3 ‘The Successful Integration of Foreign Labour’

We were invited by Harveys Foundry to study its ‘successful integration of foreign labour’. Harveys believes that there is ‘no problem round here’. This chapter is concerned to explain how it is that managers and the trades unions believe that black labour has been ‘successfully integrated’. They defined this largely in terms of the absence of public intervention, and thus our account concentrates on internal organisational features of the company.

William Harvey established the Phoenix Iron Works in a West Midlands town in the last century. At its zenith, Harveys was amongst the most advanced foundries in Europe, both technically and managerially, although it has since lost its leading position. It is still engaged in the manufacture of general engineering castings, although it is attempting to develop capacity in the production of specialist castings for new markets. While employment peaked in the mid-1950s at more than 2000 workers, today the company employs less than 1000. Numbers gradually declined to about 1500 up to 1970, although production rose by 25 per cent during this period, indicating increasing labour productivity through mechanisation. Numbers were steady until recently when, over a two-year period, the labour force was reduced to less than 1000. New mechanised moulding plants and core shops were introduced.
to the plant in the late 1950s and 1960s, and various other innovations, including annealing ovens, have also been introduced since the 1950s. The recent rounds of redundancies have not, however, been technically induced. While the most advanced foundries in Britain have begun to automate their plants, Harveys has experienced a drastic decline in output.

At the end of the Second World War Harveys was a labour-intensive company. An ex-works-director explained that 'had we invested during the war in mechanical production then we wouldn't have had to recruit labour. Outfits like Harveys were labour intensive', with, for example, metal moved manually from furnaces to casting teams in 'bogies' of about half a ton. Even before the war, 'foreign labour' had been employed. Harveys took on refugees from the Spanish Civil War as well as a succession of European nationalities including Poles and Irishmen. In some cases, William Harvey, the then chairman, had paid their passages. Post-war, foreign labour became increasingly necessary because of the backward technical nature of the plant, heavy industry being less attractive to whites. White workers also shunned Harveys because the practice had been to take on and lay off labour according to demand with the seasons. This annual lay-off of up to 150 men as demand fell became increasingly unacceptable to whites, with the tight labour market of the 1950s. So long as the practice continued, it was increasingly difficult to attract whites. The ex-works-director said 'the traditional type of British workman' could no longer be attracted. There had been, he added, a political evolution in the working class, and this practice in the labour market had been rejected. 'So it meant filling up with coloured labour.' Indeed, as in other Midlands towns, a 'dual labour market' has developed, with white factories and black factories. Harveys is a black factory, with about 70 per cent categorised as 'foreign'.

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