

The Roots of Current Trade Union Politics

Richard Hyman

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The Roots of Current Trade Union Politics

Richard Hyman

Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980).

REVIEWING THIS WORK for British industrial relations scholars when it first appeared at the end of 1980, I called attention to its "combination of meticulous documentation, sharp and persuasive theoretical argument and acute analytical insight." My judgement that this was the most important historical study of British trade unionism since Turner's *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy* has not been shared by most subsequent commentators, and I welcome this opportunity, in the light of the controversy which Price has stimulated, to renew my assessment for a very different audience.

Price focuses on the development of labour relations and labour control in British construction, drawing primarily, though by no means exclusively, on trade union archives (in particular those of masons, bricklayers, and carpenters). He also discusses more general trends in union organization and status during the period of his study, as well as drawing on more recent evidence from industrial sociology and industrial relations. His central aim is not only to offer an alternative to the institutional approach to union history of the Webbs and their successors, but also to challenge their built-in teleology. Viewing "modern" collective bargaining procedures as the embodiment of rationality, conventional labour historians traditionally interpreted their subject as the natural unfolding of enlightened progress toward this goal. But a historiography rooted in the experience of workers themselves, insists Price, involves a radically different perspective. Conflict is central to their day-to-day relationship with capital, and informs their collective aspirations and strategies; hence "we may best conceptualise the dynamic of industrial relations as a struggle for power and authority."

The professed aim of the book is "to make sense of the relationship between industrial conflict and the work process over a broad range of time."

R. Hyman, "The Roots of Current Trade Union Politics," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 185-189.

The labour process is presented as the interpretative link between a multiplicity of recorded grievances and conflicts on the one hand (Price makes particularly interesting use of the detailed reports by the stonemasons' branches) and large-scale socio-economic trends on the other. Such trends assumed particularly complex form in the building industry (or industries?): an important component of emergent British capitalism, but dominated by small employers and a traditional technology and division of labour, yet also a pioneer of conciliation procedures and national collective bargaining. A superficial continuity of employee-employer relations, argues Price, masked radical underlying changes in the late nineteenth century. The sustained high levels of strikes and lockouts are evidence of a fundamental instability in labour relations, at root attributable to a persistent "problem of labour discipline."

The genesis of this problem is identified with the rise of the general contractor, ushering in an era of "restless and competitive anarchy" dominated by a ruthless drive for accumulation. Speculative construction spelled insecurity of employment, while reckless tendering brought intense pressure upon labour costs and utilization. "Survival and profits depended not upon stability but on the employer's complete authority to rearrange the work, to hire and fire at a moment's notice, to demand overtime working suddenly, to sub-contract. . . . It was because employers needed this kind of total flexibility that the question of labour discipline was, ironically, of central significance in this most anarchic of industries." The drive to subordinate a labour force imbued with craft traditions was inevitably inflammatory.

Conflict centred around workers' efforts to sustain traditional conditions and practices, often through explicit "restriction of output." Employers in turn denounced "dictation" by the men, their campaign culminating in London in the

eight-month lockout of 1859. Here, argues Price, the workers' demand for a nine-hour day stood as proxy for "the old issues of machinery, overtime and piecework," and the underlying concerns of job security and control. The employers' victory was not immediately decisive: it concluded a decade in which many craft controls had been rolled back, but in the more favourable economic climate of the 1860s many of the workers' defences were consolidated in local codes of working rules.

These gains were, however, double-edged. More formal job regulation presaged a qualitative transformation in industrial relations. Hitherto, workers had exercised control through custom and convention, reinforced by workplace deputations, peremptory memoranda to employers, and occasional "spontaneous" stoppages. Local union branches were largely autonomous; moreover, trade unions as such were predominantly benefit societies which played little part in defending or advancing the frontier of control. To be "in union" meant essentially to follow the norms and decisions of the grassroots collectivity. Hence struggles across a whole district were typically co-ordinated by ad hoc committees of unionists and non-unionists alike, and directed by regular general assemblies of the workers.

By the late 1860s the employers faced a new crisis of productivity and profitability, and responded with a systematic and successful assault on these customary institutions of worker unilateralism. If employer rhetoric at times expressed crude anti-unionism, it was nevertheless "rank-and-file power" rather than trade union organization as such which was their main target. Indeed, in the assault on this power, the official machinery of a cautious and domesticated trade unionism could provide a vital auxiliary. The decisive innovation was the enforced introduction of local boards of conciliation and arbitration, making trade unions for the

first time central to industrial relations. Their officials soon identified their own status with the new machinery, and strove to contain local "indiscipline." As a corollary they typically accepted a demarcation between the sphere of employer authority and that of (relatively narrowly and economically defined) worker interests. Within the new framework of industrial relations, employers won a succession of detailed but cumulatively substantial engagements, eliminating or neutering working rules which obstructed profitability.

Price documents painstakingly the suppression of the traditionally effective methods of worksite militancy and the rise of "mutual negotiation and the beginnings of a procedural system." The successful management offensive was linked symbiotically to leadership authority and centralized discipline within the unions; both were repeatedly resisted from below, but to little effect. Such challenges reached a climax in 1914 with a second London lockout: a struggle over the control of hours, workplace organization, the closed shop, and the status of conciliation itself. It was six months before the union executives felt confident enough to impose a settlement; but finally they reasserted the principles of "modern" collective bargaining. "Responsible men and legitimate authority had triumphed."

