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The agitator “theory” of strikes re-evaluated

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00236560600899024>

Title	The agitator “theory” of strikes re-evaluated
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Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/10107/
Published Date	2006

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There has been a renewed emphasis amongst a small layer of British and North American academics on the importance of local union leadership to building and sustaining collective workplace union organization and activity.¹ The pioneering insights into the crucial role played by shop stewards and other union activists revealed within some of the classic sociologically-inspired empirically-based workplace studies of the 1970s² have been revisited and further developed by more recent studies, some of which have attempted to bring the contribution of mobilization theory (derived from the sociological literature on social movements) into the mainstream of industrial relations analysis.³ Within this literature a handful of researchers have focused particular attention on the much-neglected role that *left-wing* political activists can play in shaping collective activity and mobilization at the workplace in both historical and contemporary settings.⁴

This article attempts to pick up the threads of a number of elements within this literature by specifically re-evaluating the so-called ‘agitator theory’ of strikes. If for many people, including some historians, explanations for the Russian revolution of October 1917 can be reduced to the work of a handful of determined Bolsheviks, then, equally for some, agitators can appear to be the main explanation for strikes.⁵ Thus, during the second half of the twentieth century, many different commentators viewed Communist Party shop stewards as the cause and organizing force behind the many unofficial strikes that took place in Britain. When the Labour government was ‘blown-off course’ by the June 1966 national seamen’s strike, Prime Minister Harold Wilson condemned in

Parliament the alleged part played by a 'tightly knit group of politically motivated men'. 'No major strike occurs anywhere in this country in any sector of industry in which [the Communist Party] fails to concern itself'.⁶ So-called 'objective' evidence of how the Communists apparently unceasingly set about to achieve their aims became available in a succession of government-sponsored Courts of Inquiry into unofficial strike activity in different industries during the 1960s.⁷ On the docks, although the Devlin Report⁸ accepted that many of the unofficial shop steward strike leaders were genuine in their desire to improve conditions, it argued that others: 'find industrial agitation a satisfactory way of life...whose concern is to make sure that there is always something to agitate about'.⁹

A number of national trade union leaders shared the government's perception of the menace of shop-floor unrest and need to combat the influence of Communist shop stewards,¹⁰ and even some prominent British industrial relations academics, such as Roberts and Flanders,¹¹ went along with the claim that industrial conflict reflected, in part, Communist shop steward 'penetration' and 'subversion'. Similarly, in their study *Shop Stewards*, Goodman and Whittingham conceded:

...a small if well-publicized minority of stewards do sometimes persistently disregard established procedures, perpetuating strike activity as an end in itself in seeking to disrupt working relations, employment and production. There is evidence of political groups committed to disruption establishing themselves among stewards...There have

been a few well-documented situations where stewards might justly be accused of manufacturing grievances rather than managing them.¹²

The assumption that militant shop stewards and political 'agitators' fomented strikes continued to resurface in one form or another during the industrial unrest that swept Britain during the 1970s and early 1980s. For example, 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. Likewise, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher branded Arthur Scargill and the other leaders of the 1984-5 miners' strike as a furtive political clique hell-bent on the subversion of the British state.¹³ And the agitator theory of strikes is not merely of historical curiosity, but continues to have contemporary relevance, despite the massive decline in the level of strike action, weakening of the strength of trade unionism and demise of the Communist Party that has occurred in Britain (and many other countries) over the last twenty-five years. For example, during recent strikes by Fire Service and Royal Mail workers there were tabloid newspaper claims of: 'Militants exploiting their members' grievances for their own political ends,'¹⁴ with other strikes on the railways and London Underground leading to the denunciation of RMT union general secretary Bob Crow as a 'bloody minded wrecker' and 'Marxist militant'.¹⁵ Although in all these cases the Communist Party was noticeable by its relative absence, the alleged influential role of other 'hard-line left-wing' groups was highlighted.

It is true that most post-war British industrial relations academics jettisoned the Cold War right-wing demonology of Communism and continue to refuse to accept contemporary versions of such a one-dimensional agitator explanation for industrial conflict. But it is highly significant, as a few commentators have recently pointed out,¹⁶ that such academics, most of whom are from a social-democratic tradition sympathetic to trade unionism, have generally gone too far and fallen into the alternative trap of neglecting the influence of political activists and shop stewards (whether from the Communist Party or other radical left groups) in industrial disputes. Thus, the vast majority of British IR textbooks produced since the 1960s onwards have either completely ignored their influence within the workplace or referred to it only in passing. Furthermore, with the exception of some of the 1970s workplace studies, there has continued to be (and remains) a related tendency within the field of IR to downplay the important role of 'agitators', 'militants' or even activists *per se* in workplace collective mobilization.

One leading British Marxist scholar, John Kelly, has suggested this has been evidenced in three ways: first, by emphasizing the structural causes of conflict at the expense of agency; second, by recognizing the presence of activists, but assigning them a delimited role as 'the instrument not the cause of conflict'; and third, by emphasizing the functional side of shop steward activity, as 'lubricants not irritants' in workplace industrial relations machinery.¹⁷ However, recently there has been rather more systematic theoretical study of leadership

from within the mobilization tradition, much of which is directly relevant to the field of industrial relations and its analysis of strike activity and workplace union leadership.¹⁸

In the light of such considerations, this article attempts to reassess the so called agitator 'theory' of strikes by interrogating a very wide range of literature, including a number of classic and more contemporary empirical workplace studies which have been produced over the last forty years, as well as some aspects of mobilisation theory and other industrial relations literature. The article builds on and extends the Marxist analysis developed in the author's own studies produced over recent years into the social processes involved within workplace industrial disputes, to explore the extent to which shop-floor activists (whether members of left-wing political organisations, 'militant' shop stewards or rank-and-file union activists) exercise an influential 'agitator' role within workplace strike activity. It concentrates attention on *workplace*-based (as opposed to national-level) strike action.

To begin with, the article outlines the main contours of the agitator theory of strikes. It then proceeds to critically re-evaluate this theory by an equally critical consideration of six of the main counter-arguments that have traditionally been levelled, implicitly or explicitly, by many of its academic industrial relations opponents.¹⁹ The article provides evidence to suggest that although the agitator theory exaggerates and presents a distorted picture, there is clearly an important

element of truth in the thesis; agency in collective workplace mobilisation, in particular the role of leadership by union militants and left-wing activists, *can be* an important variable in an understanding of the dynamics of workplace industrial conflict.

The Agitator ‘Theory’ of Strikes

Although there is no fully developed ‘theory’ that has been expounded to explain the role of agitators in strike activity as such, it is possible to extrapolate some central ideological arguments from a number of right-wing employer-funded organizations in Britain (including the Economic League and Aims of Industry) that have provided a sophisticated information service about industrial relations in general and the alleged role of union and political ‘agitators’ in particular.

Clearly, behind the depiction of agitators as ‘troublemakers’ who cause strikes is a conservative ideology, akin to the classic ‘unitary’²⁰ frame of reference within industrial relations, that suggests the organization of work under capitalism is normal, natural and acceptable. Emphasizing the common interest between workers and managers, this approach views strikes as an unnatural and unnecessary act, at best the result of delusion, at worst the work of subversives. Whatever their ostensible justification, they are the result of some sort of conspiracy; workers are corrupted into going on strike, either duped by ‘militants’ or else compelled to leave work through intimidation.²¹ Such a unitary ideology

continues to underpin much of the contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) tradition, which does not accept that subordinate employees have the legitimacy to challenge managerial decisions in such a fashion.

