

Workplace Employee Representatives, 1980-2004

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changing prevalence and activities of workplace employee representatives over the period 1980-2004. The broad changes that affected industrial relations in Britain over this period had profound effects for trade unions. How did these changes affect employee representation in the workplace? The paper assesses whether the numbers of shop stewards fell in line with union membership. It also investigates changes in the characteristics of shop stewards changed over time, and changes in their role. The paper also considers whether a declining preference for unionism combined with legislative support for employee consultation to breed more extensive systems of non-union employee representation.

Keywords: shop stewards, trade unions, non-union representatives, employee representation.

JEL codes: J51; J52; J53.

INTRODUCTION

The stereotypical employee representative of the past was a middle-aged male trade union shop steward working in the manufacturing or extraction industries. Until the late 1960s, this, as far as we are able to tell, was the dominant form of employee representation in Britain. Despite the popular notoriety that this figure enjoyed, for example in the 1959 comedy film 'I'm alright Jack', the limited empirical evidence we have suggests that such shop stewards were relatively rare creatures.¹

The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations of 1965-68 (Donovan commission) set out to undertake a systematic investigation of the role of shop stewards in British industrial relations. In contravention of the popular stereotype, the research commissioned by the Donovan commission concluded that shop stewards more usually fulfilled the role of a 'lubricant' rather than an 'irritant' (McCarthy and Parker, 1968: 5), negotiating and representing their members in disputes with foreman, and over payment systems, a useful sticking plaster for managerial failings.

This largely benign image was to come under sustained attack during the 1970s, as rampant inflation, and Government incomes policies to try to control that inflation, led to falling real wages for many workers. In the private sector, stiffer competition in product markets also forced managers to challenge prevailing practices. And in the public sector, work reorganization and the introduction of incentive pay systems had a marked effect on the tenor of industrial relations, as unions reacted to managerial attempts to challenge custom and practice. Workers responded through their unions, so shop stewards emerged as the non-commissioned officers of a militant and angry trade union movement, on the front-line of industrial conflict. Spurred by an influx of new, more radical activists into the trade union movement in the years after 1968 (Turner 2003), the shop steward system spread to areas of the workforce where it had not previously existed, for example among white-collar employees in the public sector, and adopted a more militant, union-like form in industries, like banking and insurance, where non-union staff associations with lower levels of workplace representation had once been the norm (Jenkins and Sherman 1979, Hyman and Price, 1983).

Union militancy provoked political counter-mobilisation with the election of Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government in May 1979, and a year later, the Workplace Industrial / Employment Relations Survey (WIRS / WERS) series was born. The broader changes that affected industrial relations in Britain following the election of Mrs Thatcher are set out elsewhere. They were to have profound effects for trade unions. Union membership fell by forty per cent, collective bargaining coverage halved, and there was an almost total loss of political influence during the period 1979 - 1997.

How did these changes affect employee representation in the workplace? Did the numbers of shop stewards fall in line with union membership and coverage? How important was the decline of traditional manufacturing industries in explaining the patterns of change? Have the characteristics of shop stewards changed over time, and has their role changed as the collective power of unions has declined? Moreover, did a

declining preference for unionism combine with legislative support for employee consultation to breed more extensive systems of non-union employee representation? WERS provides unrivalled empirical evidence that can be brought to bear upon these questions, which we seek to answer in the rest of the paper.

The paper focuses primarily on workplace union representatives, as this is where the evidence is most plentiful. However the numbers, characteristics and activities of non-union representatives are discussed as far as the data allow towards the end.

SHOP STEWARD ORGANIZATION IN THE 1960S AND 1970S

There were a number of attempts to estimate the number of shop stewards in the 1960s and 1970s. Together, they suggested that the number of lay union representatives in British workplaces expanded considerably in this period. McCarthy and Parker (1968: 15) arrived at an estimate of 175,000 stewards in the mid 1960s, with around two-thirds of these in manufacturing plants and the remainder in service sector workplaces. Clegg (1979: 51-52) went on to provide estimates of at least 200,000 for the early 1970s and as many as 300,000 for the end of that decade.ⁱⁱ

One of the striking things about this expansion in the shop steward network was that it outstripped the notable rise in union membership. The result was that the ratio of stewards to union members fell from around 1:50 in the late 1960s to around 1:40 at the end of the 1970s.ⁱⁱⁱ Shop stewards were also spending more time on union duties: the number of full-time shop stewards (lay representatives permitted by their employer to spend all of their time on union duties) was estimated to have quadrupled between the mid-60s and mid-70s (Brown et al, 1978, 144; Brown, 1981: 66). Part of the reason lie in the importance of workplace-level collective bargaining (Brown et al, 1978: 147; Clegg, 1979: 12-19; Terry, 1983: 73). This implied a considerable degree of autonomy for shop stewards from the national union movement, as the primary engagement was with foremen and other lower-level managers.

The consensus was that this system of representation served the interests of union members reasonably well. However, some of its vulnerabilities were already apparent. Women were underrepresented among shop stewards: for example, it was estimated that, in the mid-1970s, only 27 per cent of shop stewards in the National Union of Public Employees were women, compared with 63 per cent of the union's membership (Fryer et al, 1978). There were also a number of infamous cases of shop stewards promoting racist exclusionary practices against black and minority ethnic workers (Virdee 2000:552). Shop steward effectiveness also depended to a considerable extent on the attitudes of local managers, and the lack of a robust national structure was to prove a weakness when managers sought to win back control of work on the shop floor during the 1980s and 1990s.