The committed analysis of *Masters, Unions and Men* has received a mixed reception. For some of the old guard it is "largely a work of historical propaganda." (Mussion, *Economic History Review*) And while Fraser (*Victorian Studies*) acclaims the book as "a model of how sociology and history can be married to produce a fresh perspective on the past," others have complained of conceptual flabbiness: "a collage of industrial sociology and populist Marxism." (Tholfsen, *American Historical Review*) Price's sociology is indeed somewhat ill-digested. His innocent deployment of the notion of "authority" muddies his account

of the bases of employer control, a problem accentuated by a lack of attention to ideology, culture, or politics (a point made by Melling in a lengthy critique in the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*). Struggles for job control are attributed to the "work group," an invention of management sociologists concerned to reduce the sources of worker solidarity to the "sentiments" associated with parochial shop-floor relationships. One consequence, as Tuckman (*Sociological Review*) has commented, is an imprecision concerning the nature of the workplace itself: shop and site are confusingly assimilated.

This weakness reflects an underlying problem of integrating particularistic detail with theoretical generalization. Despite the empirical richness of much of his account, and despite his commitment to "history from below," Price's building workers often appears as derivatives from abstractions. Thus his own insistence on *the labour process as the dynamic of labour history* is not reflected concretely in his account: "strangely enough, there is . . . very little attention paid to the tasks which building workers actually performed, to the precise nature and extent of use of machinery, or to the vexed question of the assessment of different levels of 'skill.'" (Reid, *Historical Journal*) Rather, the labour process is typically reduced to the problem of discipline and supervision; and here, too, as Melling has forcefully argued, Price oversimplifies the complex evolution of managerial policy and personnel across the eight decades of his study. And while it is excessive to suggest that "a modish concern for workers' control has led to a neglect of other factors" (Daunton, *Journal of Economic History*), workers' struggle for control is itself too narrowly conceived. Most notably, there is far too little attention to the labour market as a terrain of conflict.

Undoubtedly, the most heated controversy has centred on Price's alleged "rank-and-fileism." Thus Reid claims that

an "a priori evaluation of the motivations of 'officials' and 'rank and file' leads to a distortion of the relation between them and to a number of questionable interpretations." Conflicts were far from universally acknowledged between conservative leaders and radical workers, who indeed were often engaged in fighting one another: a point also stressed by Melling-Musson, too, insists that "the development of national trade union organisation and collective bargaining... was generally backed by the membership, for whom it produced substantial benefits."

It is true that there is a one-sidedness in Price's account of union leaders, in alliance with the employers, imposing their distinctive strategies and interests on a resisting membership. In challenging the powerful tradition which glorifies "mature" collective bargaining, he single-mindedly focuses on the negative side of this development. Despite a reference to the "mixed legacy" of institutional trade unionism, there is no real attempt to explore the rationale underlying official strategies. How far did the creation of "industrial legality" (as Gramsci called it) involve gains as well as losses? How far in any case could traditional patterns of decentralized and autonomous job control prove viable in the face of the centralization of capital and the politicization of industrial relations? And were such practices ever an option for most non-craft workers? Price is vulnerable to Montgomery's charge (*Workers' Control in America*): that "to see the role of unions in this setting as *nothing more* than disciplinary agents for management... is a facile and dangerous form of myopia."

Part of the problem is an insufficient exploration of the specificity of craft control in nineteenth-century building. Price insists on the need to differentiate craft control from work control more broadly, but the relationship between the two is far from clearly elucidated. Does the history of labour relations in this distinctive milieu justify heady assumptions about

the connection between job control and class struggle? We receive little sense of the ambiguity underlying many traditional craft controls: at one and the same time a challenge to management and a form of delegated management (of which labourers were often the double victims). There is a wealth of evidence from recent labour historiography that workplace autonomy was often reciprocally linked to relative privilege in the labour market, and that collective struggles were often explicitly concerned with the preservation of this privilege. The "doctrine of vested interests," as the Webbs termed it, may have been initially the prerogative of craftworkers, but non-craft unionists soon learned similar lessons. What basis of class unity with those workmen — and even more crucially, women — whose exclusion was at the heart of the struggle for control? The historical record shows how often powerful workplace job control has been the corollary of corrosive and divisive sectionalism, politically and ideologically as well as within the labour process itself. One proffered solution, the Leninist, involves centralization undreamed of even by the Webbs' favourite union leaders. Whether there can be a more benign alternative is a recurrent focus of controversy on the left; but it is a debate which transcends the boundaries of Price's analysis.

Nevertheless, such criticisms of *Masters, Unions and Men*, while identifying the limits of its achievement, do not destroy its substance. What is remarkable about Price's book is how much analytical purchase he has gained with a combination of careful scholarship and "simplistic" generalization. He persuasively establishes his diagnosis of a prolonged but decisive transformation between 1870 and 1890. His emphasis on the irrelevance of formal union membership to much of the previous conduct of industrial relations helps explicate the often-noted but rarely analyzed puzzle of the mid-nineteenth

century: the numerical predominance of non-unionists among the participants and even the leaders of so many prominent struggles. Price gives the first convincing explanation of how craft control could remain so strong when craft unionists were in a minority. Conversely, his focus on employer agency in the spread of formal bargaining procedures and the associated bureaucratization of union control provides an essential insight for the under-

standing of the roots of current trade union politics.

Of course this is not the last word. We still require a broader, more nuanced understanding of the many contradictory facets of the "mixed legacy" of these years of transition. It remains a massive task to unravel its political implications. Yet Price's achievement is to illuminate, and brilliantly, the dark side of this ambiguous historical process.