6 Shop-floor Control and Industrial Relations

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional academic approach to industrial relations has been to concentrate on the institutions of collective bargaining and the trade unions, and to locate rule-making at industry and national level. Certainly, until the early 1960s, such an approach was useful since most agreements were negotiated at the level of the formal institutions, and were generally observed at the workplace.

However, since this period, a number of developments occurred within industry which led to the need for a different approach. Notably, there was a large rise in the number of shop stewards, a growth in custom and practice and an increase in the number of unofficial strikes: all factors rooted firmly in the workplace and within the plant. Although some of these developments could be partially explained by the inadequacies of the formal system, this was by no means true of the great number. Indeed, it was impossible to explain why such large differences should occur between factories with similar agreements or with employees from similar trade unions. Unanswered questions such as these have led to the emergence of a strand of academics approaching the subject from the 'bottom up' - within the plant - and concentrating on the meanings and values associated with action at the place of work: in other words, workplace industrial relations.²

In this chapter, we are primarily concerned with the relations between shop-floor workers, shop stewards and lower management. We are particularly interested in establishing the way in which rules are created and maintained, and with the reasons associated
with differing degrees of shop-floor control between different groups, departments and plants. This approach will lead us to an examination of the various institutional factors associated with work, particularly the role of technology, payment systems and labour markets, and to a brief consideration of worker orientations and group cohesiveness. It is clearly important to consider why individuals or groups with structural conditions favourable to the use of power fail to take advantage of them. Indeed, it may be that groups neither realise their power nor desire increased control. The majority of the argument, however, will concentrate on cases of potential or achieved control rather than its converse, lack of control.

The fact that these terms—power and control—often tend to be used interchangeably merely serves to confuse the issue. For the purposes of this chapter, control will be taken as the possible end-result of a process which involves the usage of power: in other words, power refers to the process of achieving control. Control will be used as a relative term, that is, a comparison of the degree of influence exercised by the shop floor and management over the final outcome of any rule-making process. If, on any one issue, management is more dependent on the shop floor (or its representative) than the latter is dependent on management, then we can argue that the shop floor has control. This simplified and restricted definition will be modified during the course of the argument.

Even achieved control is severely limited in its extent. Although political commentators regularly express fears of a loss of managerial prerogative in industry, most studies seem to show that any shop-floor influence is a means of coping with the intricate mechanisms of the system, rather than challenging the basis upon which it rests. Shop-floor control is a means of accommodation and adaptation. By considering the manner and the degree to which the shop floor (often through their representatives) control their working lives, this may be clearly observed.

But workplace control must not only be considered in relation to management but also to the union of which the employees are members. We are concerned to discover the degree to which individuals in the workplace act independently of their ‘outside’ union. Shop steward committees have been formed at establishment level in order to provide the means for a joint union approach to the problems of any one site or plant. Many companies have favoured their own agreements and have bargained independently of employers’ associations, especially in relation to plant pro-