

Shop stewards in Transport House: a comment upon the incorporation of the rank and file

In the light of the currently prevalent view that shop stewards are becoming more involved in trade union government, the author suggests that we look more carefully at unverified assumptions of shop steward incorporation.

IT is now evident that a major phase of British trade union development has run its course. From 1942 until 1974 the rate of unemployment rose to three per cent or more on only three occasions. Since then it has climbed unsteadily, but now with gathering speed, to levels undreamed of for a generation. Those 32 years of high employment mark a period unique in British economic history and its effects upon trade unionism will occupy the attentions of labour historians for many years to come. The general effect most remarked upon by practitioners and industrial relations academics so far has been the growth of shop steward organisations during that period. Early discussion of this phenomenon centred upon piecework bargaining, wage drift, unofficial disputes and the generally unruly nature of this 'challenge from below'[1]. More recently, discussion has focused upon the support (through the closed shop, check-off, and granting of facilities) which workplace organisation

has received from management, the hierarchical nature of many shop steward organisations, the consequent pressures upon senior stewards to behave 'responsibly' within the plant, and their integration into higher levels of union government[2]. From these concerns it has been but a step for commentators to see a chain of compliance stretching from general secretaries through trade union executive councils and the convenors who sit on them, down to the shopfloor. Thus William Brown asserts.

In the three largest unions, with some prompting from the leadership of Jones, Scanlon and Basnett, it has proved possible to involve shop stewards in all levels of union government. Because of this, trade union leaders generally had a surer political touch in the 1970s than in the 1960s and were able to deliver a degree of compliance to the Social Contract incomes policy, for instance, that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier[3].

Richard Hyman is of the same opinion:

The very limited opposition and resistance on the shop floor during the first two (or even three) years of pay controls owe much to the new ability of national union leaders to win the backing of major convenors, and of these in turn to deliver the

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acquiescence of their own workplace organisations[4]

One of the surprising aspects of such statements is how much weight they place upon these alleged internal developments and how little emphasis they give to factors *external* to individual unions, in particular the ideological and pragmatic political circumstances in which the Social Contract was conceived and developed. The experience of the trade unions with the Industrial Relations Act, the euphoria induced in the labour movement by the miners' strike and Labour Party election victory in February 1974, the rhetoric of a government pledged to 'bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families', the fulfilment of government promises between March and October 1974, the rising level of unemployment, the deteriorating position of sterling, and the sharp rise in price inflation to 27 per cent by the summer of 1975, are factors which should not be ignored or lightly cast aside. Nor, when discussing compliance with incomes policies in the 1970s compared with the 1960s, is it sensible to overlook the initiatives taken by employers in the intervening decade to introduce procedures which enabled them to take a firmer grasp of the bargaining process such as rationalising and controlling payment systems and developing formal plant-wide, or even company-wide, pay agreements[5]. Moreover, despite all controls and stratagems, union support for incomes policy waned rapidly after the autumn of 1977. While it appears to be true that compliance with the incomes policy of 1975-77 was greater than that for voluntary policies in the sixties[6], it did not hold for a significantly longer period than then, or even than the earlier Labour policy of 1948-50. In short, a more careful assessment of all the facts and their relationship to each other is necessary before reliable conclusions can be reached. Such an all-embracing task is well beyond the scope of a single article and all that I wish to do here is examine more closely those processes which are alleged to have occurred *within* trade unions.

A model of shop steward incorporation

Incorporation — the idea that trade unions become absorbed into the institutions of

capitalist society — is a fashionable term but its use in industrial relations is often ambiguous. This is because the term is used indiscriminately to refer to different layers in the process, or even to different processes. The most common usage refers to the involvement of trade union leaders — generally through the TUC — with the machinery of the state. This process goes back at least to the First World War but, with the post-1945 Keynesian consensus and lengthy periods of Labour rule, it has become both more real and apparent in recent years being marked by positive involvement in incomes policies, participation in tripartite planning machinery and the detailed drafting of legislation. On the whole much of this is a matter of record and beyond dispute. Yet the discussion of corporatism has become a major academic growth industry[7]. To a large extent this revolves around two questions. First, is corporatism a device by which advanced capitalist societies are able to smother the power of organised labour, or is it a further development and enhancement of trade union power in relation to the state? Secondly, does corporatism represent an avenue of democratic stability for advanced capitalist economies or are the tensions within it so great that consensus is bound to break down and inevitably lead to state coercion of labour through anti-union legislation, statutory incomes policies, and economic measures designed to reduce trade union bargaining power?

To this debate industrial relations academics in recent years have added the notion that shop stewards — who, it is believed, were at one time independent representatives answerable only to those who elected them in the workshop — have also become enmeshed in this consensual process. Despite the acknowledged complexity of trade union institutions and of bargaining arrangements in British industry an interpretation, or model, of post-war trade union development has gained ground in which it is assumed that the impact of full employment invariably took the form of an increase in the number of shop stewards with a consequent conflict between the rising generation of shop stewards and the existing order within their workplaces and unions. This phase was then followed by an adjustment of managerial practices and union constitutions to accommodate the existence of these workplace bargainers, and subsequently the growth of

shop steward hierarchies and the assimilation of senior shopfloor activists (a) into rationalised bargaining arrangements at company level, following the recommendations of the Donovan Commission, and (b) into the unions' constitutional governing bodies up to the highest levels. As a result, senior stewards became increasingly subject to the influence of managerial perspectives and the full-time trade union bureaucracy, rather than that of their shopfloor constituents. In effect, the key stratum of senior stewards and convenors is seen as incorporated into both the institutions of collective bargaining at company level and the deals and understandings reached between the state and union leaders at national level. Moreover, the involvement of shopfloor leaders in this way is seen as an essential underpinning for the integration of national union leaders into state economic policy.