In a 1968 pamphlet entitled *The Agitators: Extremist Activities in British Industry* the Economic League insisted the notion that 'every strike has a cause' was misleading and one-sided because it threw no light on either *why* workers believed a problem was a grievance or *why* grievances led to strikes; in fact, grievances themselves were rarely self-evident, they usually needed pointing out, fomenting, exacerbating and ultimately exploiting.²² Left-wing shop stewards and 'agitators' often played a key role in this process by 'applying a match' to the 'inflammable material' of difficult industrial and economic situations.²³

Furthermore, 'subversives' were adept at *manufacturing* discontents and *engineering* conflict. In other words, imaginary grievances rather, than real genuine ones, were stirred up by agitators in a manipulative fashion. Often it was lack of adequate information and knowledge on the shop-floor which gave rise to discontents, fears and misunderstandings that then provided the opportunity for rumour-mongering and gross misrepresentation, a key ingredient upon which agitators thrived. It should not be underestimated, it was argued, the ability of such extremists to disturb waters that would otherwise be calm. It was no coincidence they were almost invariably to be found in positions of influence at places of work which gained a reputation as 'trouble spots'. And it was for this reason that, despite the apparent strike-prone nature of particular industries, only

certain dock areas, factories and building sites were involved in strike activity while workers elsewhere, operating under almost exactly similar circumstances, were content to have their problems settled by peaceful negotiations.²⁴

In the process agitators did not seek to remedy grievances but to *exploit* them; feeding off the fears, frustrations and anger of people at odds with the company or organization that employed them in order to conduct continuous class warfare within the workplace. Their aim was to cause the maximum disruption to industry by use of the strike weapon and convert the unions into instruments for the ultimate political objective of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.²⁵ This meant that unlike, ordinary trade unionists, they did not want increased pay and better working conditions for its own sake; instead they encouraged workers to take strike action over such issues so as to discredit the capitalist system and show it was 'unworkable'.²⁶ As a 1970 Aims of Industry pamphlet entitled *Reds under the Bed?* explained:

The strategy of 'discrediting the system' means that the Communists simply do not care about the current welfare of the working class they are supposed to support. To them, current prosperity can always be sacrificed to produce greater power for the party. The more impoverished Britain becomes, the more 'the system' can be claimed to have failed.²⁷

They successfully gained influence amongst their generally apathetic fellow workers by camouflaging their own covert political aims with *manipulative*

intent. In reply to the question: 'Do the activities of Communist groups constitute a "plot"?' Bill Carron, right-wing engineering union leader, answered:

If by this one means do the Communists on a given job, in an industry, or a trade union, regularly met to discuss tactics...to begin a strike, or to keep a strike going, the answer is unequivocally yes! ...tactics in disputes are discussed in meticulous detail.²⁸

In the same way the Economic League argued:

The fact that a majority at a mass meeting are honest to goodness trade unionists, Catholics, Protestants, or whatever, does not gainsay the point that a small well-organized minority can skillfully manipulate such a meeting.²⁹

Not surprisingly this agitator theory of strikes has provided the ideological justification for various agencies of the British state, such as MI5 and Special Branch, to consistently utilize spies and informers against suspected trade union and political 'militants', a practice that continues today.³⁰

Having outlined the central features of the agitator theory, it is now possible to consider some of the criticisms that have traditionally been mounted by industrial relations academics.

Structural and Institutional Factors?

The first counter-argument to the agitator theory of strikes that has often been advanced, albeit implicitly, emphasizes the *structural* and *institutional* causes of strikes. Indeed, there has always been a strong tradition within British industrial relations to highlight 'social structure' and downplay 'agency'. This can be illustrated with reference to the classic one-sided structural explanation provided by Bean and Stoney³¹ who suggested Merseyside's reputation in the 1960s and 1970s as an area with a high strike-propensity was entirely attributable to the fact that the region was over-represented in terms of industries such as docks and the car industry which were nationally strike-prone. The concentration of very large numbers of workers in large manufacturing plants with alienating repetitive assembly-line work and its attendant extensive division of labour, factory discipline and managerial prerogatives, was identified as being particularly significant in explaining shop-floor militancy. In other words, distinctive structural and organizational factors were held responsible for encouraging workers to develop a consciousness of collective grievance, form a strong emotional attachment to their union, and engage in strike activity.

Similarly, the importance of industrial relations *institutional* arrangements, long taken up by many writers,³² was given an important fillip by the 1968 Donovan Commission's explanation for the underlying cause of the numerous unofficial workplace strikes as being directly attributable to Britain's workplace collective-bargaining arrangements.³³ Clegg extended such an analysis to study

industrial conflict comparatively across six countries in which he also sought to relate strike-proneness to the structure of bargaining.³⁴

Yet arguably such structural and institutional explanations, on their own, are clearly inadequate, given that they fail to explain why the opportunities and limitations they illuminate become realized or missed by those involved on the shop-floor. In addition, such an approach does not account for why union solidarity and strike propensity in similar structural and institutional conditions can often vary considerably both between similar workplaces in the same industry and between similar industries in different countries.³⁵ This is not to say that such factors are unimportant, but that structural and institutional characteristics have to be considered in combination with other factors concerned with how social actors actually intervene within these circumstances. The point is that structural factors create a more or less favourable environment for the collectivization of the workforce, but do not, in and of themselves, necessarily generate a sense of injustice or collective identity: those outcomes also have to be constructed by activists and other opinion formers. Hence the importance of the role of agency and leadership in the mobilization of discontent and workplace strike activity.³⁶

But if structuralist explanations tend to downplay agency then the agitator theory falls in the opposite trap of downplaying structure and context. By placing overwhelming stress on the power of *subjective* individual agitators to manufacture discontent and engineer strikes - to the relative neglect of *objective*

material conditions - it is equally one-sided. Most commentators accept (in principle at least) that, as Marx long ago argued,³⁷ structure and agency should not be seen as oppositional; there is a complex interplay between the two in any given situation. One of the best examples of this combined approach with relation to workplace strike activity is Kimeldorf's historical sociological study to explain why dockers on America's west coast were radical and led by a committed cadre of communists and other leftists in the 1930s, compared with their much less industrially assertive and more politically conservative counterparts on the east coast. Kimeldorf attributed the contrast not just to material differences (including workers' social composition and the structure of employer ownership), but also to different leadership strategies and organizing traditions, notably the role played by the left.³⁸

Genuine Grievances?

A second objection to the agitator theory is that the assumption all would be harmonious between workers and management if only 'militants' were not stirring things up considerably underestimates the extent of workers' grievances and their material underlying causes. In fact, it is argued, workers do not willingly agree to engage in strike action unless they have been convinced there is something to fight about and there is likely to be a beneficial end product. For

example, after studying the causes of the large number of unofficial strikes within the car industry in the 1960s, Turner *et al* concluded:

...the great majority of strikes constitute reactions to, or protests against, some change in the work context: they are refusals to continue work on the same terms as previously when the conditions previously assumed no longer apply. As such, they very commonly amount to a demonstration against some managerial action...or against a managerial assumption that men will continue to work on the same pay and conditions when the content or context of the job has in some way changed.³⁹

In other words, the problem with the agitator theory is that it effectively views workers' grievances as incidental or secondary to the cause of disputes. By trying to pin the blame on militants for the outbreak of unofficial strikes it focuses attention on the *effect* not the *cause* of industrial disruption. While it might be possible for militants to take advantage of rank-and-file workers' grievances, they do not *manufacture* those discontents. Placing all the responsibility for strikes at the hands of agitators fails to take into account the way in which strikes are often provoked by *managerial* action, with discontent manifest long before a walk-out actually takes place.

