

# **BOOK REVIEW**



**Review:**

**Unions at the Workplace: Shop Steward Leadership and Ideology**

by *John Benson*, 1991 (Melbourne, Oxford University Press)

\$24.95, paperback, pp.xiv + 207.

Workplace change has been of increasing concern to private and public sector organisations over the last few years. In this context John Benson's book is welcome and valuable. It complements the recent publication of the AWIRS monograph and the BCA generated work on workplace relations and Australian industrial relations in general. The book provides a detailed analysis of workplace union organisation at a major large employer, viz., the Victorian State Electricity Commission. As a case-study of a highly unionised (over 95% union density, p.9) organisation, it sheds light on the processes of workplace relations often missed by larger studies. And in doing so it helps fill a lacuna in the literature. For the organisation, functions and management of workplace industrial relations has not attracted great research interest in Australia. There are many reasons for this.

Briefly, three may be mentioned; first, it may be due to the time demands of a broad-based methodology, which is arguably best suited to this area of research. Benson has surmounted this problem in *Unions at the Workplace*. The research methods used included a survey questionnaire, formal interviews, informal discussions, observation, attendance at negotiations and an analysis of relevant organisational and union documents. This brings a richness of analysis to Benson's work—unfortunately absent in much published work purely reliant on surveys. Second, the lack of detailed workplace research may be due to many assumptions about the lack of importance of this area in a centralised arbitral system. This book, correctly and successfully, challenges such a view. Third, questions have not been posed about the rôle of workplace arrangements for regulating the employment relation in the context of competing industrial relations systems. It is at this point that the limitation of the book became apparent. It is firmly rooted in the bargaining tradition, and is unable to address questions of this type.

The author focuses on the position of shop stewards in a system built around centralised arbitration. In particular, Benson's interest is centred on an investigation of the "factors that may influence . . . [the] rôle and relationships that develop between shop stewards and their members, management and full-time union officials" (p.xii, also p.7). The book reports the results of this investigation. The structure of the book is conventional; a chapter for both the introduction and conclusion, with chapters focusing on various aspects of the rôle of shop stewards. Amongst others this includes, leadership, dealing with issues, union organisation, and industrial action. There are nine chapters in all. Given the content and

structure of the book, it is of more interest to researchers and practitioners, but not without interest for teaching.

Chapters 2 and 3 review existing literature and conclude that little research has been directed to the actual rôle of stewards in the workplace. Previous research conducted on shop stewards in Australia concentrated chiefly on the formal or official aspects of steward activity and workplace organisation. In order to address this problem, Benson draws heavily on British theory and research to develop a typology of shop stewards. The typology is based on the dimensions of leadership and ideology. Here the author argues that to understand workplace relationships, particularly the specific *effects* of contextual factors on them, the *perceptions* of these factors and leadership rôle of shop stewards are of primary importance (p.29). This individualistic framework, is the source of both, the main weakness and strength of the book.

The work of Eric Batstone and his colleagues at Warwick University in the 1970s provide the basic framework for the typology. The dimensions of leadership strategies—either representative or delegate—and orientation to unionism—a commitment to general principles or workgroup interests—yield a matrix of four types. These are, “workgroup leader” (i.e. representative leader on leadership strategy and workgroup focus on union orientation), “leader” (representative/general principles), “delegate” (delegate/workgroup), and “committed delegate” (delegate/general principles).

Although these types differ only marginally from those identified by Batstone et al., and similar models used in other British research, the distribution of the types in Benson’s work does differ markedly from the British research. Benson found a relatively equal distribution across the four, of about a quarter in each (p.68, Table 4.6) whereas Batstone et al., and other British research, found an overwhelming predominance of leaders and workgroup delegates (see Batstone et al. 1977, p.36, Table 2.6). The remaining two categories (“nascent leaders” and “cowboys” in the main correspond to Benson’s “committed delegate” and “delegate” types respectively) together accounted for less than 20% of their sample. This result has substantial importance. Why is there such a difference? Benson largely ignores this question, making only a brief comment about the samples used in the British research (p.68).