THE INCIDENCE OF SHOP STEWARDS, 1980-2004

The Warwick survey of 1978 had shown that shop stewards were ubiquitous in manufacturing wherever unions were recognised for pay bargaining (Brown, 1981). But apart from the tentative estimates of the overall numbers of stewards discussed in the previous section, there was no systematic evidence of the extensiveness (or otherwise) of shop steward organization outside of the manufacturing sector. This broader view was to be one of the major contributions of the first WIRS (although note that the survey did only cover workplaces with twenty five employees). The upper panel of Table 1 shows that, where unions were recognised for collective bargaining, the spread of shop steward organization in the public sector in 1980 was on a par with the situation in manufacturing, and was only slightly less extensive in private services.^{iv} The proportion of *all* workplaces with shop stewards did show considerable variation at the time, as is evident from the lower panel of Table 1, but this was primarily due to differential rates of union recognition. The ratio of members to stewards was also similar across the three sectors of the economy (Table 2), and the figures for manufacturing were broadly in line with those estimated a couple of years earlier by the Warwick survey (Brown, 1981: 62). The principal difference across the three sectors that emerged from WIRS was that, in private services, a higher proportion of members were located in workplaces without stewards (Table 3).

Table 1: Percentage of workplaces with shop stewards of recognised trade unions

	<i>Cell percentages</i>				
	1980	1984	1990	1998	2004
Where unions recognised	79	83	72	69	62
<i>Sector:</i>					
Private manufacturing	86	98	90	92	70
Private services	69	69	59	58	56
Public sector	82	85	73	71	63
All workplaces	50	55	38	26	23
<i>Sector:</i>					
Private manufacturing	55	54	40	25	26
Private services	28	30	21	13	11
Public sector	77	84	64	59	55

Base: all workplaces with 25 or more employees

Source: *Workplace Industrial / Employment Relations Survey series*

Table 2: Aggregate number of members per on-site shop steward of recognised unions

	<i>Number of members per steward</i>				
	1980	1984	1990	1998	2004
All workplaces:					
Where at least one steward	25	23	32	30	30
All workplaces	27	25	37	37	38
Private sector manufacturing:					
Where at least one steward	26	23	34	32	30
All workplaces	28	24	36	34	33
Private sector services:					
Where at least one steward	23	24	36	30	34
All workplaces	30	30	50	41	48
Public sector:					
Where at least one steward	24	23	29	30	28
All workplaces	26	25	34	36	35

Base: all workplaces with 25 or more employees

Note: union members only identified among full-time employees in 1980

Source: *Workplace Industrial / Employment Relations Survey series*

Table 3: Percentage of union members working in workplaces with at least one on-site shop steward of a recognised union

	<i>Cell percentages</i>				
	1980	1984	1990	1998	2004
All workplaces	92	93	85	83	79
Private sector manufacturing	95	97	94	92	89
Private sector services	79	81	73	74	72
Public sector	92	94	85	82	81

Base: all workplaces with 25 or more employees

Note: union members only identified among full-time employees in 1980

Source: *Workplace Industrial / Employment Relations Survey series*

Using the various items of data present in WIRS, it is possible to arrive at estimates of the total numbers of shop stewards of recognised unions in workplaces with twenty five or more employees. In 1980 we arrive at an estimate of 328,000 stewards (Table 4), indicating that Clegg's estimates were in fact rather conservative. The estimates deriving from WIRS for manufacturing were similar to those produced by Brown, but WIRS provided the first systematic estimates for private services, which was estimated to support some 42,000 shop stewards, and the public sector, which was estimated to have 153,000 and which therefore accounted for the greatest share overall.

Table 4: Numbers of shop stewards of recognised trade unions, 1980-2004

	<i>Assuming no change in the total number of workplaces in the population¹</i>					Independent estimate for 2004
	1980	1984	1990	1998	2004	
All workplaces with 25+ employees:						
On-site reps of recognised unions	328,000	335,000	178,000	137,000	102,000	128,000
As percentage of 1980 total		102%	54%	42%	31%	
Average change per annum		+1,800	-26,200	-5,100	-5,800	
Private sector manufacturing:						
On-site reps of recognised unions	132,000	94,000	49,000	38,000	18,000	23,000
As percentage of 1980 total		71%	37%	29%	14%	
Average change per annum		-9,700	-7,400	-1,400	-3,300	
Private sector services:						
On-site reps of recognised unions	42,000	48,000	29,000	25,000	26,000	33,000
As percentage of 1980 total		115%	70%	61%	63%	
Average change per annum		+1,600	-3,100	-400	+100	
Public sector:						
On-site reps of recognised unions	153,000	193,000	99,000	73,000	58,000	72,000
As percentage of 1980 total		126%	65%	48%	38%	
Average change per annum		+10,000	-15,700	-3,200	-2,500	

Base: on-site representatives of recognised unions in workplaces with 25 or more employees

Notes:

1. Totals estimated by keeping the total number of workplaces with 25 or more employees constant at 1980 levels, as we are unable to identify that proportion of the increase (from 135,000 workplaces in 1980 to 169,000 in 2004) which might be attributable to improvements in the coverage of the official business register. We expect this to account for a substantial proportion of the apparent increase, since the total number of employee jobs (albeit in the UK rather than Britain) increased by only 8 per cent over the period (Office for National Statistics, 2008). The figures presented in the second column for 2004 do not fix the total number of workplaces at 1980 levels.
2. Numbers of reps have been rounded to the nearest thousand; average changes per annum have been rounded to the nearest hundred. Average and percentage changes were computed before the rounding of totals.
3. Excludes reps who are exclusively concerned with health and safety
4. The standard errors of the 'all workplaces' estimates are in the region of 12,000 reps for 1980 and 1984, 7,000 reps for 1998 and 5,000 reps for 2004. Each of the year-on-year changes for 'all workplaces' are statistically significant, except for 1980-1984.