The implication of such a critique is that any adequate analysis of industrial conflict has to be concerned with the underlying antagonistic social relations between workers and management within a capitalist society that gives rise to conflict, rather than the role of agitators as such. And it follows that

agitation would be unlikely to fall on receptive ears unless there were genuine widespread grievances and justifiable demands to agitate about. As Bert Ramelson, the British Communist Party's industrial organizer in the 1970s, pointed out:

When you use words like 'Communist-dominated' I feel this is almost insulting to the British worker. It suggests they are simpletons, allowing a tiny minority to dominate them. If the Communist Party were not saying what the workers felt, they would be ignored. They make proposals which are not totally removed from reality.⁴⁰

In adapting one of Mao Zedong's famous sayings, Cockburn⁴¹ has explained that agitators must 'swim like fishes in the sea' - which necessarily implies there is a suitable sea already for them to swim in. Therefore, to wholly attribute industrial disputes to agitators, explaining complex social processes exclusively in terms of the intervention of key individuals is to exaggerate their influence.

However, whilst the argument that strikes only take place where there are genuine grievances appears to be absolutely valid, the claim made by Hyman⁴² that militant shop stewards are often merely 'the instrument of conflict rather than its cause' is one we shall have reason to further investigate on the basis that grievances in themselves do not necessarily translate into collective forms of strike activity.

'SPONTANEOUS' STRIKES?

A third counter-argument to the agitator theory is that many strikes are completely spontaneous. In his classic study *Wildcat Strike* Gouldner pointed out that managers could view strikes as either the product of a 'calculated stratagem' by the workers - an impersonal, cold-blooded calculation of the tactical opportunities available - or an irrational 'emotional outburst' which allows workers to 'blow off steam' and 'get it off their chests'.⁴³ Similarly, Goodman and Whittingham believed unofficial strikes in which 'militant' shop stewards were involved could be seen either as 'a strategic weapon employed consciously by workplace leaders who assume the mantle of general of conspirators' or merely a 'necessary explosion of pent-up frustration, released often by a trivial incident'.⁴⁴

This suggests the common stereotype of the strike as a carefully planned confrontation, a deliberately calculated stratagem (either organised by trade union officials from above or fanned by shop-floor 'militants' or left-wing political 'agitators' from below), may not be characteristic of all, or even most, disputes. Instead, such conflict tends to originate in the more or less spontaneous action of workers and lacks leadership. In Gouldner's study the plant was reported as being a 'powderkeg' which had 'blown up' in the unpredictable manner of a natural eruption - rather than in accordance with the purposive preparation of leaders - with the absence of a well formulated set of union demands.⁴⁵ Similarly Knowles argued strikes are rarely 'carefully planned and premeditated; still less

often are they dictated by considerations of strategy. Most often they are more or less spontaneous outbursts against “injustice”.⁴⁶

A number of classic British workplace studies appear to confirm such an analysis.⁴⁷ For example, Lane and Roberts described how in April 1970 a ‘spontaneous’ unofficial walk-out at the Pilkington glass factory in St Helens, Lancashire, represented an explosion of accumulated grievances over wages and conditions. ‘There was no organized plot’. The strike had not been engineered by a group of subversives who had deliberately infiltrated the plant. ‘Such script as there was, was made up by people as they went along: the strike in its beginnings was a genuinely spontaneous movement’. At first many workers did not even know why they were striking – it was only during the process of spreading through the factories that the strike acquired definite objectives, with the decisive action of a small number of workers pulling others into action. The strike was viewed as a ‘normal event’, arising almost naturally out of the circumstances of the employment relationship itself.⁴⁸

The contemporary relevance of such an analysis seems to have been confirmed by the persistent level of unofficial strikes within Royal Mail during the 1990s and early 2000s, which have been relatively unplanned and ‘spontaneous’ to the extent that the initiative has come from the members themselves on issues that may have been perceived to have been ignored or not dealt with adequately

by lay union reps, and where union reps have been contacted and asked for their advice but consciously played no direct role.⁴⁹

So there *does appear* to be an important element of spontaneity in certain forms of strike activity in which so-called 'agitation' is completely absent. Somewhere along the line, employers' imposition of some change in the organization of work, possibly a minor incident in itself, can suddenly set off a chain reaction in which conditions hitherto taken for granted begin to be questioned and are directly challenged. In some circumstances strikes might be 'spontaneous' because the context makes this necessary - workers feel they must respond quickly because the situation (for example, the victimisation of a colleague) demands immediate action, and if action were not taken immediately management could be seen to 'win' by default. In other situations strikers may have laboured under a sense of grievance for a considerable time (and been aware that a stoppage offered a possible solution to the crisis), but their exasperation accumulates to the point of eruption. Whatever the exact event, 'something happens', becoming a catalyst that can lead to the outbreak of strike activity by rank-and-file workers in ways that, only days or even hours before, seemed impossible. Such 'explosions' can display the creative energy, resourcefulness and initiative that a mass action can unfold. All of this may occur spontaneously, in the sense that the shift does not appear to be directly attributable to the activity of any particular 'agitator' or group.

However, arguably the claim of 'spontaneity' - particularly when offered as a refutation of the agitator theory of strikes - is compromised to a considerable extent because its proponents tend to ignore the role of *leadership* within all forms of strike activity, even though it may appear there is a large degree of spontaneity in the origins of certain strikes. It is at this point that we should note the important contribution made by mobilization theory: namely that grievances are a necessary, but insufficient, condition for collective action to take place. Thus, the commonsense notion that anger, bitterness or relative deprivation *themselves* give rise to popular protest is a false one. In practice while grievances are real enough, someone (not necessarily conscious 'agitators') still needs to articulate them and suggest practical collective remedies. As Shorter and Tilly have reminded us, individual workers 'are not magically mobilised for participation in some group enterprise, regardless of how angry, sullen, hostile, or frustrated they may feel. Their aggression may be channelled to collective ends only through the co-ordinating, directing functions of an organisation, be it formal or informal'.⁵⁰

From this perspective, the very notion of a purely 'spontaneous' strike is misleading because collective action by workers is impossible without some degree of leadership and organisation (in which the actions and demands of a determined minority draw into collective activity the mass of workers), even if such intervention in certain circumstances is improvised, intermittent and/or

unplanned. Paradoxically this is an argument that has in the past been given due consideration by some IR commentators. Thus, Karsh made the point:

Individual unrest, frustration or discontent represents a fluid condition, which has the potentialities for differing lines of action. Indeed, the unrest is not social until it is organised; expressions of individual dissatisfaction need to be crystallised, defined and focused. Most of all they need to be communicated and thus shared...It is in these terms that leadership plays a crucial role.⁵¹

Similarly, Batstone *et al's* study documented the way shop-floor workers' grievances have to be translated into strike action:

Strikes do not just happen. As a form of collective activity they require the development of a degree of unity amongst those involved. Such organization is not only important once a strike has begun; it is equally necessary in creating a stoppage of work. Particular individuals or groups are likely first to introduce the idea of a strike and then to persuade their fellows of the validity of this course of action. The mobilization of strike action, then, is a social process involving systems of influence and power.⁵²

The problem is that whilst the agitator theory grossly *overstates* the role of activist leadership in strikes, many other British industrial relations academics over the past 40 years have tended to considerably *understate* its significance - particularly in relation to union militants or political activists. Now as has already been implied, there is a very crucial difference between the creation of shop-floor discontent that gives rise to strike activity on the one hand, and the leadership

role of shop stewards, militant activists or even political agitators on the other. The latter do not, and cannot, create the underlying material conditions that lead to antagonism and conflict. Nonetheless, what they *can* do is to stimulate awareness of grievances as well as of potential collective strength in acting for redress; generalise a belief in the desirability and feasibility of strike action; take the lead in proposing or initiating such action; and provide some cohesion to the general movement of discontent by generalising from workers' specific economic grievances to broader more political concerns. And in certain circumstances left-wing political activists (of whatever specific variety) can provide the very kind of ideological, organisational and political leadership which advocates of the agitator theory of strikes find so alarming, precisely because an awakening to the general character of the situation can in many cases be more explosive than the immediate grievance which originated the conflict.