The argument has been expressed as follows[8]:

... Within the workplace, the disciplinary powers of convenors and joint shop stewards committees (which in the 1960s were often loose co-ordinating bodies) have enlarged considerably. At national level, meanwhile, the main unions have given leading shop stewards a greatly enhanced role in decision-making processes.

These developments — which could perhaps be defined as 'corporatism at the base' — are in some respects far more significant than the institutional trends at national level which concern most advocates of the corporatism thesis. Indeed, the changes in workplace trade unionism are virtually a pre-condition of serious corporatist tendencies at the top: for without the integration of the key stratum of shop steward leadership within official trade union structures, and without their new ability to push through the official line on the shopfloor, agreements made in Congress House and Whitehall would be empty.

Put in this way, the argument appears to override the reservations expressed by Panitch, who has emphasised that corporatism within liberal democracies, and above all in Britain, is unstable precisely because rank-and-file pressure forces trade union leaders to 'withdraw from the incomes policy structures and abstain from co-operative behaviour in broader economic planning structures'[9]. The notion of shop steward incorporation, if true, therefore has substantial implications for the future development of relationships between the state and the trade unions.

The model encompasses two distinct arenas: the workplace and internal union government.

For the relationships described in the first of these between senior stewards and the rank-and-file, and between senior stewards and management, there is considerable evidence although Batstone has challenged both its novelty and significance[10]. However, it is the second arena with which *this* paper is principally concerned and there the model sets out four principal features: an increase in the numbers and status of shop stewards; a greatly enhanced role for senior shop stewards in the formal decision-making processes of trade unions; the 'new ability' of national union leaders to win the backing of these senior stewards; and, in turn, the 'new ability' of these senior stewards/convenors to push through the official line on the shopfloor. The argument of this paper is that the evidence for these assertions is alarmingly thin and that there is a danger that this model of workplace trade unionism will be as simplistic as the earlier romantic notion of 'rank-and-fileism' from which, in certain schools of thought, it is a reaction. Even where the model does approximate to the facts it needs careful refinement in the light of the considerable variety of trade union organisation, tradition and practice, their differing environments, and the complexities of human relationships.

Some exceptions to the model

In the first place, the variety of union constitutions needs to be emphasised. Opportunities for workplace activists to be both incorporated into workplace bargaining and into wider union structures have long existed. In the NUM, NUR, ISTC, the footwear and printing unions, the UPW and POEU, for example, the place of work has always been the natural basis for branch organisation. In this situation the branch, lodge or chapel officials have also been the workplace negotiators. The constitutional links between workplace-based branches and the other levels of union government have consequently ensured that workplace activists have generally been able to participate up to and including executive council level. The same has applied for many years to a large number of branches in USDAW. In the unions catering for the clerical and executive grades of the civil service a majority of members are probably in workplace branches. Alternatively, where the member-

ship of a branch is drawn from a number of small workplaces the Whitley machinery has for almost 60 years encouraged workplace representation; and unions have provided these with a formal link to the branch. The 'group' system within ASTMS operates in a similar way. Even in the AUEW, where branches are generally geographically rather than workplace based, there has been provision for shop stewards to sit on district committees (and to be elected from there on to divisional committees and the national committee) since the formation of the AEU in 1920. Thus, there is a substantial section of the trade union movement where a dichotomy between workplace and branch has not existed and where machinery has been available for many years whereby shopfloor activists could participate in the higher levels of union government. Far from this being a new phenomenon, therefore, it is probable that this form of 'incorporation' was normal for the activists in unions organising the majority of trade unionists before the second world war.

In the unions mentioned so far the impact of the post-war labour market was reflected less in their formal constitutions than in direct pressures upon their memberships and the existing workplace/branch activists, and when examined closely their experiences are very different. The assumption of high levels of employment, for example, does not always apply. Throughout the post-war period there were areas of the United Kingdom where levels of unemployment were always well above the national average (One of the neglected areas of trade union research is regional studies of the development of trade union organisation since 1945 and how it has been affected by differing labour market conditions.) Industries were affected unevenly too. Technological and product market changes brought about large scale redundancies or transfers of workers in mining, steel, the railways, docks and ship-building and presented workplace bargainers with a variety of challenges which, it may be argued, rather than encouraging incorporation provoked 'unofficial movements' and sit-ins and prepared the ground for major outbursts of industrial action.

