5 Antagonistic Constitutionalism: The Electric Traction Co.

THE FELT NEED TO CHANGE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The Electric Traction Co. fits fairly closely to the popular image of an American multinational with its emphasis on control systems, budgetary and performance targets and constant pressure to maximise efficient working time. This is partly corporate style: 'the pursuit of excellence', passed down from New York; and partly a conscious need to maintain control over unit costs while pressing for high-quality standards in order to survive in the highly competitive world-wide market of agricultural machinery. Corporate style and the competitive market place have always been major influences on the conduct of industrial relations in this company. A further factor was the way in which the company developed in the postwar years. The three production plants (the UK head office is in London) opened one after the other over a period of seventeen years as demand grew. The first plant - the No. 1 Works - opened just after the war in a northern industrial town (referred to as Brotherton) and now employs approximately 2250 manual workers, including 400 in the foundry. Unionisation grew gradually in the 1950s but the company refused to give full recognition. Not unusually in these circumstances a number of unions were recruiting together, some for the craftsmen, others for the foundrymen, and yet others for the production workers. When recognition eventually came in 1960, after a well-remembered strike and march to the factory gates, multi-unionism was inevitable, with eight manual unions and subsequently three unions for staff. The company was persuaded, with some reluctance, to join the local Engineering Employers' Association in 1960 and for nearly all of the next decade used its procedures and facilities frequently. This meant a heavy reliance on union full-time officers. There were no annual wage negotiations (as was commonly the case then) but each union was free to pursue claims on its own or in concert with other unions through the grievance procedure to local or central conference under the EEF procedure. Union independence and sectionalism were positively encouraged by the procedure, a
fact aided by the widespread use of piecework incentive payments and the multiplicity of grades and allowances.

The position in the No. 2 Works some 40 miles from Brotherton, which the company acquired with its workforce of about 1300 in the mid-1950s, was quite different. The factory had originally been opened to build motor cars and unions were already recognised and well organised. The crucial distinguishing feature was the presence of a convenor with power to act on behalf of all six manual unions and the practice of letting him handle most issues informally with the industrial relations officer. The CIR reported in 1970 that 'a constructive working relationship between senior stewards of all unions at the plant allows the convenor system to operate with considerable success. Senior stewards work through the convenor for major questions ... and also for the negotiation of disputes at the labour relations department level ... The convenor has a major influence over the way the procedures are operated and certainly upon the attitudes of both unions and management.' Despite disapproval of the degree of informality in the system ('There is a point at which informality leads to confusion ...') the CIR felt the convenor system worked 'to the mutual advantage of both unions and company.' Another unique feature as far as the company was concerned was the formation, after an inter-union row in 1965, of a JNC which provided in effect a senior steward committee and gave the convenor a constitutional base. While informality and centrality remained the key notes of industrial relations in the No. 2 Works at the time of our fieldwork, it is important to note the extent to which the informal system was controlled by the union. Every meeting - even those with researchers! - is minuted by the secretary of the Joint Steward Committee and filed. Every day the secretary fills in the log book so that the night shift senior steward is kept fully informed.

The third plant, the No. 3 Works at the other end of Brotherton, has proved to be more of a trouble spot ever since it opened in 1963. Some 600 to 700 manual workers are employed there. The original idea was for the company to diversify into the motor truck business and to this end they acquired the No. 3 Works from Ford, again with a unionised workforce largely in membership of the power group section of the TGWU. This meant a different full-time officer and branch structure from the TGWU members at the No. 1 Works, which proved to be of some significance later. The motor truck gambit failed but the factory was retained for agricultural machinery. It was no doubt an expensive move and influenced management in their attitude to the