Barker *et al* have explained the need for, and material foundation of, leadership within any form of social movement is provided by the fact that such movements as entities are anything but homogeneous. This means participants do not arrive at shared ideas and a collective identity all together and at the same time. Instead there are arenas of discussion and argument out of which emerge, unstable and only provisional forms of collective understanding, organisation and action. It is precisely here that the issue of leadership arises. Leadership in social movements consists in proposing to these differentiated entities how they could

and should identify themselves and act together. Without such proposals, collective movements do not arise and collective identity is not formed.⁵³

As the Italian Marxist of the early twentieth century, Antonio Gramsci, commented: 'pure spontaneity does not exist'.⁵⁴ Some form of leadership takes place even within the initiation of what appears on the surface to be 'spontaneous' strike activity - to the degree that *some* person or groups of individuals have to take the initiative in walking off the job and then providing a lead to fellow workers to do likewise. An apparently spontaneous action draws on pre-existing informal communication networks that give rise to varying levels of conscious leadership and organisation. Scott and Homans looked at so-called 'unplanned' and 'wildcat strikes' in America, and concluded.

It appears that in almost all instances a wildcat strike presupposes communication and a degree of informal group organisation. The strike has some kind of leadership, usually from within the group, and the leaders do some kind of planning, if only but for a few hours or minutes ahead. Whether this kind of behaviour is 'spontaneous' or 'planned' is a quibble. The interesting thing is not the question itself but what it implies about the people who raise it...showing [their] ignorance of informal group behaviour in industry and elsewhere.⁵⁵

The implication of this particular assessment is that workplace activists (whether they are 'spontaneously' thrown up by events or are more established figures) can play an indispensable role as *catalysts* of strike activity, a perspective which is differentiated from the agitator theory of strikes (with its

emphasis on the alleged *manufacture* of discontent) by an alternative stress on the articulation of workers' *genuine* grievances. But even if we accept that the *origin of strikes* does not necessarily, or in the majority of cases, depend on the leadership role of workplace activists, militants or political agitators, the overall direction of such strikes once started *can* undoubtedly be profoundly influenced by such figures. Thus, although the Pilkington strike seemed to have emerged out of 'nowhere' in the sense that it was not formally organised, once under way in one small area the strike spread to all six plants on the site and gradually drew the mass of workers into activity only through the determined efforts of a small handful of union activists. Of crucial significance was the way in which such activist leadership was able to shape the definition of the meanings, purposes and objectives of the strike. Ironically, the predominant purpose of the strikers' cause only became explicit *after* the stoppage was already in progress, with the articulation of a rationale that effectively selected specific demands from among the strikers' pre-existing grievances and aspirations.⁵⁶

More recently, Fantasia has provided a fascinating participant observation study into the internal dynamics of wildcat strike action in a steel-casting factory in New Jersey, in which a small group of the most confident workers pulled into action a more hesitant group who in turn influenced the least confident, with a union militant eventually articulating their discontent with management and connecting this to inaction on the part of the local union leadership. The action was structured in certain ways which gave rise to organised forms that could then

lead, plan or harness workers' spontaneity in a more systematic way. 'In posing a dualism between spontaneity and the planned or rational calculation of collective action, the pretence of the structured elements *within* spontaneous action may be missed'.⁵⁷

Therefore, the attempt to refute the agitator theory by emphasizing the spontaneity of workers' strike activity is undermined by the theory's important, albeit distorted and exaggerated, truism that, as another study by Taylor and Bain noted: 'in the development of collective organization, leadership prove[s] decisive'.⁵⁸

Shop Steward Lubricants?

A fourth counter-argument to the agitator theory (and 'communist-shop-steward-as-villain' notion) is that the shop stewards' role is more often associated with attempts to *prevent* strikes than to *foment* them. Of course, it should be noted a number of classic workplace studies of the 1970s and early 1980s provided evidence that shop stewards' leadership was, in fact, crucial in articulating workers' sense of grievance, targeting it at employers and organizing strike action.⁵⁹ One of the most detailed examinations of the processes through which shop stewards can foster collective organization and action was provided by Batstone *et al.*⁶⁰ 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 stewards' 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, 'mobilization of bias' and 'systems of argument' to reinforce the collective interests of the group. In the process, shop stewards' influence and leadership could, within limits, determine whether a stoppage occurred as well as to which workers and what issues would be involved and along what lines a settlement would be reached.

However, notwithstanding this recognition of the influential leadership role of shop stewards, a number of classic and highly influential British industrial relations studies of the 1960s and 1970s also explicitly rejected the assumption made by the agitator theory of strikes (and the tabloid press) that it was shop steward 'troublemakers' who stimulated or provoked unofficial disputes. For example, Clack⁶¹ who worked as a participant observer in a car factory during a period when several so-called 'unofficial-unofficial' strikes occurred, reported that they took place without the knowledge or against the advice not only of full-time officials but also of the shop stewards. He concluded they were 'demonstrations neither of temper nor of political manipulation' and 'contrary to public opinion' were neither started nor led by 'power or politically motivated shop stewards'. On

the contrary, the stewards were generally a restraining influence, although they could not afford to get 'out of touch with the feelings of the shop'.⁶²

This assessment - that stewards often counselled moderation not militancy - was reinforced by Turner, Clack and Roberts's broader study of unofficial strikes in the car industry.⁶³ They also rejected the agitator theory's notion of irascible shop stewards and found 'clearly no evidence' for such an inflammatory view of shop stewards: 'Strikes have been as common in plants where the stewards' organization is weak or divided'. They acknowledged that many stewards were 'militant' in some political sense or other and were often to the left of the Labour Party. They were likely to be selected for 'certain tough-mindedness, for an active, individual or aggressive temperament', and those who remained in office were often 'necessarily both tenacious and motivated'. But the study concluded the impact of left-wing political beliefs on workplace behaviour was minimal: 'Circumstances themselves tend to press stewards into courses of action which are as much moderating as inciting'.⁶⁴

The 1968 Donovan Commission's highly respected broader survey of British industrial relations also categorically rejected the media's claim that 'unofficial strikes are fomented by shop stewards bent on disruption'.⁶⁵ On the contrary, stewards were hard working and responsible people who were often obliged to act as mediators trying to prevent stoppages while grievances could be examined. In a subsequently much cited statement they reported:

It is often wide of the mark to describe shop stewards as 'troublemakers'. Trouble is thrust upon them...shop stewards are rarely agitators pushing workers towards unconstitutional action. In some instances they may be the mere mouthpieces of their workgroups. But quite commonly they are supportive of order, exercising a restraining influence on their members in conditions which promote disorder.⁶⁶

And the Donovan Commission quoted from its earlier survey of shop stewards:

There is little evidence that shop stewards are more militant than their members, or more likely to favour unconstitutional action. For the most part stewards are viewed by others, and view themselves, as accepted, reasonable and even moderating influences, more of a lubricant than an irritant.⁶⁷

Many other studies over the last thirty years (including Goodman and Whittingham)⁶⁸ have also suggested that not all strikes, including unofficial strikes, are led or fomented by shop stewards, and that stewards can often be a moderating influence in relation to strike activity. For example, Batstone *et al*⁶⁹ explored the way 'leader' stewards employed references to collective interests not merely to foster strike action, but also as an important means by which to dissuade groups from taking collective action, particularly of an unofficial nature. Some Marxist-inspired writers⁷⁰ have also documented the way shop stewards display the general contradictory tendencies involved in trade unionism within capitalist society - characterised by the tension between *conflict* and *accommodation* in their relationship with management. Thus, although sometimes stewards express rank-and-file members' grievances through

collective action, they also seek to limit their manifestation to forms over which they can exert control and which do not jeopardise the overall bargaining relationship developed with management. In the process, the stewards' role *can* often be to inhibit or resolve than to initiate or mobilise. Yet in reality the picture has always been considerably more complex than the Donovan Commission's broad brush-stroke assessment suggested. We can see this in a number of ways.

