A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File versus Bureaucracy Debate

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Against the backcloth of an upsurge in industrial militancy in Western economies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Richard Hyman crafted an unsurpassed Marxist analysis of the political economy of industrial relations. He drew attention to the way in which a hierarchy of specialist trade union representatives (notably full-time officials) had acquired interests and perspectives which tended to channel union policies towards accommodation with employers and governments. Officials acted cautiously, with concern for continuity and stability rather than take risks as leaders of mass activity and struggle (Hyman, 1975a: 74). In common with other Marxist-informed writers on trade unionism (Cliff and Barker, 1966; Anderson, 1967;Lane, 1974; Clarke, 1977; Beynon, 1973), Hyman viewed strong independent workplace union organisation as providing an important counteracting tendency against bureaucratisation and accommodation of the official union leadership (1971; 1972; 1973; 1974; 1975a). In Britain at least, the growth of shop stewards' organisation had 'proved highly responsive to the spontaneous demands of the rank-and-file, articulating members' aspirations and grievances, where necessary, independently and even in defiance of official trade union channels' (Hyman, 1989a: 41).

By the late 1970s Hyman had distanced himself from what he now perceived to be the 'unsophisticated' view of classical Marxists and their contemporary Trotskyist adherents, the latter amongst whom he had 'cut his own teeth' politically in the 1960s and early 1970s.[1] Hyman rejected the dichotomy between a 'trade union bureaucracy' and the 'rank-and-file'. He regarded the term 'trade union bureaucracy' as an unsatisfactory description (or derogatory slogan) often employed by those whom he dismissively claimed held an 'idealised and romanticised conception' of workplace struggle and shop steward militancy. This position represented union officials as scapegoats for contradictions which in reality were inherent in trade unionism itself. Likewise, although he had often used the term himself, he argued 'rank-and-file' lacked theoretical foundation and represented no more than a 'military metaphor' (1979b: 54-55; see also 1985; 1989b). Hyman identified a tendency towards what he termed the 'bureaucratisation of the rank-and-file' within British shop stewards' organisation (1979b), with the growing influence of a 'semi-bureaucracy' of 'lay' representatives such as full-time workplace convenors, senior stewards, as well as influential activists at branch and district level. Such a development had arisen in part, he argued, from the implementation of the Donovan Commission's recommendations in the late 1960s on. The largely autonomous shop stewards' organisation had become far more closely integrated within the official structures of trade unionism and collective bargaining. This change had produced an expanded layer of *full-time* stewards, with more hierarchy and centralised control within stewards' own organisation. This process had led to a

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[1] Hyman was for number of years until 1976 a member of the International Socialists, the forerunners of today's Socialist Workers Party.

distancing of senior stewards from their members, with shop steward leaders often acting in ways that contained as well as encouraged members' militancy (1979b: 57-60).

While commentators drew attention to similar trends (Lyddon, 1977; Cliff, 1979), for Hyman the 'bureaucratisation of the rank-and-file' thesis undermined his earlier conceptualisation of a conflict of interests between the 'union bureaucracy' and 'rank-and-file'. The 'problem of bureaucracy' was not rooted in the interests of a layer of full-time union officials (FTOs), but as a set of social relationships which 'permeates the whole practice of trade unionism' at *every level* of the representative structure (1979b: 61), with militant lay stewards and activists facing similar pressures towards bureaucratisation. Hyman concluded that intra-union relations could not be reduced to a rank-and-file/bureaucracy cleavage, but were complex and contradictory.