Even where a high level of employment was the general rule its effects were by no means uniform, as the examples of the UPW and the UCATT illustrate. The UPW (now UCW) was formed in 1920 and although its leading

activists were influenced by guild socialism the development of the union for the next 20 years was shaped by more conservative forces. One was involvement in the Whitley machinery, at all levels, with its emphasis upon order, documentation and general principles mutually agreed. Another was an ethos of public service developed from the days of Rowland Hill, reinforced by consultation, and underlined by the accountability of the Postmaster General to Parliament. A third was the 'safe' nature of the service: competitive in entry; uniformed but with opportunities for promotion; 'a job for life' and with sick pay, holidays, comparatively good wages and a pension. Sons followed their fathers into the service (as they did on the railways) and submitted to a quasi-military discipline. The influence of such factors was felt early in the life of the union when, in the face of a large defection from its ranks, the 1922 Conference decided to suspend its strike policy and depend henceforth unreservedly on negotiation. And for most of the inter-war period these factors were underpinned by large scale unemployment.

The post-war era of economic growth and labour shortages had two broad effects. The first was that the Post Office management, in order to cope with the workload and to attract and retain labour, resorted to measures familiar to students of the engineering industry. Large amounts of overtime and weekend working were made available, 'job and finish' customs were endorsed, 'ghost' overtime condoned, and disciplinary measures relaxed. In a symbolic episode postmen won the right to wear brown boots. At the same time there was a certain growth of local bargaining, depending upon the state of the labour market and the emergence of strong personalities in particular localities. The role of the branch/workplace activist became enlarged, less consensual and less confined to the routine Whitley machinery. This change was reinforced by the second factor which was a change in the nature of the labour force, particularly in the Midlands, south-east and London, but noticeable elsewhere too. Essentially, as pay in private manufacturing industry increased and 'a safe job' became less attractive, turnover increased. Workers moved out of the Post Office into local industry and then came back again when Post Office pay increased. At the same time, workers made redundant — miners, dockers, engineering workers — joined the PO and

brought with them different and more aggressive union traditions. The public service ethos was diluted.

More recently, as the failings of the British economy became increasingly manifest, new pressures built up for the Post Office to increase its productivity and efficiency. The change in climate was symbolised by it becoming a public corporation in 1969 but the pressures increased during the 1970s and were linked with the threat of private competition. Management sought to increase labour productivity and regain control of job practices.

As a result of these various factors three consequences relevant to this paper followed. In the first place the union as a body became more militant in character. Unofficial industrial action in various localities increased during the 1950s and by the early sixties the union's conference — probably the most representative body in British trade unionism — had overruled the executive council and restored to it the power to call strikes. There then followed the 1962 work-to-rule, the 1964 one-day stoppage, the telegraph strike in 1968 and the national strike in 1971[11]. Secondly, within the executive council, which was composed of the national officials and lay members, the general secretary and the paid officials ceased to vote as a bloc and the influence of the lay members increased. Thirdly, a tension developed between the UPW head office, with its long tradition of centralised negotiations and consequently centralised power, and those branches and districts which had acquired a measure of local bargaining power. The London District, containing one-third of the union's membership and one-third of the country's mail traffic, was a continual headache to both Post Office management and to UPW officialdom[12]. During the 1970s the authority of the UPW leadership was therefore subjected to twin pressures from the membership. On the one hand it suffered a series of conference defeats on issues where it had already reached agreement with the PO management on rationalising the service. On the other, when conference ratified agreements it was invariably on condition that they were subject to further consultation at branch level. Branches then exercised their autonomy to delay implementation of the agreement.

The limits of this paper do not permit further elaboration of these themes but their general thrust does not support the incorporation

thesis. On the contrary, a central leadership long imbued with notions of public service and accustomed to comfortable bargaining arrangements had to accommodate to militant pressures from below and, with a time-lag, was itself in process of change. Even in outline, however, the UPW story is suggestive of forces which have been at work in the other uniformed sectors of the working class — railwaymen, police, firemen, nurses and ambulancemen — and among local and national government employees.

The building industry provides quite a different picture from any discussed so far. The mainly craft unions within the industry had geographical rather than workplace based branches. Their executive councils, with the exception of the bricklayers, were not composed of lay representatives but were small bodies of full-time officers on the AEU model; but unlike the AEU their executives were not subject to the same detailed scrutiny and instruction from a national conference. Nor were there clear avenues for the activists on the district or area committees to move into higher levels of lay representation. In the first place therefore the structure did not allow for the integration of shop stewards. Secondly, the effect of full employment was to bring about a virtual collapse of unionism in the industry. Where sites were strongly unionised then shop steward bargaining naturally increased in extent and depth. But in much of the industry union organisation was weak or non-existent. The result was that the high demand for labour enabled workers to shop around and to negotiate their wage contracts on an individual basis, generally in the form of labour-only sub-contracts. Trade unionism was thereby bypassed and union opposition to 'the lump' resulted in members leaving the unions. By the mid-sixties union membership figures and finances were approaching a state of crisis. The sixties ended with the plasterers' union being absorbed into the TGWU and the bricklayers, painters and carpenters joining to form UCATT.