(i) If shop stewards are perceived by their members to fail to represent their interests in negotiations with management, their advice can, on occasions, be ignored, with the rank-and-file reasserting their control - in the last resort replacing a steward whose competence they doubt by one in whom they have greater confidence. For example, Gouldner's *Wildcat Strike* described how conciliatory union reps, in a plant with deteriorating labour-management relations, were replaced in practice, though not formally, by more extreme leaders when members felt a strike was necessary. A similar thing happened during the Pilkington strike, when a number of the older stewards who had originally acted as a brake on the strike, were pushed to one side and replaced by a militant Rank-and-File Strike Committee. Such examples, rare as they might seem in more recent years of union decline, are important in so far as they reveal the way in which the 'elevation' of individuals into workplace leadership roles is always, in principle, provisional and situational, with every leader only as good as their last effort.

(ii) Although stewards *can* be a moderating influence, it is noticeable that when they are faced with their advice being rejected by members who then accept the leadership of others who hold no union position, stewards sometimes try to retain their influence by accepting the majority view, and in the process can find themselves leading the conduct of a stoppage they had had no role initially supporting. Darlington's study of the strike-prone Ford Halewood plant in the 1970s showed that even though many of the sectional stoppages of work – over the speed of assembly lines, the movement of labour and discipline – were initiated by rank-and-file workers, the stewards often felt obliged to support their members even though they acted against their advice for fear they would otherwise be removed from office at subsequent elections.⁷¹

(iii) Workplace union leadership within strike activity is a continuous reciprocal process between stewards and members. On the one hand, as we have seen, rank-and-file workers can attempt to influence their stewards in order to achieve certain objectives, sometimes placing considerable constraints on the degree of influence and authority that stewards are able to wield. In *Social Organisation of Strikes*, Batstone *et al* went beyond their earlier study that had demonstrated the importance of 'leader' shop stewards to look at the influence of *other* shop-floor figures were likely to initiate strike proposals, namely the 'griever' and 'opinion-leader'. The 'griever' was particularly 'reward-deprivation aware'. Such individuals were *not* leftist agitators, the majority could best be described as either non-political or more right-wing than the majority of workers.

But they had a greater readiness than other workers to identify and act upon grievances, although they were usually viewed with some suspicion because they were always 'moaning'. By contrast, the 'opinion-leader' tended to hold more sway among workers and hence have resources that they could mobilise. Their articulation of grievances tended to be directed more frequently at collective, rather than individual, solutions, and in this role workers often looked to them to articulate grievances on their behalf.⁷²

Both of these shop-floor figures were able to play an important role initiating strikes, although whilst 'grievers' were influential almost solely at the level of the work-group, 'opinion-leaders' were more influential at the level of the section as a whole.⁷³ In the process, the extent to which stewards could act as leaders was something very much influenced by their members. In other words, then rank-and-file were never mere puppets in a strike, they were themselves an active agency, highlighting the need to consider the extent to which members play an agitational role and influence stewards' behaviour.⁷⁴

On the other hand, it is equally important we recognise the central leadership and 'agitational' role in strike activity that *is* often played by shop stewards; in particular the fact they are in a unique position to influence members by raising issues they think important and proposing strategies to win improvements in wages and conditions. As Lane remarked:

A shop steward was not a leader in the military sense that he could give orders and expect unquestioning obedience. On the contrary, his leadership was always on trial and open to question. Yet if he could lead only to the extent that the led acquiesced, he was in a position to influence what it was that the led would find acceptable.⁷⁵

This position of influence derives from the way that as a representative of workers whose work situation constantly generates grievances, 'the steward's role is always one of potential conflict'.⁷⁶ Their authority stems essentially from the fact that they share the aspirations of their members, are personally involved in their experiences and grievances on the shop-floor, and are expected to represent their interests in negotiation with management. In many respects, their dedication to building and sustaining workplace union organization, their bargaining skills and appreciation of strategy and tactics acquired through previous experience and their integration into networks of support provided by union organization generally, mean they are usually in a better position than their members to spell out the causes and consequences of conditions and prospective action. They are able to situate sectional concerns in the overall context of the workplace and are well-equipped to judge the effectiveness of a proposal and to advocate one course rather than another. Precisely because of this relationship with the rank-and-file shop stewards have often, both in the past and in contemporary settings, figured prominently in strikes (which are sometimes in open defiance of full-time union officials) and hence the popular appeal of the agitator theory's portrayal of many of them as 'troublemakers' or 'agitators'.

As we have seen, this is not to suggest the members are infinitely manipulable. The refusal sometimes of workers to accede to advice made by stewards to engage in strike action, as well as the refusal of strikers to return to work despite the request of their stewards, are clear demonstrations of the limits of leadership in contingent situations. But even if stewards' recommendations are not always uncritically accepted, this does not mean they do not have the ability and are not in a position to direct the way matters are presented and hence to influence the final outcome. Moreover, once strike action has been agreed upon, maintaining it often requires a certain level of shop-floor organization, at which point stewards can often play a crucial role in the development and articulation of strategy to members.

Significantly, despite their identification of the role of 'grievers' and 'opinion-leaders', Batstone *et al* also recorded that the third type of shop-floor figure who had an above-average ability to initiate strike action were shop stewards, particularly 'leader' stewards, who occupied a more central position in the influence network within the section specifically and workplace generally. They concluded that over the broad pattern of strikes, such stewards were crucial to successful initiation. In large part this related to their function as stewards and the prominent 'gate-keeper' role this bestowed. Work-group level disputes, if they were to achieve support from the senior stewards or other sections of workers, had to go through the steward. And strikes initiated at department or plant-level typically required the stewards' co-operation if they were to be supported by the

members. Nonetheless, pressure for strike action, they noted, typically occurred within the section itself, and it was the stewards (and opinion-leaders) that played a disproportionate role in this process.⁷⁷

Even the Donovan Commission made the important observation that although many unofficial strikes appeared to be 'spontaneous demonstrations' on the part of the workers themselves, the larger and more important ones were 'more consciously organised and prepared for in order to impose pressure and increase the effectiveness of the action'. Such strikes were usually led by shop stewards, who had 'strategically calculated when they would be most effective'.⁷⁸ Gall's recent study of shop-floor militancy in Royal Mail has also confirmed that unofficial strikes are 'predominantly organized, premeditated and not spontaneous', with the initiative usually coming from lay union reps.⁷⁹ The clear implication is that the attempt to refute the agitator theory by stressing that the shop stewards' role is more often associated with attempts to prevent strikes than to foment them is inadequate and unconvincing.

Ineffective Political Agitators?