Source: Workplace Employment Relations Survey series

The total number of stewards grew further in the first half of the 1980s to reach 335,000 stewards by 1984 (Table 4). But there were important variations, with a decline of some

thirty percentage points in the number of stewards in manufacturing being offset by considerable gains in private services and the public sector. Further detail from the 1984 WIRS showed that, summing across the whole economy, non-manual stewards were nearly as common as manual shop stewards by this point in time (Millward and Stevens, 1986: 84-86). The prevailing stereotypes were clearly in need of some revision.

Despite some high profile incidents around this time in which managers of manufacturing plants had sought to wrestle back control from militant shop stewards (witness the sacking of Derek Robinson at British Leyland's Longbridge plant in 1979), the principal cause of the decline in the number of stewards in manufacturing was a decline in the number of workplaces in the sector that recognised unions. This was the result both of the closure of large manufacturing plants, which reduced the overall propensity to recognise unions among workplaces in the sector, and some shrinkage of the sector as a whole, as employment began to shift away from manufacturing towards service activities.

In retrospect, the mid-1980s proved to be a dramatic turning point, where hopes that union fortunes would recover with the economic cycle were dashed as unions were defeated in a series of set-piece industrial battles. This turning point was signaled *inter alia* by dramatic defeats in the miners' dispute of 1984-5 and in the Wapping dispute of 1986-7. At workplace level, the second half of the 1980s also saw a substantial fall in the overall rate of union recognition, from sixty six to fifty three per cent, and an even more precipitous decline in the number of shop stewards which, in 1990, stood at only 178,000. The number of stewards of recognised unions had fallen by almost half in just six years. As in manufacturing in the early 1980s, the decline in the rate of recognition was one important factor behind the decline in shop steward numbers. But those workplaces that did recognise unions also became less likely to support stewards (Table 1), and the average number of stewards also dropped where they were present, causing a considerable rise in the ratio of members to representatives (Table 2). Local union organization therefore faltered even when the formal structures of influence remained. Further shifts in employment away from manufacturing and the public sector and towards private services, where the steward network was weaker, served only to accentuate the decline. One result of the shrinkage in the steward network was that fewer union members now worked in an establishment that had an on-site lay representative: the proportion fell from ninety three per cent in 1984 to eighty five per cent in 1990 (Table 3). It was full-time officials who increasingly filled the widening gaps in representation (Millward et al, 1992: 111-114).

The decline in shop steward numbers continued during the 1990s, although the rate of decline did slow down considerably in each sector of the economy. The total number of stewards fell by a further twelve percentage points between 1990 and 1998. Further declines in rates of union recognition in the private sector were the dominant cause, followed by further shifts in employment away from manufacturing and the public sector. One countervailing factor in the private sector was an increase in the average number of stewards in workplaces where they were present (perhaps a 'batting average' effect), which served to bring about slight improvements in the member:steward ratio in

manufacturing and private services. However, this was insufficient to alter the overall trajectory.

The election of the Labour Party in 1997 was expected to signal some reversal of fortunes for the union movement and, indeed, between 1998 and 2004, rates of union recognition stabilised among workplaces with twenty five or more employees (Kersley et al, 2006: 121). However, the steward network continued to shrink, due to a further fall in the proportion of recognised workplaces with stewards and a return of the decline in the number of stewards where there were any. Stewards had broadly maintained their presence in recognized workplaces in the 1990s, but between 1998 and 2004 the network of union representation had returned to the pattern seen in the late 1980s, when representation had thinned out even where unions remained recognised. One outcome was that lay representatives were increasingly called upon to represent members in workplaces other than their own (Kersley et al, 2006: 124). The situation in 2004 was such that the total number of stewards stood at just 102,000: less than one-third of the total in 1984.^v Moreover, only four-fifths (seventy nine per cent) of all members now worked in an establishment with an on-site union rep. The steward network in manufacturing suffered in particular. Manufacturing workplaces with twenty five or more employees supported only 18,000 stewards in 2004 – just fourteen per cent of the 1980 figure. Manufacturing had accounted for two-fifths of all stewards at the beginning of the period, but by the end of the period it accounted for less than one fifth.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT CAUSED THE PROCESSES OF DECLINE

The preceding discussion has pointed to a number of factors that played a part in the substantial reduction in the shop steward network in Britain over the period 1980-2004, namely: falling rates of union recognition; a declining propensity for recognised workplaces to support on-site lay union representatives; fewer shop stewards in workplaces where on-site representation had been maintained; and finally the shift in employment towards private services, where unions were traditionally less well organized. Shift-share analysis confirms that these four factors each played roles of approximately equal importance over the course of the twenty year period from the high point of 1984 to the low point of 2004.

What sorts of factors lay behind these profound changes? Sharp drops in manufacturing employment can be partly attributed to the impact of technological change, which led to employers replacing workers with capital. However, the process of de-industrialisation was hastened dramatically by the length and depth of the recession of the early 1980s, which led to the closure of many large, highly unionized workplaces which had had elaborate shop steward networks embedded within them. The depth and length of recession can be attributed in large part to the monetarist policies pursued by the Thatcher Government (Keegan 1984). The associated appreciation in the value of the pound also exacerbated the problems for manufacturing industry by adversely affecting exports. Similarly the contraction of the employment share of the public sector can be attributed primarily to political decisions to privatize and contract out parts of the public sector,

while limiting employment growth in what was left by holding down public spending to allow for tax cuts.

