2 Trade Unions, Control and Resistance*

JOB CONTROL AND CAPITALISM

For the great majority of the ‘occupied population’ (in Britain, over 90 per cent), work equals wage-labour. Labour relations are thus, at the outset, market relations. The prospective worker must find an employer willing to pay a wage or salary in return for the disposal of his/her skill, knowledge or physical capacities; and can expect such employment to last only so long as this willingness continues. Labour thus has the status of a commodity; and as with all market relationships, the interests of buyers and sellers are antagonistic. The wages and conditions sought by the employee as the means to a decent life, both within and outside work, are a cost cutting into the employer’s profits. In the absence of specific and untypical counter-tendencies (the need to recruit and retain scarce categories of labour, or a belief that improved conditions will generate greater worker commitment and productivity), the employer is naturally motivated to resist worker aspirations which are liable to increase labour costs. Moreover, because labour represents a cost to be minimised, it is in the employer’s interest to continue a worker’s employment only so long as it remains profitable to do so. A decline in demand for the goods and services produced, or the development of new techniques permitting these to be produced more cheaply and profitably, may at any moment lead to managerial decisions which throw men and women out of employment.

If labour within capitalism is in one sense a commodity like any other, in another sense it is quite unlike all other types of commodity. For while the employment contract may well specify precisely what the worker receives from the employer, what he/she provides in return is rarely defined specifically. The worker does not agree to sell an exact quantity of labour; for neither physical nor intellectual work can normally be quantified precisely, and few employers could in any case predict with certainty their day-to-day labour requirements. The employer wishes rather to be able to make flexible use of the labour


R. Hyman, The Political Economy of Industrial Relations
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force as circumstances dictate; and the employment contract reflects
the employer’s interest by imposing on workers an open-ended
commitment. Rather than agreeing to expend a given amount of
effort, the employee surrenders his/her capacity to work; and it is the
function of management, through its hierarchy of control, to
transform this capacity into actual productive activity. Hence Marx’s
vital distinction between labour and labour power: the wage or salary
is not the price of labour as such but of labour power, the ability to
work; but the realisation of this potential is by no means a simple
economic exchange, it is a process which occurs ‘outside the limits of
the market’ (Marx, 1959, p. 175). The cobbler who sells a pair of
boots is separated from the commodity after the moment of sale, and
is engaged in no necessary and continuing relationship with the
customer; but the worker’s labour power cannot be detached from
his/her physical presence, and this necessitates an ongoing social
relationship with the employer (or the employer’s agents) throughout
the labour process itself. Issues of control inevitably pervade this
relationship: the conflictual character of job control and the com-
modity status of labour are reciprocally dependent aspects of social
relations of production within capitalism.

The interdependence of the two elements of the employment
relationship – the sale of labour power and the control of the labour
process – is apparent in the detail of industrial relations. The
worker’s standards of acceptable payment are influenced by the
nature of the work tasks and the pressure under which they are to be
performed: witness the popular slogan ‘a fair day’s work for a fair
day’s pay’. An increased workload or speed-up which might
otherwise be resisted may be accepted if higher payment is received
as compensation (either through a scheme linking earnings directly to
output – ‘payment by results’ – through promotion, regrading, a
special bonus or a simple wage increase). Conversely, relatively low
pay may be tolerated by some workers if the pressure of work or the
exercise of managerial authority is comparatively relaxed. For the
employer, this interrelationship is also of crucial importance: the
three parameters of level of pay, length of working time and labour
productivity together determine the possibility and rate of profit. The
drive for profitability will in different contexts focus primarily on one
factor rather than another; and historically, improvements won by
workers in increasing pay and reducing working hours have been
compensated by the employer through more intensive exploitation of
labour.