A fifth counter-argument is that political agitators, whether members of the Communist Party or other radical left-wing groups, have been ineffective and of little importance in explaining why strikes occur. For example, confronted with the

claim that the strike-prone nature of industrial relations at Ford Dagenham during the late 1950s was directly associated with the prominence of numerous Communists among the leading stewards, Turner *et al* reported that the Jaguar plant in Coventry had at least as high a strike-incidence despite the lack of any known Communists within its stewards' body. Indeed, despite broad complaints of 'Communist interference' made by some companies, a number of managers privately expressed appreciative comments on the role of Communist senior shop stewards, with one manager noting they were 'an invaluable buffer'. And as far as the Communist Party as an organization was concerned, the study concluded it had been 'dubious in industrial effectiveness', as evidenced by its failure to support a continuing national body of motor industry shop stewards and in the almost complete absence of sympathy strikes in the car industry.⁸⁰

The Donovan Commission's Report and its associated research papers, as well as Brown's studies of shop stewards also made no real attempt to relate industrial militancy, particularly the strike wave of the early 1970s, to the role of the left, notably the Communist Party. Neither did Clegg's standard industrial relations text, Durcan *et al*'s comprehensive study of strikes nor, paradoxically, Hyman's pioneering Marxist analysis of industrial relations.⁸¹ In fact during the last thirty years there have only been a handful of academic 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.⁸² Such

neglect seems remarkable given that the British Communist Party during the 1960s and 1970s, an organization 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.

McIlroy's recent research on this hitherto much-neglected area has provided substantial evidence of the prominent role played by the CP in building party branches in large, often strategic, workplaces (notably in the steel, engineering, car manufacture and mining industries), where they led strikes, developed shop stewards' organization and constructed workplace politics.⁸³ A number of other studies have also shown the pivotal role that was played by a network of CP union militants in industrial disputes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, helping to develop and transform the consciousness of those they represented and mobilized.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, we should note during this period the contradiction between trying to give a lead to independent rank-and-file militancy on the one hand and cultivating influence among sympathetic full-time union officials on the other increasingly led the CP to subordinate the former in favour of the latter, with the result that its activist role was taken over in a handful of workplaces by Trotskyist groups.⁸⁵

During the late 1990s and early 2000s a number of case studies of workplace trade unionism in Royal Mail, the Fire Service and on London Underground⁸⁶ have also revealed the importance of shop stewards' *political*

affiliations, and the influence and leadership that new groups of *left-wing* activists (whether this is defined in terms of fixed affiliation to a political party or in the broader sense of a form of 'quasi-syndicalism' that emphasises industrial struggle rather than political action) with a consistently adversarial attitude towards management can exert on collective workplace union organization and mobilization.

Pragmatic Respect?

A sixth and final counter-argument is that left-wing shop-floor influence (however limited) stems not from manipulation of workers but from the pragmatic respect they generate amongst workers.

Of course, there was the very well documented case of British Communists engaging in trade union manipulation: notably the ETU (Electrical Trades Union) affair in 1961, when faced with the loss of part of its union base in the wake of events in Hungary, Communist full-time union officials tampered with ballot returns to disqualify votes from branches which were thought to be anti-Communist. However, there is no evidence that ballot rigging as practiced in the ETU was typical of the behaviour of Communist trade union activists or was sanctioned by any of the leading bodies of the party.⁸⁷ More recently, it is clear the Trotskyist Militant Tendency practiced a form of deception during the 1970s

and 1980s, operating as a separate and secret political organization inside the Labour Party (with its own programme and policies, newspaper, full-time political organizers and membership) until it was eventually proscribed and suffered the expulsions of leading figures. But again, there is no real evidence their influence amongst workers, for example within Liverpool City Council and its workforce during the political battle with the Conservative government over rate capping, arose from means other than legitimate public campaigning and activity, even if their internal organization was semi-clandestine as a way of unsuccessfully attempting to circumvent the hostility of the national leadership of the Labour Party.⁸⁸

Allegations of manipulation are viewed as being misconceived on the basis that its proponents clearly seek to deny the correspondence of left-wing political ideas of working class defiance and the aspirations of many workers themselves, assuming the former is an 'external' penetration of the latter rather than flowing from genuine indigenous roots. Yet this reveals a fundamental ignorance of the manner in which workers take action in opposition to management. If it was true that left-wing militants were really unconcerned with the immediate interests 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 employers, government and the media often portray such 'agitators' in this light.⁸⁹

Significantly, a number of historians have documented the way British Communist Party industrial militants, despite the Cold War, were able to win respect on the shop-floor as a result of their sheer commitment to the daily round of trade union activity.⁹⁰ Often the most indefatigable organizers and negotiators, and choosing to fight on issues such as higher pay, better working conditions, and stronger unions, that commanded widespread support, their influence also stemmed from a willingness to take on leadership roles necessary for the basic functioning of workplace union. Paradoxically, it was less Communists' *politics* that mattered than their determination to pursue shop-floor grievances and uphold workers' interests against employers and government. It was this that gave them an influence disproportionate to their real numerical strength.

However, this does not mean that there were not sometimes considerable tensions between Communist activists and rank-and-file workers.⁹¹ And as some contemporary studies of Trotskyist groups have shown, although political tolerance can be high, with left-wing convictions no necessary barrier to election as a steward, such activists can remain an object of suspicion, with their recommendations scrutinized for any indications of 'political' motivation. Any apprehension they might be seeking to develop strikes into support for demands reflecting the perspectives of their own organizations can lead to a certain degree of detachment, even if workers can also highly value left-wing activists' ability to provide practical commitment and guidance.⁹²

Overall the counter-argument that left-wing activists instead of manipulating workers win their pragmatic respect is one that appears well founded, even if there can inevitably be some tensions involved in the relationship that also need acknowledgement.

The Dynamics of Shop-Floor Leadership

It is now possible to consider in more detail the contribution of mobilization theory to an understanding of the dynamics of shop-floor leadership and its implications for the agitator theory of strikes. Kelly has made an important attempt to bring the contribution of mobilization theory into the mainstream of industrial relations analysis.⁹³ As an alternative conceptual framework to the dominant pluralist/HRM perspectives, Kelly's use of mobilization theory draws not only on the work of Fantasia but also Tilly, McAdam, Gamson, Franzosi and Klandermans, to generalize about 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.⁹⁴ 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 legitimize such action in the face of counter-mobilization by the employer.

All this raises the question of what precisely is meant by the term 'leadership'? From within mobilization theory tradition Barker *et al* have offered a very useful analytical framework for understanding the nature of leadership in collective activity: namely, as simultaneously a *purposive* activity and a *relationship*.⁹⁵ Considered as a *purposive* activity, leadership involves engaging in practical theorization and evaluation of concrete situations and communicating to others, implicitly or explicitly, practical proposals about appropriate forms of organization and action concerning 'what is to be done?' Lavalette's case study refers to a process of 'strategic planning' or 'strategizing' in which union and political activists think through the various possible strategies and tactics open to the workforce and the potential consequences resulting from each.⁹⁶ This involves questions to do with whether the case can be won, the level of support for action, and whether the activists are able to convince others of such possibilities.

