



AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

• SHOP STEWARDS' MOVEMENT

Macho management, the confrontational style of industrial relations forged in the recession and both typified and climaxed by Sir Michael Edwardes' period at BL, was supposed to have pushed them so far towards extinction that they virtually qualified for a slot in a tv series on endangered species. But even so, it looks as though Britain's shop stewards may have weathered the hard times.

Hard times they were too, and not just at BL: as unemployment bit harder, as militancy as an industrial strategy collapsed, as nervous, isolated, head-down individualism shifted workers away from their always limited interest in trade unions, it became a commonplace for managers to seize the time - knock down stewards' offices, take away their telephones, cut back on their facilities' time, end full-time convenorships, push them back towards the production line.

Not surprising, perhaps: 'I always thought it quite ludicrous,' says Dr James McFarlane, director general of the Engineering Employers' Federation, 'that companies should actually pay people full-time to search out grievances, and organise disputes about them.' That's one view. Another, clearly, sees the shop steward almost as part of the managerial system, detached from it, but geared to policing trouble, preventing difficulty, rather than stimulating it.

The difference between stewards and their members was both seen as the problem by management - and the means of solving that problem. The government saw things similarly, audaciously and deliberately breaking the consensus of collectivism when it came to power in 1979, circumventing union leaderships and union activists to focus on the individual. Not just the Tories either: albeit in a positive, constructive way, the TUC's

strategy exercise - started in 1984 and still quietly ticking away - acknowledged, as it had to, that the considerable pressures on stewards, particularly in a recession, led to a distancing from the members.

What that skates around is a schismatic view very common among many union general secretaries about their activists: stewards *know* they're the backbone of the union, what makes it operate away from the London headquarters, and simultaneously, they *know* they're trouble, they ask questions, they make demands. Though it's more conditional, many union leaders have acknowledged the force of the government's drive to emphasise the individual member; sneakily, they share its suspicions about their activists' representativeness.

Given all this, where does it leave the shop steward? Surprisingly, perhaps not too badly off. While all around him have been theorising about workplace life in the recession, Dr Eric Batstone of Nuffield College, Oxford, has been on the shop-floor, trying to grub up the evidence. His first report back from the front, *Working Order* (Blackwell, 1984), was a survey of personnel managers; among its many startling discoveries was one showing that 63% of managers thought senior stewards a very or fairly important influence over work organisation, with other stewards rating 10% less - but still a majority. His latest dispatch, to be published in March, *Union Structure and Strategy in the Face of Technical Change*, carried out this time with three other academics, takes it further by sampling and interviewing among the stewards themselves. Mostly, it finds Britain's stewards in remarkably good heart, even finding now that because they have declined in number less rapidly than jobs in their plants, there are even proportionately more of them than before the start of the recession.

Current industrial changes may benefit

stewards, too. Though they're often decried by other unions (except when they're signing them themselves) the growing trend towards single-union agreements may give more power - but also, more importantly, more responsibility - to the steward: multi-unionism inherently pulls the focus of activists outwards, towards the other unions; single-unionism emphasises not even the company, but the enterprise. In plants like Toshiba in Plymouth, or Hitachi in South Wales, the stewards, contrary to popular opinion about such factories with strike-free agreements, often sharply differ and oppose their managements - but their commitment to the enterprise and its success gives them a real representative strength. Batstone argues that change there has been (and charts it), but stability too has been a strong feature of industrial relations in the recession; in the blending of both, he sees - and he may well be right - the durability of the British shop steward.

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