The new workplaces that sprung up to replace the casualties of recession were considerably less likely to recognise unions than those that they replaced (Disney et al. 1995). This reflects a number of factors, including legislative changes which removed statutory trade union recognition procedures. Trade unions were also weakened by a period of high unemployment and by changes to product markets (greater competition and de-regulation), which increased incentives and opportunities for employers to oppose union recognition while reducing the benefits for employees that recognition conferred (Brown, et al. 1997, Pencavel 2003). Consequently, when unions attempted to organize new workplaces during the 1980s and 1990s, success rates were low (Beaumont and Harris 1990; Millward et al, 2000: 106), and recognition did not spread sufficiently among continuing workplaces to compensate (Millward et al, 1992: 74-5; Millward et al, 2000: 103). Union's began to enjoy more success in organizing after 1996, once the election of a Labour Government, committed to introducing a statutory recognition procedure, became a realistic prospect. But unions have not been able to organize enough new workplaces to reverse the losses of the 1980s (Gall and McKay 1999).

In workplaces where unions were recognized, the prevalence of shop stewards declined for a number of different reasons. Regression analysis shows that stewards are more likely to be present in certain types of recognized workplaces: larger workplaces, those with higher levels of union membership, those with higher proportions of male employees, those where managers engage in workplace bargaining, and those where managers support union organization by deducting union subscriptions direct from the payroll (Table 5). Certain of these features became less common over the past quarter century among workplaces with recognized unions: those workplaces became less male-dominated, union density declined and the incidence of workplace-level bargaining also fell. Comparing columns one and two in Table 5, we can see that changes on these dimensions accounted for some part of the overall decline in prevalence of shop stewards in recognized workplaces between 1984 and 2004. They nonetheless accounted for only a minor part of the story.

Table 5: Probit analysis of the determinants of a recognized workplace having a shop steward

	Model one	Model two
Year (ref 1984)		
1980	-0.131	-0.282***
1990	-0.385***	-0.417***
1998	-0.445***	-0.233*
2004	-0.653***	-0.445***
Industry sector (ref Private: metal goods and engineering)		
Extraction		0.037
Manufacturing		0.033
Energy and Water (private sector)		0.268
Construction (private sector)		-1.187***
Distribution, retail, hotels and catering (private sector)		-0.209
Transport and Communication (private sector)		-0.222
Banking and financial services		-0.605***
Other private sector services		-0.351
Energy and water (public sector)		-0.040
Transport and communications (public sector)		-0.159
Central & local government		0.274
Education		-0.014
Health		-0.121
Other public sector		-0.177
Workplace size (ref 25-49 emps)		
50-99		0.356***
100-199		0.727***
200-499		1.068***
500-999		1.338***
1000+		1.460***
UK owned		0.054
Single independent		-0.063
Decade established (ref before 1980s)		
1980s		-0.202*
1990s		-0.320**
2000s		-0.494*
DK		-0.411*
% female		-0.007***
% female missing		-0.080
% union members		0.009***
% union members missing		-0.104
Any workplace bargaining (ref=No)		
Yes		0.612***
DK		0.167*
Deducts union subs (ref=No)		
Yes		0.261***
DK		0.198
Constant	0.947***	0.314
<i>Number of observations</i>	<i>6438</i>	<i>6437</i>

Base: workplaces with 25 or more employees and recognised unions

Note: Analyses were weighted to account for differential sampling probabilities of workplaces.

Source: *Workplaces Industrial / Employment Relations Survey series*

Other factors are evident primarily from qualitative research. One factor was that, in the minority of new workplaces where unions were able to get recognition, the unions were unable to recruit shop stewards in the numbers that had existed in more traditional workplaces. One reason for this failure is that recognition was often awarded by management following ‘beauty contests’ where unions competed to demonstrate the benefits to management that their union would confer, for example by signing ‘no strike’ agreements (Bassett 1986).^{vi} In these circumstances, unions were unable to establish a social custom of membership and activism, which in older workplaces had developed over time through cycles of confrontation and accommodation with management. So it became harder to recruit shop stewards. For example, Garahan and Stewart’s (1992) analysis of work and industrial relations in Nissan’s flagship Sunderland factory, established in 1986, pointed to the difficulty that unions had establishing effective shop steward organization in new workplaces. Management selected a single union (the AEU) to represent the workforce before a single worker had been hired. In these circumstances, the union struggled to recruit members and activists. Only around a third of the workforce joined the AEU, and there were few shop stewards.

The wider political and economic climate of the 1980s and early 1990s also contributed to union difficulties in recruiting and retaining shop stewards in workplaces where they continued to enjoy recognition. For example, recession and union defeat meant that workers in the ‘sunrise’ labour market of Swindon stopped believing in the efficacy of unions (Rose 1996). While in the ‘Heating Factory’ case-study of Fairbrother (2000) shop steward organization among white collar workers collapsed during the 1980s in the face of persistent restructuring of the workforce and associated redundancies, which resulted in all the union’s key activists leaving employment at the factory.

The shop steward network was therefore considerably less extensive by the turn of the twenty-first century than it had been some twenty years earlier. But did the characteristics and activities of shop stewards also change over that time?

CHANGING CHARACTERISTICS OF SHOP STEWARDS

Research into shop stewards conducted prior to 1980 (Clegg et al. 1961, McCarthy 1967, Brown 1981) was partly concerned with identifying the characteristics of shop stewards in terms of gender, age and ethnicity, to see to what extent they reflected the wider workforce that they represent. As WERS has always included a survey of shop stewards (and latterly of all employee representatives) it allows us to examine how the personal characteristics of shop steward respondents have changed over the past 25 years. Have unions succeeded in attracting shop stewards who are representative of an increasingly diverse membership?

We must sound a small note of caution at the outset, since the WERS survey of shop stewards focuses only on the senior shop steward of the largest recognized trade union at the establishment, and these will not necessarily be representative of all shop stewards. However, the WERS sample is of particular interest nonetheless, because it does capture

the characteristics of the steward that is likely to be the most important and influential at the workplace.