In the wake of Hyman's analysis other commentators (Gore, 1982; Kelly, 1988; Mcllroy, 1988; Heery and Fosh, 1990; Heery and Kelly, 1990; Kelly and Heery, 1994; Zeitlin, 1987; 1989a; 1989b), also criticised the 'rank-and-filist' perspective from a variety of viewpoints, albeit on occasion in ways in which Hyman was not prepared to countenance (Hyman, 1989b). It was argued *inter alia* there was no clear demarcation line between 'officialdom' and the 'rank-and-file'; that FTOs were responsive to their members; that left-wing officials had more in common with left-wing shop stewards than their rightwing counterparts; and that FTOs did not necessarily tend towards conservatism and the members towards militancy. What united all of these critiques was the view that the rank-and-file *versus* bureaucracy notion was insufficiently coherent or empirically grounded (Zeitlin, 1989a: 60). Most industrial relations academics accept the contours of Hyman's later analysis of bureaucracy, including some Marxist-influenced writers such as Kelly, (1986), Mcllroy and Campbell (1999) and Gall (2003). Certainly over the last 30 years there has been little attempt to provide any systematic challenge to Hyman's refutation of the rank-and-file/bureaucracy interpretation. This article attempts to fill the gap by providing a critical reappraisal of Hyman's late 1970s analysis of bureaucracy from within the revolutionary Marxist perspective that he had previously held. It reapplies what are regarded as the enduring strengths of Hyman's early analysis. Yet it also seeks to provide a critique of his later assessment that draws not only on the 'classical' Marxist tradition (of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci and the early 1920s congresses of the Communist International) but also attempts to take into account developments within trade unions in advanced capitalist societies.

The paper argues Hyman critiqued a crudely defined model of the conflict of interest between FTOs and their members. A more nuanced and multi-dimensional revolutionary Marxist conception, recognising the variations and complexities involved was not adequately considered, albeit to some extent this was because it was not available at the time in any all-encompassing form.[2] The attempt to redefine 'bureaucratisation' in a precise fashion helped to focus attention on its ubiquitous

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[2] Notably, but not exclusively, developed by the International Socialism/Socialist Workers Party tradition over many years.

nature at all levels of the unions, and specifically the bureaucratic trends at workplace level, trends which have remained evident amidst the atrophy of reps/stewards' organisation in the 1990s and 2000s. By generalising from such developments to rebut wholesale the rank-and-file/bureaucracy model of analysis of intra-union relations, Hyman arguably 'threw the baby out with the bathwater'. The article proceeds by examining the nature and social dynamics of (a) full-time union officialdom, (b) shop stewards and workplace union organisation, and (c) the relationship between the two. In the process, the limits and potential of both Hyman's 'earlier' and 'later' writings are highlighted and some broader generalisations are drawn with relevance to current dilemmas for trade unionism.

The Trade Union Bureaucracy

It has long been acknowledged (for example, see Luxemburg, 1906; Michels, 1915; Murphy, 1917; Webbs, 1920; Mills, 1948) that FTOs have displayed an attachment to the formal procedures of industrial relations, the need for compromise in negotiations, the avoidance of strikes, and a commitment to the existing social and political order. One of the strengths of Hyman's early analysis of trade union officialdom, compared to many 'pluralist' political and industrial relations commentators of the 1950s and 1960s (Lipset; 1960; Lipset *et al*, 1962; Clegg *et al,* 1961), was the attempt to locate the problem of 'bureaucratic conservatism' (Kelly, 1988: 149) not just to pressures *internal* to the trade unions, but most importantly to the impact of *external* agencies with which unions are engaged in continuing power relations, notably the powerful moderating pressures from employers and the state (Hyman, 1975a: 90). The advance of neoliberalism and globalisation in more recent years has further underlined the efficacy of such an analysis.

Nonetheless, the emphasis placed by Hyman (1975a: 89-90; 1975b: XXV-XXVI) on the centrality of the *bargaining function* of FTOs to explain their moderate behaviour neglected or downplayed other important *sociological* and *political* factors within this model: such as their specific social role as intermediary and mediator between capital and labour, their substantial material benefits, and their political attachment to social democracy. It is the combination of these factors which helps explain why FTOs can be distinguished as a distinct social stratum with interests different from, and sometimes in antagonism to, their rank-and-file members. What follows is an attempt to present an analysis of the objective and subjective factors which help to explain why FTOs behave in a conservative and bureaucratic fashion. It draws extensively at various points on Hyman's early formulations, but also on other writers. The term 'trade union bureaucracy' is used to refer to FTOs who are the paid professional functionaries of a trade union organisation, previously estimated to number around 3,000 in the UK (Kelly and Heery, 1994). Four aspects of the 'trade union bureaucracy' are offered here to help explain their unique position. These are their social role, their bargaining function, their relationship with social democracy, and their power relationship with union members.