The structure of this new organisation diminished even further the formal role of the lay activists. Its executive was composed of full-time officials, the delegate conference became biennial instead of annual; the lay district committees were abolished and replaced by a regional structure which involved fewer people meeting less frequently. The

consequent alienation of activists from the leadership was subsequently demonstrated at the 1974 national delegate conference when the executive council's policies on wages, pensions, the Shrewsbury pickets and the structure of the union were all defeated; and at the 1976 conference when the leadership's espousal of the Social contract was rejected[13].

The incorporation model therefore receives little support from the cases examined so far. But what of the general workers' unions which organise one in four of British trade unionists, which provide the workplace activists in much of British manufacturing industry, and whose leaders play a key role in the TUC?

A new unionism

The question brings us back to the significance of that period of post-war trade unionism in which the predominantly defensive, craft and locality-based trade unionism of the thirties, uncertain of how to advance, was replaced by the assertive, numerically stronger unionism of the fifties which, through workplace-based organisation, had found a dynamic which was to drive it forward for the next twenty years. The change, qualitative as well as quantitative, deserves to be recognised as one of those periods of 'new unionism', like the 1850s or 1890s, to which the British labour movement is subject. No discussion of the notion of incorporation in the general unions is possible without a brief resume of the central features of this new unionism. These were a considerable growth in trade union membership, with its extension into new industries and services, consequential changes in the overall characteristics of the membership and the widespread establishment of shop steward systems of representation. The TGWU and the GMWU were both affected by, and were important constituents of, these changes.

For more than a decade after 1920 trade union membership fell as unemployment rose. Not until 1934 did the membership figures show a recovery, after which they rose steadily until, by 1948, they were double the 1934 level. But over the same period the GMWU membership almost quadrupled and that of the TGWU rose three and a quarter times. Some of the growth in these unions was due to amalgamations, but far more important was the growth in employment in a number of sectors where they had negotiating rights. These

included local government, construction, road transport, chemicals, gas, electricity, water, engineering and the metal trades. On the other hand, employment levels fell, in some cases drastically, in highly unionised industries such as coal mining, railways, ports, shipping, footwear and cotton textiles. After 1948 overall trade union membership, and the membership of the two general unions, remained remarkably stable until the end of the 1960s. But the changes in industrial structure already in train continued[14].

These changes had consequences for the character of union membership. The absolute numbers of both females and white collar workers who were trade unionists more than trebled between 1931 and 1971. But the most significant change was the great increase in unskilled and semi-skilled workers who became trade unionists, particularly in the two decades after 1933. It is not possible to document this exactly, but it is implicit in the doubling of total union membership from 4.6 million in 1931 to 9.2 million in 1951, while the proportion of white-collar unionists rose by only 1.1 per cent[15]. It can be seen too in the growth of the manual sections of the general workers' unions (Table 1) and the growth of the engineering union from 218,459 members in 1930 to 953,382 in 1955, while the proportion of skilled (section one) members in the union fell between those years from 72 per cent to 33 per cent[16].

This expansion of unionism among the unskilled and semi-skilled operatives in the growing service and mass production industries, and the concomitant relative decline of craft and industrial unionism (together with significant changes in the geographical dispersion of unionism), might have been expected to lead to a weakening of democracy, group solidarity and concern with job control among British trade unionists. Historically, most workers in 'open' occupations lacked

Table 1: Manual Worker Membership in the TGWU and GMWU

Year	TGWU	GMWU
1931	381,899	261,254
1941	909,203	587,740
1951	1,264,885	907,215
1961	1,255,977	745,275

Source: Union membership records. The figures exclude the white-collar members of these unions.

occupational consciousness or a tradition of workplace organisation. They were recruited from above, by professional union organisers external to the workplace, into unions which placed their faith in collective bargaining, usually at national level. Internally, these unions were characterised by autocratic regimes which dealt firmly with the few challenges offered by a generally passive membership. They were, as Hobsbawm pointed out, 'pillars of conservatism'[17]. Yet, it was among just these workers that the fifties and sixties saw the emergence of highly developed workplace organisations which not only bargained at the point of production but also exercised autonomous supervision over working rules and developed unilateral job regulation. Power within the bargaining structure, and within the complex of social relationships that constituted their union organisation, moved closer to the shopfloor. Attitudes to job regulation and union democracy usually associated with 'craft' workers spread among those in the mass production industries. An explication of the process by which this transformation occurred, its uneven nature, and its extension to differing groups of workers during the seventies, is one of the tasks awaiting historians[18]. But it did occur, albeit unevenly, and the growth in the numbers of shop stewards must be seen as a quantitative expression of this qualitative shift in consciousness.

A varying response

Then followed a process broadly similar to that set out in the model described earlier: workplace struggles eventually followed by an increasingly sophisticated response by management; distrust by officialdom (reflected in the 1960 TUC report and debate on disputes and workshop representation); followed by an adjustment in structures and practices to accommodate shopfloor bargainers. But two points deserve to be emphasised. First, there was no once-for-all confrontation between the rising generation of shop stewards and the official bureaucracy. It was a long drawn-out process (which is still going on). The officials of general unions, once appointed, are allowed to run their course. The stewards surging from below encountered union practices and structures firmly in the grip of full-time officials. It was the age of Deakin and Williamson and, when they retired, a generation of officials

whom they had appointed in their own image carried on[19]. Although there were various changes along the way, it was almost two decades before Jones and Basnett were elected by the members on explicit programmes of reform. There were also important geographical time-lags, based partly on labour market conditions, but also, and particularly in the GMWU, on the attitudes of regional secretaries.