But as well as a purposive activity, leadership is also a *relationship*. As an activity it involves 'listening' as well as talking, anticipating responses as well as making proposals. In this sense, leadership can be understood to be a dynamic activity with other actors, who themselves are strategically thinking entities,

possessing 'agency'. From this perspective, leadership is exercised not only by union activists or agitators but by *all* participants inside the workplace with views about union organization and activity, who engage in 'framing' issues, translate grievances into a sense of injustice, blame management, assess opportunities, and mobilize their fellow workers. While activists or 'agitators' can often be crucial and initiatory, they are so only in relation to rank-and-file workers themselves, with questions of strategy and tactics an inherently relational activity (formed in the face of the words and actions of both allies and combatants) and always necessarily provisional, subject to revision and to argument. Listeners are *as significant* a participant as speakers in a transforming process of social dialogue: 'On both sides we find agency and creativity.'⁹⁷

In other words, being simultaneously a purposive activity and a relationship, leadership can be seen to involve both identification with a group of workers and a degree of 'projective distance' from their immediate situation. Leaders (whether political agitators, union activists or other shop-floor figures) not only propound a positive idea, but also have to compete with aspiring leaders and to combat alternative ideas or conceptions of what should be done. In this respect, all leadership relations can be seen to inevitably involve a degree of tension between would-be-leaders and potential followers.

One implication of treating leadership as a relationship is that it suggests more attention should be given to 'followers' and to whom, how and

with what effect leadership proposals are addressed? For example, why and within what limits, do workers agree to visions and practical suggestions articulated by others? Another implication is that more attention should be paid to the discussions, debates and arguments involved in deciding what are the most appropriate ways of 'framing' issues around which workers can be mobilized for action, including different *political* conceptions between activists and members.

Finally there is the question of the context and opportunity for collective mobilization. Clearly, the presence of activists or 'agitators' is often a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* explanation for workers taking strike action, given there are many cases of activists urging action but action *not* being taken. In understanding why workers are sometimes open to suggested strategies for action from agitators, and why they find certain arguments persuasive in terms of their appropriateness, feasibility and effectiveness, we also need to consider a variety of other potentially influential factors, including: the economic and political situation, state of product and labour markets, industrial and organizational context, extent of management provocation, nature of workers' grievance, state of shop-floor morale, level of organization and consciousness of workers, degree of self-confidence, and strength and traditions of solidarity. But it should be remembered how quickly all this can change, so that an apparent passive workforce can suddenly explode into action (as happened at Pilkington).

Conclusion

In conclusion, notwithstanding the serious flaws at the heart of the agitator theory of strikes, it is clear that agency in collective workplace mobilisation - in particular the role of leadership by union militants and left-wing activists - *can* be an important variable (amongst other factors) to an understanding of the dynamics of workplace industrial action.

As we have seen, collective action involves actors in a series of practical decisions concerned with defining their situation, identifying common identities and selecting practical strategies to obtain their goals. They must identify a common grievance with other combatants and from this a shared identity of some description. They must make an assessment of the context within which they find themselves and then to start to formulate actions that are intended to resolve their grievance. Finally, they must react to and deal with the activities of opponents who are involved in similar processes themselves. It is precisely within such processes that leadership becomes central and, in certain circumstances, the role of *left-wing* leadership and agitation can become crucial.

Hyman has remarked: 'While the notion of politically motivated and tightly knit agitators is wide of the mark, the romantic concept of absolute spontaneity is likewise inadequate'.⁹⁸ And it is certainly true that both spontaneity and agitator theories dismiss working class agency - the former on the basis that it is an

impulsive outburst with little conscious intent, the latter that they are blindly led by the nose by some extremists. Neither approach acknowledges that workers themselves can take collective action for rational and purposive means. On the other hand we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater when it comes to recognizing the role of union activists, and sometimes so-called 'politically motivated' militants and 'agitators', within collective mobilization.

Of course, the agitator theory of strikes exaggerates and presents a distorted picture of the role of such figures. Nonetheless, there is clearly an important element of truth in the thesis. Even if agitators do not in any sense *cause* the underlying material conditions that lead to antagonism and strike activity, workplace militancy is usually far from spontaneous and unorganized. There is always a degree of conscious leadership involved in whatever limited or provisional form that may manifest itself. In the process of developing such leadership, activists or 'agitators' can often be central to tapping into members' concerns, articulating them and agitating around them so that they become legitimate. They can often encourage workers to see their grievances as part of a broader class struggle and urge them to seek redress through strike action, significantly contributing to the subsequent direction and leadership of such activity and taking events in a different and more combative direction than might otherwise have been the case had they not acted. While most activists 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 mobilizing workers to take militant strike action.⁹⁹ And even though leadership involves a dynamic interaction between *leaders* and *led* in which many different shop-floor figures can engage in the process of argument, evaluation of the situation and advocacy of practical proposals to engage in strike action, the influence of certain key individual ‘agitators’ within this process should not be ignored or downplayed.

Notes

¹ For example, in the British context see Fosh and Cohen, ‘Local Trade Unionists in Action’; Fairbrother, ‘The Contours of Local Trade Unionism in a Period of Restructuring’, *Politics and the State as Employer*, and ‘Workplace Trade Unionism in the State Sector’; Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*; Dundon, ‘Post-Privatized Shop Steward Organisation’; Gall, *The Meaning of Militancy?*; Beale, ‘Engaged in Battle’.

² See Beynon, *Working for Ford*; Nichols and Beynon, *Living with Capitalism*; Batstone et al., *Shop Stewards in Action* and *The Social Organisation of Strikes*.

³ Kelly, ‘The Future of Trade Unionism’ and *Rethinking Industrial Relations*; Taylor and Bain, ‘Call Centre Organising in Adversity’.

⁴ McIlroy, ‘Notes on the Communist Party’; ‘Always Outnumbered: Always Outgunned’; ‘Every Factory Our Fortress’ Parts 1 and 2; McIlroy and Campbell, ‘The High Tide of Trade Unionism’, ‘Organizing the Militants’; ‘Beyond Betteshanger’ Parts 1 and 2; Campbell, ‘Exploring Miners’ Militancy, 1889-1966’; Gall, ‘The Prospects for Workplace Trade Unionism’; ‘What is to be Done with Organized Labour?’; Calveley and Healy, ‘Political Activism and Industrial Relations in a “Failing” School’; Darlington, ‘The Challenge to Workplace Unionism in Royal Mail’; *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*; ‘Shop Stewards’ Organization in Ford Halewood’; ‘Restructuring and Workplace Unionism at Manchester

Airport’; ‘Workplace Union Resilience in the Merseyside Fire Brigade’; ‘Union Militancy and Left-Wing Leadership on London Underground’; ‘Shop Stewards’ Leadership, Left-Wing Activism and Collective Workplace Union Organisation’; Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*.

⁵ Wrigley, ‘Industrial Protest 1940-90’, 178.

⁶ Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-70*.

⁷ Cameron Report; Report of a Court of Inquiry into Trade Disputes.

⁸ Devlin Report: *Final Report Concerning Labour Relations in the Port Transport Industry*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-3.

¹⁰ Wigham, ‘What’s Wrong with the Unions?’, 114-30

¹¹ Roberts, ‘Trade Unions and the Labour Party’; Flanders, *Trade Unions*.

¹² Goodman and Whittingham, *Shop Stewards*, 203

¹³ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years, 1979-90*, 339.

¹⁴ *The Mail on Sunday*, 17 November, 2002; *The Sun*, 3 December 2002.

¹⁵ *Daily Express*, 14 April, 2004.

¹⁶ Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*; McIlroy and Campbell, ‘The High Tide of Trade Unionism’; Darlington, ‘Shop Stewards’ Leadership, Left-Wing Activism and Collective Workplace Union Organisation.

¹⁷ Kelly, Review of Nina Fishman, 77.

¹⁸ della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*; McAdam, ‘The Framing Functions of Movement Tactics’; McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*; McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*; Tarrow, ‘States and Opportunities’; Barker et al., ‘Leadership Matters’.