(a) Social Role

Unions are concerned within capitalism first and foremost with improving the terms on which workers are exploited, not with ending that exploitation. By confining the class struggle to the search for reforms there is a presumption that the interests of capital and labour can be accommodated, with the consequence that workers' struggles, however militant, must ultimately result in a compromise.   It is this situation which generates a permanent apparatus of FTOs who specialise in negotiating the terms of such compromises.

Such officials occupy a unique social position which is different from the bulk of the members they represent. They are neither *employers* nor *workers.* While they might employ secretaries and research assistants to work on their behalf in union headquarters, unlike a capitalist enterprise, this is clearly not where they gain their economic or social status. But conversely the full-time union official is not an ordinary worker. Rank-and-file workers are obliged to sell their labour power to an employer and their immediate material interest is bound up with ensuring they get the maximum possible return for that sale. By contrast, while trade union officials also depend on a money wage, this is something which is gained from a *union*, not from an employer. The official's very existence is indissolubly connected with the existence of the unions (Kaye, 1984: 10). As a consequence they come under strong pressure to view themselves as having a vested interest in the continuation of the wage labour and capitalist order from which trade unions derive their function. In turn this can lead to the establishment of accommodative relationships with employers and the state. Thus the limits of trade union officialdom are determined by their social situation.

The contrast between the rank-and-file and FTOs can become sharply evident during strike activity. Thus, the basic necessities of workers' lives can often depend on the outcome of struggles with employers, whereas union officials' are one step removed. If workers begin to take on the employers independently of the official leadership through militant forms of strike action, then the FTOs function as mediator can be called into question. The more militant and broader the struggle, the more dramatic such a divide between officials and the rank-and-file can become. While for workers a mass strike driven from below (for example against both employer *and* government policies) can raise the prospect of the transformation of society, for the official it can seem to represent a threat to their *raison d'être*. One graphic example of this took place in 1919, when union leaders of the British miners, railwaymen and transport workers were told by Prime Minister Lloyd George that if they called a strike the government would be defeated, and it would be up to them to run the country! Confronted with the possibility of actually overthrowing the system the union leaders recoiled - in the immortal words of railway workers' leader Jimmy Thomas: 'I have never disguised that in a challenge to the Constitution, God help us unless the Government won' (Miliband, 1972: 134).

The material benefits FTOs enjoy are also of significance. The general secretaries of Britain's 15 biggest unions currently earn between £84,000 and £112,000 in basic

salary,[3] compared with the median gross annual earnings for full-time employees of £25,123.[4] While such financial benefits do not in themselves necessarily lead to conservatism, they do conspire to place FTOs in a different social environment from the bulk of their members. Thus even though many officials work long hours in demanding jobs, and spend periods away from home, in general their (relatively) secure job and salary contrasts starkly with the much lower pay and precarious living of the members they represent. A degree of social isolation arises from the inevitable change in job context, with officials spending a good proportion of their time involved in a steady succession of union meetings and negotiations with employers often isolated from the bulk of the members they represent (Pannekoek, 1936; Callinicos, 1982). The cumulative effect of such changed social conditions is that they are under enormous pressure to absorb some of the employers' outlook, to have 'a greater understanding of, and sympathy for, their erstwhile opponents' (Kelly, 1988: 151).

