encouraged this process.

It should be noted that during the 1990s the SWP were not the only left-wing organisation to have built some influence within the trade unions. There was the Socialist Party (SP), successor to Labour's one time Militant Tendency, one of whose leading members was a strong contender for the general secretary's position in Britain's largest union, UNISON. There was the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), which spectacularly won a seat in the new Scottish Assembly in 1999 and received union support in a number of areas. And there was the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), headed by the well-known miners' union leader Arthur Scargill, who won a sizeable number of votes in local and parliamentary elections in 1999 and who built a credible

base at both activist and official union level inside the RMT, particularly on the London Underground (Darlington, 2001).

But given that the SWP is the largest of the far-left groups in Britain it is useful to make some comparison - by way of illustration of similar dilemmas faced by all left-wing groups today - with the Communist Party's earlier attempts to encourage union collectivism, shopfloor militancy and wider political generalisation. Of course, there are significant differences between the industrial activities of the CP and SWP, in part related to the very different historical, economic and political circumstances in which they have operated, but also to variations in political approach (for example, the attitude towards union officialdom). But there have clearly been a number of factors in recent years that have prevented the SWP, as well as other left-wing groups, from being able to fill the vacuum left by the demise of the Communist Party.

First, there has been the shift in the balance of power in favour of the employers and the massive decline in the level of workers' militancy in Britain over the last 20 years, which has had a generally negative impact on the spread of socialist ideas and organisation. Such a development cannot be overestimated, since the direct connection between workers' confidence to fight and their potential attraction to left-wing political organisation seems clear. This has been compounded by the structural changes in the nature of workforce from manufacturing to the service sector industry and the resulting haemorrhage in levels of trade union membership. Second, there has been the legacy of a generational loss of many thousands of trade union militants who previously looked to the Communist Party, but who have either entered into union officialdom and moved rightwards politically,

or are no longer active in trade union affairs (some having retired). Whilst the SWP and SLP have been able to attract a layer of new young workers during the 1990s, they have not been able to recreate the same national political network of established and prominent shop stewards and union branch activists, who in turn might be able to influence many thousands of other workers.

Third, the SWP's conscious attempt to try to prevent its members becoming narrowly preoccupied with trade union issues to the exclusion of raising general socialist politics in the workplace, and from becoming bureaucratically removed from their members during a period of low level of workers' struggle, has meant discouraging them from taking on union positions beyond the level of (and sometimes including) the shop steward, thereby also limiting their potential influence. By contrast, the greater emphasis placed on capturing the official union machine by the SLP (like the Communist Party in the past) has enabled a broader degree of influence in some unions such as the RMT, although this has also made it more susceptible to internal factional disputes within the union apparatus (Darlington, 2001).

Fourth, the SWP's extra-parliamentary politics, with its advocacy of mass strikes and socialist revolution to overthrow capitalism, has also limited its potential appeal to those trade union activists looking for a pole of opposition to 'Social Partnership' and New Labour but with a less ultra-confrontational edge. By contrast, the SLP and SSP's more electorally orientated politics, standing parliamentary candidates on a platform of broad socialist demands, appears to have been more attractive to a wider pool of disaffected union voters, albeit still of relative minority

appeal. Fifth, involvement in socialist politics and militant union activity has also made left-wing activists, whatever their party affiliation, vulnerable to management harassment and victimisation, and to being ostracised by union officialdom. Recent examples of this have been attempts by national leaders of UNISON to discipline prominent SWP union branch activists and shop stewards involved in leading unofficial disputes in London, Sheffield, Newcastle and Glasgow.