Table 6 compares the characteristics of senior shop stewards with the characteristics of union members. Compared to a quarter century ago, senior lay trade unionists today are more likely to be female, they are older, they are less likely to work in manufacturing and they are more likely to be found in the public sector. There has, however, been little change in their ethnic profile or in the proportion working in private sector services. Changes to the characteristics of senior shop stewards have partially mirrored changes in union members: they too, as a group, became more likely to be female, older and less likely to work in manufacturing. Nevertheless, the proportion of senior shop stewards who are white, male and over forty actually rose from forty one percent to forty seven percent between 1980 and 2004, whereas the proportion of union members who shared these characteristics remained constant at twenty nine percent. The apparent increase among senior shop stewards is not statistically significant because of the relatively small samples, but it indicates that senior shop stewards may have become less representative of the wider union membership over the past twenty five years, rather than more so. Why has the proportion of senior shop stewards who are over forty increased? It may be an issue of concentration. One key reason why the average age of union members has risen is that young workers tend to work in young workplaces, and unions have not been able to get recognition in such workplaces (Machin, 2003) while twenty five years ago, new workplaces were being organized, so younger shop stewards may have been more likely to be elected to represent workforces composed predominantly of younger workers. It may also indicate that unions are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit their younger members into shop steward roles.

Table 6: Characteristics of senior representatives of the largest recognised union

	Senior shop stewards		All union members	
	1980	2004	1983	2004
<i>Demographic characteristics:</i>				
Male	77	63	64	49
White	97	97	96	94
Age (mean)	42	46	40	43
Aged 40+	52	78	49	60
White male aged 40+	41	47	29	29
<i>Workplace characteristics:</i>				
Private manufacturing	31	13	28	12
Private services	25	27	18	33
Public sector	45	60	54	55
<i>Observations</i>	881	607	4,608	14,305

Sources:

Senior shop stewards: Workplace Employment Relations Survey series

Union members: 1983 General Household Survey and 2004 Labour Force Survey

In the 1960s, the stereotypical shop steward was a middle-aged male manufacturing worker. WIRS80 suggested that that stereotype was enduring and real. By 2004 one might have expected this to have changed, but the preceding discussion has shown that white, middle-aged male stereotype still has enduring relevance. Unions have been partially successful in recruiting more female shop stewards. But women remain under represented and unions have not succeeded in recruiting more younger and ethnic minority workers into senior representative positions. Fairbrother (2000) has argued that for unions to renew themselves there needs to be a generational change in activists. These results then are further evidence of the failure of unions to achieve renewal.

THE CHANGING ACTIVITIES OF UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Having considered the prevalence and characteristics of stewards, we now move on to consider changes in the role and activities of shop stewards within the workplace. Research into workplace trade unionism in the 1970s (Batstone et al. 1977, Brown 1973, Beynon 1973) suggests that the shop steward of 1980 had the potential to be powerful figures within their own workplaces. Although this research focused primarily on manufacturing, accounts of trade unionism in the services sector during this period tell a similar story (Jenkins 1990). Where shop stewards were powerful, this was a function of the ideological resources and orientation of the shop steward (Batstone et al. 1977), the social organization of production^{vii}, and the intensity of product market competition: firms in less competitive product markets were likely to cede more power and influence to shop stewards (Brown 1973) as they had less incentive to keep control of costs, and the wider inflationary environment. High inflation, which eroded real wages, increased the sense of collective grievance among the workforce, and shop stewards emerged as spokespeople for this sense of grievance (Jenkins 1990).

After 1980, the environment that sustained shop steward power in the 1970s changed radically. The defeat of trade unions in large set piece industrial disputes had a demoralizing effect, product markets became more competitive, inflation slowed and real wages grew for the majority of workers and the introduction of new technology and the decline of manufacturing industry changed the social organization of production. How did the role and activities of shop stewards change in response to this environmental shift? WERS has less to tell us about the answer to this question, because as the nature of workplace industrial relations in Britain changed, WERS changed too. Some of the activities in which shop stewards were involved in 1980 had less relevance to the workplaces of 2004 - the maintenance of the closed shop and the organization of industrial action are two examples - and so the WERS Survey of Worker Representatives progressively gave them less attention. Subtle changes in question wording also compromise comparability over the series. WERS does have a small number of consistent questions about the role and activities of senior shop stewards which were asked in reasonably consistent ways to comparable individuals in 1980, 1998 and 2004. We explore these results below, but before we do, we will briefly consider the wider evidence on the changing role of shop stewards over the period.

Batstone (1985) pointed to the relative resilience of shop steward organization after 1980 a finding which mirrors the stability in shop steward presence over the period 1980-84 noted above, but case evidence from later in the 1980s, suggests that the period 1983/1984 was something of a turning point. Fairbrother (2000) studied workplace union organization in a number of west midlands workplaces. He found some examples of resilience, but also evidence of decline. In the 'Heating Factory' case, in the years immediately after 1990, shop steward organization among manual unions came to be increasingly dominated by the management agenda, a 'one-sided partnership'. Meanwhile in 'Telecommunications Factory', the shop stewards became increasingly defensive in the face of management threats about the future of the factory if the unions failed to co-operate with the management.

Darlington (1994) studied the dynamics of shop steward organization in three Merseyside factories. By the end of the 1980s, two of these factories had closed, while in the third (Ford's Halewood plant, previously studied by Beynon 1973), the shop steward organization had been radically recast as a result of management efforts to reform industrial relations and improve productivity. Darlington (1995) also identified similar processes at work among the shop stewards representing baggage handlers at Manchester airport. Despite a successful strike in 1989, workers and their shop stewards became demoralized by the unceasing nature of management attempts to reshape industrial relations on management's own terms, a process given seeming inevitability by the introduction by the Government of Compulsory Competitive Tendering of the service.