Secondly, there were considerable differences in response between the two unions. One reason for this is that the level at which bargaining is conducted has an important effect upon the centralisation or decentralisation of power within a union. The GMWU was much less affected by the shop steward phenomenon than the TGWU for a much higher proportion of its membership was in sectors where national wage bargaining remained of prime importance and where management invariably preferred to deal with national or regional officials. For example, in 1955, the proportion of the GMWU's membership employed in local and national government, health services, gas, electricity and water was 41 per cent; the equivalent proportional figure within the TGWU was 5.3 per cent. Another reason is that the attitudes and values of the power-holders exert a vital influence upon constitutional changes[20]. Especially is this so in the general unions, where the initiative for change so often comes from the top. In this respect, Frank Cousins and Jack Jones were, by the circumstances of their life histories, much closer to the shopfloor than Jack Cooper or David Basnett, who were both nurtured within the bureaucratic machine. Finally, there were substantial differences in the formal structures of the two unions. Power and patronage were centralised in the TGWU, whereas in the GMWU much was regionalised. The TGWU possessed a trade group structure and a lay executive council, the GMWU had neither. It was natural therefore for the GMWU to look to these latter areas as ways in which lay members could be given a greater voice in the affairs of the union. Regional and national industrial conferences of shop stewards were introduced in 1969 and the executive council was reconstructed in 1976 to give lay members a two to one majority. At last we apparently have a clear example of a union's constitution being changed to provide shop stewards with a greatly enhanced role in decision-making

processes. Is it possible to argue from this that the key layer of senior stewards was incorporated into the deals which the general secretary, as a member of the TUC Economic Committee and of the National Economic Development Council, was making with the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

The answer is no: and for one simple reason. There were hardly any senior stewards on the GMWU executive when agreement was being reached on incomes policies in the mid-seventies. In July 1975, when the £6 limit was agreed, the executive was still in its unreformed state and effectively the voice of full-time officials. In the spring and early summer of 1976, when the five per cent limit was approved, the composition of the executive had been reformed and was as follows:

- 10 full-time paid officials (regional secretaries)
- 3 full-time branch secretaries (nominally lay but actually paid officials)
- 2 branch secretaries, both of whom had retired from full-time employment (both were over 70 years of age)
- 5 branch secretaries, of mixed branches, who played little part in day-to-day workplace affairs (mainly employed in local authorities)
- 2 shop stewards from the gas industry
- 2 shop stewards from electricity supply
- 1 shop steward from manufacturing industry
- 2 convenors from manufacturing industry
- 3 convenors from local authorities.

Thus only ten of the executive (one-third) were shopfloor activists and only three (one-tenth) were activists from the private manufacturing sector.

The reasons for this particular admixture involve an analysis of the GMWU and need not detain us here, except for three factors which bear upon the incorporation argument. The GMWU has no built-in mechanism (such as representation from trade groups) to ensure that among the lay members on its executive there is a wide representation of industries and services. Secondly, the minority position of GMWU members in large areas of private manufacturing industry reduces the chances that a GMWU shop steward will become convenor. In a factory with mixed trade union membership, the convenor is more likely to be

from the TGWU or AUEW. Thirdly, the method of electing lay members to the GMWU executive is an indirect one based upon a body, the regional council, dominated by branch secretaries. The acquiescence of the GMWU in the Labour Government's incomes policy does not therefore lie in the incorporation of a key layer of stewards into the higher reaches of the union's government. It is to far more traditional methods of manipulating consent within the union, such as the system of regional block voting at the annual conference, coupled with the moderate views of large sections of its membership, that one must look for an explanation.

Indeed, the important point to grasp about the GMWU case is that attempts to integrate shop stewards into the structure started late, were limited in extent, and varied from region to region. Hence it is only *since* the mid-seventies that the changes have begun to have an impact. The focus for this was growing frustration with Labour's incomes policy, which found expression through the industrial conferences, where stewards challenged the policy (most notably in the case of the waterworkers) and in a fragmentation of the traditionally solid regional votes at conference. The current moves to strengthen further the industrial conference system will increase the strains within the long established methods of bureaucratic control in the union.

The TGWU presents quite a different picture. Before Jack Jones became general secretary there had been initiated certain reforms — such as reorganising trade groups and regional boundaries, providing for a much greater use of district committees and lifting the ban on communists holding office — which were intended to encourage lay participation[21]. Once in office he enthusiastically encouraged lay involvement in bargaining and asserted the necessity for agreements made by officers to be ratified by the shopfloor[22]. But another difference from the GMWU was that it already possessed a firmly established trade group structure and an all lay executive council. Accommodation to the rise of shopfloor power went further in the TGWU therefore, both because the leadership of the union gave it a more enthusiastic welcome than did those in the GMWU, and because its structure was more open to possession from below. Here, if anywhere, we come closest to the incorporation model.