¹⁹ Royal Commission on Trade Unions, *Report*.

²⁰ Fox, ‘Industrial Relations: A Social Critique of Pluralist Ideology’.

²¹ Samuel, ‘Introduction’, 4.

²² Economic League, *The Agitators* (1968 edition), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁴ Aims of Industry, *The Road to Ruin*; Aims of Industry, *Reds Under the Bed?*

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- ²⁵ Economic League, *Pattern of Trotskyism*, 26.
- ²⁶ Rosewall, *Dealing with the Marxist Threat to Industry*; Economic League, *Companies Under Attack*, 3.
- ²⁷ Aims of Industry, *Reds Under the Bed?*, 8.
- ²⁸ Economic League, *The Agitators* (1974 edition), 2-3.
- ²⁹ Economic League, *The Agitators* (1968 edition), 58-59.
- ³⁰ Milne, *The Enemy Within*.
- ³¹ Bean and Stoney', *Strikes on Merseyside*'.
- ³² Ross and Hartmann, *Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict*; Kassalow, *Trade Unions and Industrial Relations*.
- ³³ Royal Commission on Trade Unions, Report, 97-108.
- ³⁴ Clegg, *Trade Unionism Under Collective Bargaining*.
- ³⁵ Eldridge, *Industrial Disputes*; Edwards, 'A Critique of the Kerr-Siegal Hypothesis'; Cronin, *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain*.
- ³⁶ Kelly, 'The Future of Trade Unionism', 407.
- ³⁷ Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', 96.
- ³⁸ Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*
- ³⁹ Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*, 21-2.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Ferris, *The New Militants*, 78.
- ⁴¹ Cockburn, *Union Power*, 79.
- ⁴² Hyman, *Strikes*, 61.
- ⁴³ Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike*, 55.
- ⁴⁴ Goodman and Whittingham, *Shop Stewards*, 94.
- ⁴⁵ Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike*, 63.
- ⁴⁶ Knowles, *Strikes*, 6.
- ⁴⁷ By way of example see Clarke and Clements, *Trade Unions Under Capitalism*; Matthews, *Ford Strike*; Rogaly, *Grunwick*.
- ⁴⁸ Lane and Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons*, 86-87; 224; 241.
- ⁴⁹ Gall, *The Meaning of Militancy?*, 170.

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- ⁵⁰ Shorter and Tilly, *Strikes in France*, 338.
- ⁵¹ Karsh, *Diary of a Strike*, 6.
- ⁵² Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *The Social Organisation of Strikes*, 1.
- ⁵³ Barker, Johnson and Lavalette, 'Leadership Matters', 45.
- ⁵⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 196.
- ⁵⁵ Scott and Homans, 'Reflections on the Wildcat Strike', 283.
- ⁵⁶ Lane and Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons*, 160-1.
- ⁵⁷ Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, 110-11.
- ⁵⁸ Taylor and Bain, 'Call Centre Organizing', 170.
- ⁵⁹ Lane and Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons*; Beynon, *Working for Ford*; Nichols and Armstrong, *Workers Divided*; Nichols and Beynon, *Living With Capitalism*; Armstrong, Goodman and Hyman, *Ideology and Shopfloor Industrial Relations*; Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*; Edwards and Scullion, *The Social Organisation of Industrial Conflict*.
- ⁶⁰ Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *Shop Stewards in Action*, Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *The Social Organisation of Strikes*.
- ⁶¹ Clack, 'How Unofficial Strikes Help Industry'.
- ⁶² McCarthy, *The Role of Shop Stewards*, 22.
- ⁶³ Tuner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 330; 288; 289.
- ⁶⁵ Royal Commission on Trade Unions. *Report*, 102.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 28-9.
- ⁶⁷ McCarthy and Parker, *Shop Stewards and Workplace Relations*, 5.
- ⁶⁸ Goodman and Whittingham, *Shop Stewards*, 191-99.
- ⁶⁹ Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *Shop Stewards in Action*, 61.
- ⁷⁰ Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*; Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*; Clarke and Clements, *Trade Unions Under Capitalism*; Darlington; *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*.
- ⁷¹ Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, 229.
- ⁷² Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *The Social Organisation of Strikes*, 1-2; 64.

⁷³ Ibid, 66-7.

⁷⁴ Darlington, 'Shop Stewards' Leadership, Left-Wing Activism and Collective Workplace Union Organisation', 101.

⁷⁵ Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, 198.

⁷⁶ Hyman, *Strikes*, 48.

⁷⁷ Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *The Social Organisation of Strikes*, 69-73; 78; 81.

⁷⁸ McCarthy, *The Role of Shop Stewards in British Industrial Relations*, 22.

⁷⁹ Gall, *The Meaning of Militancy?*, 166, 168.

⁸⁰ Tuner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*, 211; 213; 289; 290.

⁸¹ Royal Commission on Trade Unions, *Report*; McCarthy, *The Role of Shop Stewards in British Industrial Relations*; McCarthy and Parker, *Shop Stewards and Workplace Relations*; Brown, *Piecework Bargaining: The Changing Contours of British Industrial Relations*; Clegg, *The System of Industrial Relations in Britain*; Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes in Post-War Britain*; Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*; *Strikes*; *Political Economy of Industrial Relations*.

⁸² Beynon, *Working For Ford*, Foster and Woolfson, *The Politics of the UCS Work-In*; Spencer, *Remaking the Working Class?*

⁸³ Mcllroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics'; 'Every Factory Our Fortress' Parts 1 and 2.

⁸⁴ Allen, *The Militancy of the British Miners*; Mcllroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide of Trade Unionism' and 'Organizing the Militants'; Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*.

⁸⁵ Mcllroy and Campbell, 'Organizing the Militants'; Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*; Shipley, *Revolutionaries in Modern Britain*; Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism* and *Inside Cowley*; Lyddon, 'The Car Industry, 1945-79: Shop Stewards and Workplace Unionism'; Macllroy, 'Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned'; Cliff, *A World to Win*.

⁸⁶ Darlington, 'The Challenge to Workplace Unionism in Royal Mail'; 'Workplace Union Resilience in the Merseyside Fire Brigade'; 'Union Militancy and Left-Wing Leadership on London Underground'; 'Shop Stewards' Leadership, Left-Wing Activism and Collective Workplace Union Organisation'.

⁸⁷ Eaden and Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain Since 1920*, 133.

⁸⁸ Darlington, 'Workplace Union Militancy on Merseyside since the 1960s'.

⁸⁹ Cockburn, *Union Power*, 79.

⁹⁰ Stevens, 'Cold War Politics: Communism and Anti-Communism in the Trade Unions'; Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict*; Eaden and Renton, *The Communist Party of Britain Since 1920*.

⁹¹ McIlroy, "'Every Factory Our Fortress'", Part 2.

⁹² Lavalette, 'Defending the "Sefton Two"'; Calveley and Healy, 'Political Activism and Industrial Relations in a UK "Failing" School'.

⁹³ Kelly, 'The Future of Trade Unionism' and *Rethinking Industrial Relations*.

⁹⁴ Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*; Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*; McAdam, 'Micromobilization Contexts and Recruitment to Activism'; Gamson, *Talking Politics*; Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes*; Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest*.

⁹⁵ Barker, Johnson and Lavalette, 'Leadership Matters', 5-11.

⁹⁶ Lavalette, 'Defending the "Sefton Two"', 117.

⁹⁷ Barker, Johnson and Lavalette, 'Leadership Matters', 8.

⁹⁸ Hyman, *Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, 111.

⁹⁹ Darlington, 'Workplace Union Resilience in the Merseyside Fire Brigade', 70.