Despite such limitations, and what McIlroy (2000a) has derided as the apparent 'catastophism….impatience and economism which have been hallmarks of the British left' in the *past*, it remains possible the SWP and other left-wing groups could grow significantly in numbers and influence inside the unions in opposition to New Labour in the *future*. The prospects for such a development have undoubtedly been encouraged by the recent decision of the SWP to build up a national network of Socialist Alliances in England and Wales (which unite the SWP and other far-left groups together with ex-Labour Party members, independent socialists, union militants, single-issue activists and anti-globalisation campaigners) and to merge with the SSP in Scotland. The relative success of this reorganisation became apparent In the 2000 London Assembly and 2001 general elections when the Socialist Alliance and Scottish Socialist Party succeeded in presenting a creditable and widespread electoral intervention to the left of Labour, and has subsequently been confirmed by the building up of new-style broad-based left-wing campaigning activist organisations that have attracted support at different levels inside some unions.

The revival of the British left has also been reflected in the election of a number of left-leaning union general secretaries and at the general frustration with the New Labour government amongst a growing minority of trade unionists, highlighted in sharp relief by the Fire Brigades Union's 2001 decision that its political fund should in future only be used to support electoral candidates and organisations who uphold the union's policies, even if this means opposing Labour Party candidates. It is a revival process that could be greatly encouraged with any resurgence of workers' militancy in Britain, notably on the issue of the government's attempt to introduce the private market into public services. But whether or not political activists from this newly reconstructed British left would be able to decisively affect the actual outcome of events in such circumstances, their current day-to-day attempt to influence their fellow workers ideas and activity, and to challenge alternative strategies and tactics, is undoubtedly a significant factor in industrial relations that should not be overlooked.

CONCLUSION

One of the reasons why left-wing influence within workplace unionism is of particular importance is because for many commentators the advocacy of an adversarial approach to industrial relations is regarded as being merely self-destructive and self-defeating in the current era of globalisation. Thus, it is argued that union survival and recovery in the 21st century will depend on the willingness of unions and their members to behave 'moderately' and to engage in a 'social partnership' between

workers and employers. This means abandoning an adversarial approach and accepting the need for co-operation to change workplace culture towards a more consensual direction (Taylor, 1994; TUC, 1997; Unions '21, 1999). However, as Kelly (1996) has argued, militancy is often necessary in the face of the growing hostility of employers to any form of unionism and collective bargaining which makes social partnership impossible to achieve. Compared with militancy gains from moderation are generally meagre, whether measured by membership increases or union strength and influence. Moreover, moderation can seriously weaken trade unions and leave them vulnerable to employers' attacks because they erode the willingness and capacity of members to resist and to challenge employer demands. (As with anything else, this is not a uniform process. Indeed, certain groups of workers, particularly those who are strategically placed in bargaining terms, may find otherwise). Nonetheless, even Kelly does not consider the ways in which left-wing activists might play an important role in providing a coherent political alternative to the 'pragmatism' of New Labour policies and its notions of 'Social Partnership'.

Of course, this does not mean falling into the trap of assuming that the fortunes of left-wing leadership can be viewed irrespective of objective circumstances. As we have previously explored, there are numerous factors that come in to play in shaping the balance of power between workers and management. The nature of employer and government attacks, the level of organisation and consciousness of workers, the strength of traditions of solidarity, how angry workers are, how confident they are they can do something about it, the willingness to engage in struggle, the degree of official union support, and the character and level of workers' struggle in society generally are crucial factors to take into account.

Other specifically structural and organisational features of the work situation, which are beyond the control of individuals, will also be significant. Thus, only if the question of left-wing workplace leadership is anchored within this broader context can we appreciate the material constraints and limitations to militant workers' activity that can operate. Nonetheless, it also has to be remembered that workplace relations can also change very quickly, so that an apparently cowed workforce, with a hitherto 'pragmatic' leadership, can suddenly explode into militant action. This in turn can to a situation where left-wing activists, who have previously been relatively marginalised in terms of influence, can potentially gain a much wider hearing for their ideas, and even play a decisive role in terms of the outcome of events.

At the very least, it seems justifiable to suggest that without much more extensive research into the influence that left-wing activists can exert in the workplace, and the discussions, debates and arguments involved in deciding what are the most appropriate ways of 'framing' issues around which workers can be mobilised for action, including different political conceptions between activists and rank-and-file members, the dynamics of workplace union organisation will remain only a partially understood phenomenon.

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