Brown et al. (1999) also noted significant qualitative changes in the nature of workplace union organization in the thirteen unionised firms that they investigated. Single-table bargaining, fear of de-recognition and increasing competitive pressures, often coupled with threat of redundancies or workplace closure resulted in union organizations that were increasingly cut off from the wider union movement. In other words, the wider resources of social capital, developed through industry-based shop steward combine committees, participation in multi-workplace union branches and units of organization (e.g. district committees, regional councils) were lost as participation in these bodies declined in the face of pessimism engendered by the Conservative assault on the unions. Consequently, shop stewards became increasingly dependent on management. It also became harder for unions as organizations to support and sustain shop steward organization, because unions were struggling financially (Willman and Bryson 2006). At the same time as this loss of independence, there was a narrowing of the scope of collective bargaining. These processes and their causes were then common to the majority of workplaces studied by researchers undertaking qualitative studies of shop steward organisation.

The WERS evidence is generally in line with the evidence of the case studies. During the early 1980s, the number of non-pay issues subject to collective bargaining declined between 1980 and 1984 (Millward et al. 2000: 167), but was stable over the 1984 – 1990 period. This suggests that the role and influence of shop stewards diminished in the early 1980s even though their numbers were increasing at that time. WERS also shows that the 1990s saw the growth of 'hollow shell' trade unionism: workplaces where nominally

union recognition agreements existed, but where pay was no longer determined through collective bargaining. By 1998, fourteen percent of workplaces with union recognition did not use collective bargaining to determine pay and conditions (Millward et al., 2000: 164) and the number of issues negotiated over was small (Brown et al 2000). Over the period 1998 – 2004, there was further erosion of the collective bargaining role, as the number of issues subject to negotiation fell, with consultation becoming more common instead (Brown and Nash 2008, Kersley et al. 2006). Mobilisation of the membership in support of collective disputes also became less common in the 1980s and 1990s: in 1980 almost one-third (29 per cent) of senior stewards said that industrial action of some form had taken place at their establishment in the previous 12 months, but in 2004 the equivalent proportion was less than one-fifth (18 per cent). Indeed, the 2004 WERS suggests that individual casework – welfare work and dealing with grievances and disciplinary cases – is now a key part of what shop stewards do. Whilst around two-fifths of stewards in the 2004 WERS said that the most important issue they had spent time on in the previous 12 months involved some aspect of terms and conditions (e.g. rates of pay or hours of work), a further one in six chose disciplinary matters or grievances and one in ten chose welfare issues such as equal opportunities or health and safety (Kersley et al, 2004: 150). Moreover, shop stewards involved in focus groups undertaken to feed into a government review in 2007 of facilities for workplace representatives suggested that they spent the majority of their time on individual casework, and that the amount of time spent on casework had increased over the last decade as a result of the increasing body of individual employment rights (BERR, 2007)

The picture that emerges from the quantitative and qualitative evidence on the activities of shop stewards suggests a significant diminution of their role within the workplace. In some cases, workplace trade unionism became a hollow shell, where shop stewards enjoyed little substantive or procedural role. In others, the procedural role for shop stewards was preserved, but their influence declined markedly as they spent less time on collective bargaining and more time on representing individual members.

What is interesting, then, is that there appears to have been no substantial change in the degree of practical support that stewards receive from employers, at least where they remain present. Trade union representatives have, since the 1970s, enjoyed a legal right to reasonable time off to undertake their representative duties. But many employers have also provided shop stewards with a degree of clerical and administrative resources to help them undertake union work, and the degree to which they have done so does not appear to have declined to a very great degree. The proportion of senior stewards with use of an office declined from 68 per cent in 1980 to 60 per cent in 2004, and the proportion with use of a telephone declined from 93 per cent to 88 per cent. But the proportion of workplaces with shop stewards in which management deducts union subscriptions direct from union members pay using the ‘check-off’ system was similar in both years, standing at around four fifths .

Another indicator of the support provided to shop stewards is the proportion of workplaces with one or more shop stewards in which at least one of these stewards is permitted to spend all of their working time on union activities. Questions in the WERS

management questionnaires on the incidence of such ‘full-time’ lay stewards are different for the periods 1980 – 1990 and 1990 – 2004, so it is not possible to make direct comparisons across the whole of our period, but the data we do have point to stability in the proportion of workplaces with a full-time shop steward between 1980 and 1990 and, perhaps surprisingly, an increase in the proportion of workplaces with a full-time shop steward between 1998 and 2004. There is also evidence from the WERS surveys of worker representatives that shop stewards who only spend a proportion of their working hours on representative activities were spending more time on union duties in 2004 than they were in 1998 (Kersley et al 2006: 148). Therefore, on balance, it seems likely that, among workplaces which still have on-site shop stewards, there has been approximate stability in the degree of practical support for union representatives. What does appear to have changed, however, is the balance of stewards’ activities, which are now tilted less towards the determination of the wage-effort bargain and more towards individual casework, with a subsequent diminution of their influence on the broad scope of workplace affairs.

WHAT DO WORKERS THINK?