It could be argued that the answer lies in the substantial differences in the dynamics of the British and Australian systems. It is precisely the relative lack of integration of workplace relations into the centralised arbitral system in Australia that allows a greater variety and stability of *types of authority relations* at work than in Britain. The British distribution indicated that the “cowboys” and “nascent leaders” were unstable categories, unlikely to be viable types over time. To put this in another way, Australia provides more possibilities for innovation in workplace relations as a result of the relative weakness of the bargaining model of industrial relations at the local level. This is the case, even in a highly organised

workplace, such as the SECV. In contrast, the dynamics of the British system have a tendency to convert all worker-management interactions into bargaining type relations. This point uncovers a fundamental weakness of the book—the lack of a coherent link between steward activity and organisational dynamics and structural conditions. Benson, in adopting an individualist framework based on a bargaining model, has overlooked an essential aspect of the analysis of workplace relations, viz., the *systematic nature* of power and authority at work. This in turn is reflected in the weak results from the empirical evidence underpinning his typology. When the predictors of “orientation to unionism” and “leadership” (p.48, Figure 3.4) are tested, they leave 83% and 81% of variance unexplained, respectively. The absence of factors related to the contextual structure, including power, may go a long way in explaining these results. The strong positive influence on *both* orientation to unionism and leadership (0.606 and 0.573, both  $p < 0.05$ , respectively) of the factor, “presence of full-time officials”, is in indication of this.

Nevertheless, the typology does yield many interesting results concerning the organisation and processes involving shop stewards in the workplace. Chapters 4 to 8 discuss the aspects of the rôle of shop stewards briefly mentioned above. In general, the leader rôle stands out as the most activist. For example, leaders are more likely to engage in negotiation with management on almost any issue concerned with wages, working conditions, hours and employment conditions (pp.79–83); foster and engage in, more intra- and inter-union organisation (Ch.6); meet regularly with members, involve them in negotiations, establish a solid negotiating relationship with management to represent members (Ch.7); and although more likely to follow procedures, they are still more likely to engage in industrial action. But in doing so they are more likely to seek a membership mandate for action, get involved in strike organisation, strategy development and participate in negotiations with management (Ch.8). The empirical detail is impressive. It is in these chapters that the richness of analysis, made possible by the variety of methods used, becomes evident. The bald statistical results are supplemented by qualitative evidence based on detailed knowledge of the research site. Herein lies the strength of the book.

But the focus on processes leaves the reader with the question of effectiveness. There are two aspects of this. First, are leaders more effective in securing gains for members than the other steward types? The British research, by Batstone and colleagues (1977, pp.232–237), answers in affirmative, at least in terms of earnings and bonuses. Yet Benson skirts the question with only a few comments. For example, in terms of pay issues, he admits only limited possibilities for negotiation existed (p.80) in the SECV. Leaders were more likely to respond to issues generated from a wider range of sources and consequently dealt with issues which would otherwise have gone unprocessed (p.75). It is implied this would be in the interests of members. He notes that AMWU stewards (mostly leaders) perceived their rôle to be the winning of issues (p.76). But apart

from the general statement that leaders sought “to ensure that all members of their union gained the fruits of their labour”, in the final analysis the author admits that, in terms of the wider aspects of the employment relation, “it is doubtful whether these [leader] stewards, . . . will achieve superior conditions for their own constituents”. Their direct effectiveness appears to be restricted to “individual issues such as discipline and victimisation [where] these stewards have been able to make considerable gains for their members” (p.81). So, although the activism of leaders is ably demonstrated in the book, it is not at all clear what particular benefits this has for members or unions, which could not be counter balanced in the activities of the other types of shop stewards.

The second aspect of effectiveness brings us back to the broad problem of the place of workplace relations in alternative, and competing, industrial relations *systems*. How effective is this *form* of workplace organisation in light of the debate on industrial relations reform, especially when concerned with productivity and efficiency? In reviewing the implications of the case-study, Benson is locked into the bargaining tradition. For in response to demands for devolution of responsibility for the regulation of the employment relation he writes, the “key problem confronting unions . . . is: to what type of steward do they want to devolve responsibility?” (p.172). He argues that it would appear that leaders have the ability, but workgroup leaders may prefer to “pursue sectional interests and thereby jeopardise the prospects of such [workplace] reform” (p.175). This misses the point—it is the very structure of the industrial relations system and the nature of bargaining that is on the agenda. Not whether this or that action could maximise bargaining power. It may be the case that the increasing diversity required in the workplace, could be better served by one or more of the other steward types. Or, alternatively, a different *type of authority relation* could serve the needs of high productivity employment. From this perspective the relative stability of different steward types gives Australia a unique chance to adapt and develop workplace processes on the basis of choice. This book is unable to either address these issues or provide much of an input to them.

*Unions at the Workplace* is essential reading for those interested in the processes involved in workplace relations and the rôle of shop stewards in large Australian organisations. It is a very good book in its own terms. The rich empirical detail dispels many myths about workplace relations. In so doing it provides valuable balance to many studies recently published on workplace reform. But the framework adopted in the book is unduly limited and limiting. Unfortunately, it is likely that its impact on current debates regarding workplace change will be minimal.

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**References**

Batstone, E., I. Boraston and S. Frenkel, 1977, *Shop Stewards in Action: The Organization of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation* (Oxford, Blackwell).