The General Executive Council of the TGWU

Some preliminary points need to be made before taking a closer look at the General Executive Council (GEC) of the TGWU in the 1970s. Because the GEC is a lay body it has always been possible for workplace activists to become members of it and a certain number always have. This has been particularly so where there were branches based upon the place of work so that the branch official was also a workplace activist. It has also happened where workplace activists have been involved in a network of committees, official and unofficial, which made them known to a wide range of influential members. These conditions applied to two groups which, for many years, were among the most numerous and vociferous within the TGWU — the dockers and the busmen. Right down to the early sixties the busmen, coming from large garage-based branches, held a disproportionately large number of places on the executive. However, despite the lay character of the union's governing bodies, the powerful, indeed dominant, position of the general secretary has long been recognised. It is a domination which has extended over both the Biennial Delegate Conference (BDC) and the GEC, regardless of whether the general secretary was Bevin, Deakin or Cousins. In this sense then it may be argued that an important layer of workplace activists has always been incorporated into the highest levels of the union's governance, that it has always been subject to the decisive influence of the general secretary, and that it has been inevitably involved in the understandings reached between the country's largest union and the government of the day. But in the sixties and seventies certain things changed. Within the union the ban on communists holding office was lifted; the number of stewards, and senior stewards, grew; there was positive encouragement for further lay participation in the union and in the settlement of wages and conditions. Outside the union the most important changes were probably the growing concentration of manufacturing in multi-national corporations operating large establishments, and the long periods of Labour Government rule. How did these affect the GEC?

The effects can be seen first in its composition. In 1978, 35 of the 39 members

answered a questionnaire[23]. Of these, 7 came from road passenger transport, 4 from the docks, 2 from local authorities, 1 from electricity supply and 1 from steel; all industries where the TGWU has traditionally had membership. Another two were from road haulage, which although, in the past, patchily organised, has also been traditional TGWU territory. One worked in a naval dockyard. The remaining 17 came from manufacturing and process industries which have largely been unionised over the past 30 years: 3 from British Leyland, 2 from Dunlop, 1 from Ford, 1 from Rolls-Royce, 1 from Girling, 1 from Chloride Batteries, 1 from Firestone Tyres, 1 from Pirelli, 2 from Courtaulds, 2 from ICI, 1 from British Aerospace, and 1 from KCA International Ltd. Nearly all, 31 of them, were shopfloor activists, with 19 holding office as convenor and 12 as shop steward. As many as 26 had been a convenor or senior steward before being elected to the GEC. Therefore, unlike that of the GMWU, the TGWU executive does contain a high proportion of senior workplace activists from major manufacturing companies.

Of the 35 surveyed, 23 per cent were aged 40-49, 60 per cent were aged 50-59, and 17 per cent were aged 60 or older. This means that all of them grew up during the inter-war depression or during the Second World War, and that their parents had lived through World War One and the General Strike. The GEC members moved into active trade unionism after 1945 and their personal biographies are representative of that generation of shopfloor activists who built the post-war new unionism. The 35 respondents were asked whether management had generally resisted shop steward activities at their workplace. Twelve (one-third) replied that management had not in the past, and did not now, one replied that management had resisted in the past and still did so, and 22 (63 per cent) said that management had resisted in the past but did not now. The 'past' was defined as 20 years ago. The fact that almost two-thirds of the Executive members could look back on management opposition which had been overcome establishes a benchmark of achievement for them. (It can also be interpreted as evidence of their incorporation into bargaining structures at company workplace level. But that is not the subject of this paper.)

Certainly, their orientation to the shopfloor

and the workplace membership remains strong. That, after all, is where they spend most of their time and where their influence is greatest. The answers to three survey questions provide evidence of shopfloor commitment. The 35 surveyed were asked: Which aspect of your union work gives you most satisfaction? Six replied that all aspects gave satisfaction; two replied trade group level; ten, the largest single number, said GEC; but nine said 'the branch' and eight said 'workplace level'. If we set to one side the six who found satisfaction in all aspects, then 17 out of 29 prefer to operate at branch and workplace level. When asked why they gave a particular answer, 16 of the 17 who plumped for workplace and branch answered in the same terms: the satisfaction derived from helping the membership, particularly individuals with problems. Here is a reply given by one who found satisfaction at the branch:

Because basically I am a trade unionist to care for others and the satisfaction I get out of this and the look on the faces of members who have been helped — money couldn't buy it — and help given to retired members. The satisfaction of being able to help

And here from one who chose the workplace:

When I have achieved something for an individual and he sees what the Union can actually do for him. It gives me enormous satisfaction to be able to help someone and know I have achieved something which seemed almost impossible. It then demonstrates to the member what the Union can do and it doesn't seem as remote.

These replies are absolutely typical of what is by far the strongest single sentiment among the GEC members.

A second question sought to discover whether GEC members would be interested in applying for a full-time official's job. The replies were

Definitely interested	3
Quite interested	5
Not really interested	6
Definitely not	10
DK/NA	2

A number of people gave multiple reasons for not wanting an official's job. The most frequent first reason for not wanting a job was given as 'too old'. 13 said this. But eight gave as their first answer that a lay post was more satisfying or that they could do a better job for the union as a lay member. When multiple answers are taken into account the result is: 14 said 'too old', but 17 felt that a lay post was more

satisfying or better. Again, the sentiment which comes through is summed up by:

I like the shopfloor. It's got a life of its own and I think so much more satisfying work can be done there.