Given these wide-reaching changes, what did workers themselves think of these changes to the role and power of union organizations in their workplaces? The case studies discussed above provide some anecdotal evidence on this. Resigned disillusionment in some of the cases of Darlington and Fairbrother, indifference in the Swindon workplaces studied by Rose. Quantitatively speaking, the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) allows us to get some insight into the answer to this question. In 1989, 1998 and 2005 it asked respondents who were employees in workplaces with a trade union presence whether they thought that the union at their workplace had too much, about the right amount or not enough power. Table 7 summarises the results. We need to be cautious in inferring too much from this question. More in depth interviewing would suggest more nuanced and complex reactions to the declining power and influence of shop stewards. Nevertheless, we think the BSAS provides an interesting summary measure. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Workers’ perceptions of changing union power at their own workplace

	<i>Cell percentages</i>		
	1989	1998	2005
<i>All in union workplaces:</i>			
Unions have too much power	4	2	5
Unions have about the right amount of power	56	48	55
Unions have too little power	40	50	40
<i>Union members:</i>			
Unions have too much power	1	2	4
Unions have about the right amount of power	44	49	51
Unions have too little power	55	49	46

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

These results suggest that by 1989, a significant proportion of employees in union workplaces thought that the union at their workplace, personified by shop stewards, had too little power. Given the size of possible sampling errors in the BSAS, the proportion thinking that unions have too little power hasn't changed much since 1989, although there is evidence of a small downward trend among union members. This may be a sign of some recovery in union power, but in the light of the analysis presented in the previous section, this seems unlikely. Instead it might suggest that some union members have become habituated to union weakness, perhaps as a result of the arrival of more younger workers, who are indifferent to trade unionism, into union workplaces.

The 1998 and 2004 WERS also provide an interesting insight into the views of workers because the Surveys of Employees have asked employees in workplaces with unions what they thought of the union in their workplace. In 2004, just 55 per cent of union members thought that the union(s) at their workplace were taken seriously by management, while just 46 per cent thought that unions make a difference to what it is like to work at the workplace (there was little change in these figures between 1998 and 2004). However, union members were more likely to think that the union 'makes a difference' if there was a shop steward on site (Table 8, column one). The recognition of unions is a key determinant overall, of course, but in workplaces where a union was recognised, the presence of an on-site union representative was associated with more widespread perceptions of union effectiveness than if no representative was present. Moreover, union members in workplaces with full-time or nearly full-time shop stewards were more likely to think that unions make a difference than members in workplaces with part-time stewards.^{viii} Table 8 also hints at the areas in which unions are seen to be most effective. The WERS 2004 Survey of Employees asked employees who they think would best represent them in dealing with managers over certain issues, with 'trade union' being one of the possible response options.^{ix} Again, union recognition was a key factor informing union members' responses, but the presence of shop stewards again played a part. Union members in workplaces with part-time shop stewards were more likely than members in workplaces without on-site stewards to believe that the union would best represent them, and this was true across all four issues: pay, training, grievances and discipline. The presence of full-time reps further raised the likelihood that employees would choose 'the union', although only in respect of training, grievances and disciplinary matters.^x

Table 8: Union members' views on the effectiveness of trade unions in the workplace

	Unions make a difference to what it is like to work here	<i>Cell percentages</i> Trade union would best represent you in dealing with managers here about...			
		Getting increases in your pay	Getting training	Making a complaint	Facing discipline
No recognised union	37	39	8	27	49
At least one recognised union	46	73	12	48	75
<i>At least one recognised union:</i>					
No on-site reps	35	62	8	36	64
No on-site reps, but largest recognised union has rep(s) at another site in the organisation	36	69	9	42	70
On-site reps but all part-time	45	75	12	48	75
At least one on-site rep who spends all, or nearly all, of their time on union duties	53	77	16	55	81

Base: union members in workplaces with 5 or more employees where the employee reports that a union or staff association is present

Source: 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey

This suggests that employees do recognize the value of having access to on-site shop stewards. However, there are two cautionary remarks that can be made. First, it is apparent that substantial minorities of union members do not choose 'the union', even when the workplace has full-time union representatives. This may be because members will not necessarily have access to a representative of their particular union, although some union representatives do represent members of other unions (Kersley et al, 2006: 160) and so it is as plausible that it serves as an indication of the ineffectiveness of some shop stewards.^{xi} The second point is that, even though many employees do acknowledge the value of on-site lay representation, the discussion in the earlier parts of this paper has shown that members are increasingly having to manage without.

NON-UNION REPRESENTATION

Understanding changes in non-union forms of employee representation since 1980 is a more difficult task. Non-union forms of employee representation have attracted much less attention from researchers than union representation (Terry 1999) and, whilst successive WERS have contained questions about non-union employee representation, the questions have changed from survey to survey, with the result that it is difficult to build up a picture of what has changed. The best available estimates on the incidence of individual non-union representatives in the 1980s suggests that they were present in around one in ten workplaces at both the beginning and end of that decade (Millward et al, 1992: 164).

Figures from the more recent WERS surveys indicate that this proportion rose to around one in seven by 1998: a level at which it has since stabilized. Non-union representatives may also separately sit on joint consultative committees (JCCs). WERS unfortunately cannot robustly indicate the changing proportion of JCCs with non-union representatives, but the survey series does show that that JCCs became slightly less common overall between 1980 and 2004, having been present in around one-third of workplaces with 25 or more employees in 1980 but only one quarter in 2004. And so the available evidence does not point towards any substantial expansion of non-union representation, despite the considerable interest provoked in recent years by the transposition of the European Union's Information and Consultation Directive into UK law.