Thirdly, the members were asked the advantages and disadvantages of being on the GEC. The clearest advantage — mentioned 17 times — was the greater insight and knowledge they received on policy issues. But second — mentioned eight times — was the ability to take shopfloor opinion to the GEC. The largest disadvantage — mentioned ten times — was that membership took up a lot of time. Second, with eight mentions, was the allied point that there was a physical loss of contact time with the shopfloor. So the greatest disadvantage by far was seen as the time away from the shopfloor and contact with membership.

Yet as GEC members they are confronted with administrative and policy matters which may conflict with their conception of themselves as workplace representatives and the primacy they give to trade unionism at the point of production. If they identify so strongly with the shopfloor, then to what extent can they be incorporated into 'national' objectives?

Part of the answer to that question lies in the ability and knowledge of the GEC members and these vary considerably. Some find the gap between shopfloor and executive council a difficult one to cross. Almost half, 16 out of 35, said that they felt at home straight away, mainly because they already knew many of the sitting members through trade groups and other union meetings. But one-third (34.3%) said that it took them 12 months or longer to settle down.

It takes all the first two-year period to get to know the work of the Council and the impact that the decisions can have — not only on the members but on the whole industrial scene because of the size of our Union. It's the difference between local and national level. You make decisions at local level not frivolously but only with your own part of the world and the impact on your own little bit. On the GEC decisions have far greater consequences — far more important decisions. In debate you can be timid about taking part until you've really got used to Council.

There is a certain awe about it. You want to do the proper thing. You have to have the right notes. You have to have done your homework. There you can listen to some very good debates.

Then there are those members who look to the permanent, and well briefed, officials for

guidance on the major national issues. One referred to the top officials in the union as 'providing a God-like guidance', while another said of Jack Jones[24]:

is it wrong to have a leader who exhibits leadership? I've never known him propose anything I disagree with. I follow his leadership. Yes, I do.

More important than these individual feelings, however, is the fact that the electoral term on the GEC is only two years and the turnover rate is, and always has been, considerable[25]. Twenty of the 35 had been on the executive for less than five years. With that rate of turnover it was difficult for many to build up sufficient knowledge and experience to challenge Jack Jones, whose personality and ability were as formidable as his predecessors'.

Another, and important, part of the answer lies in structures. The leadership of the TGWU — above all Jones and Urwin, his deputy — were deeply involved with the Labour Government's policies. This meant that they were involved in decision-making processes (at the NEDC, NEB, or in discussions with civil servants) that took place outside the channels of the union, although the issues discussed were sometimes of considerable concern to sections of the membership. Consequently, discussion in the GEC of issues such as the collapse of Chrysler or Ferranti were severely constrained by the involvement of the leadership in the wider power structures. Thus an executive member said of Jones and Urwin in 1976: 'They don't want to reveal their hand, although there may be an item in front of them on the agenda. There may be top level negotiations about giving cash which Jones and others know about. After being on the EC for a number of years you become aware due to an inflection of the voice, a lack of emphasis here or there, which tells you that the situation is being discussed and that negotiations are going on. And at that stage you let the matter drop.'* As for those who do not catch the hint, 'they are told to lay off by the more experienced members — it can be an embarrassing process if people go on about wanting to change the world'. Moreover, once a decision is reached in one of those outside bodies then debate within

the GEC is severely curtailed. 'If Jack says "no" it is very difficult to push it.'

The constitution of the union is also important, and nowhere more so than in the case of incomes policy. Once the July 1975 BDC had overwhelmingly agreed to wage restraint then the broad outline of union policy for the next two years was decided. With that decision in hand Jones was able to use it whenever GEC members expressed dissent from the policy. This was not new, of course. The general secretary's ability to gain from the BDC the policy he wants has always been an important element in his control of the GEC. Thus there are a number of factors, personal and structural, which push the lay members of the GEC toward acceptance of 'national' perspectives.

Despite these pressures, however, incomes policy was hotly debated within the executive on several occasions. 'There was a proper ding-dong on the EC over the £6,' said one. More important were the GEC meetings of March and May, 1976; particularly the latter occasion, which was a meeting specifically called to discuss the issue of incomes policy. There ensued a long and heated discussion, conducted in formal style with the general secretary opening and closing the debate. Although he carried the immediate decisions, the strength of feeling within the GEC was an important factor in the TGWU advocating a gradual return to free collective bargaining at the 1976 TUC. This is of considerable significance in the incorporation debate. There are obviously many areas where GEC members accept the general secretary's formulation of a problem — international relations and other questions of 'high politics'; pressurising the Treasury or NEB to save jobs, the general administration of the union; and doubtless many other areas where the general rule would be to 'render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's'. The orientation of GEC members to the shopfloor would make this a natural response for most of them. But where GEC decisions have direct and immediate implications for the shopfloor, then contrary views to the general secretary's are likely to be expressed which cannot be ignored. This is because on these issues the power of the lay executive is not derived from its formal position in the union's power structure, or from the personal qualities of its members, but from the fact that they operate as spokesmen for the

* In fact, Urwin, who served on a number of quasi-governmental bodies, including the National Enterprise Board, did so as a representative of the TUC and not the TGWU. He was also, of course, bound by the Official Secrets Act.

workers on the shopfloor and, under pressure from those members, pass on their views.