One strand of the development work for the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey sought to revise the questions on employee representation so as to provide a more robust picture of the incidence of non-union forms of representation. And so we are now better able to chart the relative prevalence of union and non-union representatives and, because of the expanded scope of WERS 2004, can do so in the population of workplaces with 5 or more employees. Investigating this issue, Charlwood and Terry (2007) found that, in 2004, that seven per cent of workplaces with five or more employees had non-union representatives on site, whilst eight per cent of workplaces had on-site shop stewards; around two per cent of workplaces had both forms of on-site representation. This left eighty-five per cent of workplaces without any on-site representatives. So although non-union representation may not have expanded to any great degree over the past 25 years, the decline in on-site union representation has been such that the spread of the two networks is now similar. Union representation does cover a larger proportion of all employees than non-union representation (around 37 per cent compared with around 17 per cent) because union representatives tends to be more prevalent in larger workplaces. But non-union representatives are as numerous as shop stewards – there are roughly 150,000 of each in workplaces with 5 or more employees – because non-union JCC representatives tend to exist in large numbers where there is a JCC (see Kersley et al, 2006: 159).

The characteristics of non-union representatives are, however, somewhat different to those of shop stewards: they are younger on average and more likely to be female, and they are also likely to have been in post for a shorter period of time (Kersley et al, 2006: 146). They are also less likely to have been appointed through an election process. But how do the processes of representation differ for shop stewards and non-union representatives?

On average, non-union representatives spend only half as much time on representative duties as union representatives (*ibid*). However, there is evidence that non-union representatives are consulted more regularly than their shop steward counterparts, and that non-union representatives in dual channel workplaces are consulted more than shop stewards in dual channel workplaces (Charlwood and Terry, 2007). Whilst this may reflect the more collaborative relationship that is generally found to exist between non-union representatives and workplace managers (Kersley et al, 2006: 168-175), it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that cases where non-union representatives actually

negotiate with management over terms and conditions in the way that some shop stewards do are extremely unusual. The joint regulation of terms and conditions through bargaining remains the preserve of union representatives.

This final point is reinforced when one investigates employees' views on the efficacy of different forms of representation. In Table nine we saw that, when faced with a variety of options as to who would best represent them in certain matters, union members invariably chose the union as their preferred agent where shop stewards were present. However, non-union representatives enjoy no such level of popularity among non-members. Instead, only a minority of non-members in workplaces with non-union representatives (between fifteen and twenty per cent, depending on the issue) believe that non-union representatives would be the best person to represent them. In such circumstances, employees generally prefer to represent themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarise and conclude, how has workplace representation changed since 1980? The first key point is that there is much less of it than there was. In 1980 there were around 328,000 shop stewards, with shop stewards present in fifty percent of workplaces. By 2004, equivalent estimates suggest that there were only around 102,000 shop stewards, while shop stewards were present in twenty three percent of workplaces. However, in workplaces with shop stewards, there were important continuities between 1980 and 2004. In 1980, senior shop stewards tended to be older, white men. By 2004, this had not changed. Those shop stewards left in 2004 continued to enjoy similar levels of management provided facilities to their counterparts of 1980. There is also evidence that shop stewards were spending more time on representative duties in 2004 than they were in 1998. But despite this institutional continuity, there is widespread evidence of a dramatic decline in the influence of shop stewards over the management of the workplace, and something of a change in their role. Shop stewards do still, quite clearly, make a difference to many employees' experience of work, but there is nonetheless a degree of skepticism among a substantial minority of union members as to the efficacy of their representatives, with some considering that unions lack power, are not taken seriously by management and made no difference to the workplace. Nevertheless, union shop stewards have not been replaced to any widespread degree by non-union employee representatives, and in workplaces that have non-union representatives, employees are less likely to think that the non-union representatives would be effective in representing them than equivalent employees in workplaces with union shop stewards. Overall then, changes in employee representation can be seen as part of a wider pattern of declining collectivism, and shifting ideologies of workplace governance: from governance regimes predicated on pluralist assumptions, with shop stewards as powerful autonomous actors able to represent the interests of union members to management, to unitarist systems of governance under which shop stewards or non-union representatives, if they exist, are often relegated to the role of managerial assistant.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ As the term ‘shop steward’ was that most commonly used in the literature, we use this term throughout this paper, it could however be used interchangeably with the term ‘union representative’.

ⁱⁱ These rather rough estimates seemed justified when Brown’s authoritative survey of manufacturing plants with 50 or more employees implied that, in 1978, there were 119,000 manual stewards and 37,000 non-manual stewards in these larger manufacturing plants alone (Brown, 1981: 62).

ⁱⁱⁱ Estimates derived by dividing the the estimated numbers of stewards discussed in the preceding paragraph into the numbers of union members cited by Waddington (2003: 220).

^{iv} The situations in manufacturing and the public sector were not directly comparable, however, because manual employees had less extensive steward networks in the public sector than in the private sector, but non-manuals were equally well served (Millward and Stevens, 1986: 80).

^v See note 1 on Table 1 for the basis of these time-consistent estimates, and see the final column of Table 1 for the best-available estimates of the total number of stewards in 2004.

^{vi} ‘No strike’ agreements are those in which both parties commit to abide by arbitration if there is a failure to agree.

^{vii} For example, the way in which production was organized often resulted in a steady stream of grievances and disputes about the intensity of work, linked to production-line speeds and the use of ‘payment by results’.

^{viii} The differences shown in column one of Table 8 between employees’ perceptions in the presence of full-time reps and those in the presence of part-time reps were statistically significant at the 1 per cent level, as were the differences between employees’ perceptions in the presence of part-time reps and those in the absence of reps.

^{ix} Other options were: myself; employee representative (non-union); another employee; somebody else.

^x The differences shown in columns two to five of Table 8 between employees’ perceptions in the presence of part-time reps and those in the absence of reps were all statistically significant at the 1 per cent level, as were all of the differences between employees’ perceptions in the presence of full-time reps and those in the presence of part-time reps, with the exception of ‘getting increases in your pay’.

^{xi} It is not possible to discern whether union members identified in the WERS Survey of Employees belong to the same union that has on-site reps.