It is clear from interviews that executive members who had initially agreed with the policy, and who continued loyally to expound it to their shopfloor constituents as the expressed will of the BDC and the GEC, increasingly found it to be a bone of contention with their constituents and fellow stewards. With around one-third of the GEC in the mid-seventies coming from the relatively profitable large multinationals in the private sector, the growing rank and file unease about wage restraint was clearly expressed at its meetings. Here the high turnover among GEC members may have played a part. Generally this has been assumed to increase the power of the general secretary, whose knowledge and resources are so much greater than a lay committee with a changing composition[26]. No doubt on many issues this is so. But turnover tends to sustain the number of GEC members whose first interest is in the workplace and branch. Of the ten GEC members who said that the GEC gave them the most satisfaction in their trade union activities, a majority had served on the executive for seven years or longer. Turnover works against incorporation into national perspectives.

Even in the TGWU, therefore, where the incorporation model comes closest to reality it carries little credibility. One reason is that the power of the general secretary, *vis à vis* the GEC in the seventies, lay not in any 'new ability' to control its members but rather in the use of the BDC and the ethos of collective responsibility and loyalty which have always been powerful in holding together such a heterogeneous organisation. These were methods freely available to, and used by, Bevin and Deakin. (They were also available to Cousins, and if one seeks a reason why TGWU workplace bargainers in the sixties were apparently more willing to breach incomes policy than were their counterparts in the seventies then, among all the other reasons, it should never be overlooked that Cousins and Jones, unlike Jones in the later period, were opposed to incomes policy.) But the major flaw in the model is that incomes policy, far from being the supreme example of shop steward incorporation, was in fact the occasion for an unprecedented defeat for the general secretary. Even while he was securing majorities for his policy within the GEC it was in

turn serving as a channel through which the need for a change in that policy was pressed home. When the supreme policy-making role of the BDC was stressed, the significance of that role was appreciated all the more by those who found it held over them. A year later, in 1977, when change in official policy had not gone far enough, the 'unique authority' of the general secretary was thrust aside at the BDC. In a manner more brutal than anything yet seen in the GMWU (because the impact of the new unionism has been greater in the TGWU) the delegates refused to be manipulated in the time hallowed fashion.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper three aspects of trade union incorporation were distinguished. Two have not been questioned. These are: that national trade union leaders have for decades been involved in discussions over a wide range of policies with the state, and that this involvement intensified during 1974-9; and, secondly, that shop stewards have developed a talent for wage bargaining at plant level which requires stable relationships with management and which has indeed been facilitated by managements in the past decade. However, in recent years the assumption has gained ground that in line with these developments senior stewards, through integration into union constitutions, have become privy to deals between the state and union leaders — particularly over wage policy — and have then disciplined their members into accepting them. It is this assumption which has been questioned on four principal grounds.

First, that it ignores the variety of union constitutions and market environments. There are a number of important unions in which workplace activists have been involved in the higher reaches of union decision-making for many years. In others, the post-war changes in the labour market have not always found their most potent expression in shop steward organisation. Secondly, the assumption is curiously lacking in historical perspective. Compared with preceding decades, the increase in shop-floor activity since 1945 has led to a radical democratisation of relationships in many unions, particularly those organising the unskilled and semi-skilled in the public service and in private manufacturing industry. The 'popular bossdom' phase of the TGWU, for

example, appears to be over. Far from general secretaries acquiring a 'new ability' to win over the senior stewards on union decision-making bodies, the power and authority they customarily exercised has been plainly weakened. Thirdly, although it is clear in the case of the TGWU that most, if not all, GEC members expounded union policy in their workplaces there is no evidence that they were either willing or able to use the disciplinary powers of the shop stewards committee to push the policy through. On the contrary, what emerges from discussion with GEC members is the dialectical nature of the process between the GEC members' and the shopfloor, and between the GEC members and the general secretary. Finally, and closely linked to the previous point, is the fact that there are obvious difficulties for shop stewards, whose whole *raison d'être* centres upon workplace bargaining, when they are asked to restrain that bargaining in 'the national interest'. Incorporation at one level — 'economism' or 'factory chauvinism' — is an obstacle to incorporation at another. Even when shop stewards have been encouraged and sponsored from above by the official union machine they may behave autonomously and cause embarrassment to national leaders, as incidents within the National Union of Public Employees illustrated during the winter of 1978-9.

The problems surrounding trade union democracy are real and difficult enough — and the current return to large-scale unemployment could once again enhance bureaucratic tendencies — without unverified assumptions about shop steward incorporation being allowed to gain currency. This paper suggests that there is in fact more hope than latter-day Michelsians, wrapped in the 'metaphysical pathos' of pessimism and fatalism [27], would allow. Obversely, for those who are optimistic about the implementation of a future incomes policy with no more than minor adjustments to our current social and economic arrangements, there is need for a more sober assessment.

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