 (b) Bargaining Function

Union leaderships are subject to moderating pressures to accept the parameters of bargaining institutions which are dominated by capital. As Luxemburg (1906: 87-8) argued, the preservation of the union's machine – its headquarters, finance and organisation – effectively becomes an 'end in itself'. Institutional pressures towards an 'accommodation with external power' (Hyman, 1975a: 89-90) lead to resistance to objectives and action (such as militant strike activity) which push 'too far' and unduly antagonise employers and the state. In the process, even though union officials express their members' grievances, they can also tend to view strikes as a disruption to stable bargaining. There is a tendency to define the conduct and outcome of collective bargaining as being dependent on their own 'professional' competence and expertise, acting *on behalf* of their members. Hence the paradox, that although collective bargaining can win material improvements for workers, it also institutionalises industrial conflict. It subordinates the autonomous and informal activity of workers to limit managerial prerogative by channelling grievances into innocuous forms, defining bargaining issues within a narrow focus so as to render the task of achieving compromise with employers more tractable (Hyman, 1975b: XXV; 1984: 141). Union officials can sometimes act as 'manager[s] of discontent' (Mills, 1948: 9).

Gramsci (1969: 15) drew attention to the exercise of control *over* workers by union officials through the process by which unions win improvements *for* them. While it is undoubtedly vital that union officials (utilising the threat of rank-and-file industrial strength) can win material improvements for their members, they are subject to powerful normative influences of 'industrial legality'. The union official is under intense pressure to 'keep faith' with their negotiating partners, to regard each conflict as a 'problem' to be resolved within a framework defined by the prevailing system. It is for this reason that they often tend to limit workers' struggles and to

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[3] Certification Officer, 2010 www.certoffice.org
[4] Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2009, HM Government.

end strikes on 'compromise' terms in ways which can be detrimental to rank-and-file interests and aspirations.

The tendency towards bureaucracy is reinforced on a national political level by industrial relations institutions which act as 'integrating mechanisms' for the representatives of organised labour who become bound to the interests of 'national business competitiveness'. With the FTOs 'mediators' role between capital and labour dependent on the development of 'trust' between employers, government and individual union leaders, it is necessarily sometimes bought at the expense of workers' interests, with union membership wage militancy, for example, suppressed in the 'national interest' and expressed in terms of social contracts or pacts (Taylor and Mathers, 2002; Hassel, 2003).

(c) Social Democracy

Social democracy is an historical phenomenon marked by the *de facto* integration of the labour movement into parliamentary democracy, a process in Britain termed 'Labourism' by Miliband (1972). This integration was achieved through an historic 'settlement' in which trade union officialdom recognised the legitimacy of private property and the market in return for 'concessions' based on the delivery of a social wage. The ability of labour movements to extract concessions was based on the close institutional connections between trade unions and a 'dominant party of labour' with an ideological commitment to social justice, political liberalism and the welfare state (Upchurch *et al*, 2009). Social democratic trade unionism was thus the product of this 'specific social structuration' (Moschonas, 2002: 17) marked by a contingent relationship between a growing industrial working class, trade unions, reformist labour and socialist parties and the nation state. The principal objective of social democratic trade unions *vis á vis* the party was the winning of elections in order to facilitate the development of electoral programmes that would augment the industrial power and influence of the trade unions. Social democracy was progressive in that it based itself upon working class solidarity that went beyond the business or craft interests common to many early trade unions, but the interests of class solidarity were always contained by party and union officials who fought consistently against workers' power over capital whenever rights of ownership and control were challenged from below. As a result of this 'specific social structuration' social democratic trade union leaders (of both right and left) enhanced their position as mediators through a process of 'bureaucratic consolidation' (Upchurch *et al*, 2009: 8), or what Panitch (1986: 189) refers to as the 'statization of society'

In Britain from its inception the Labour Party institutionalised the divorce between 'economic' and 'political' activity and reinforced the process by which workers' struggles have been confined within strict limits. Loyalty to the Labour Party, especially when Labour is in office, has encouraged ministers to place pressure on officials not to undermine 'their' government with industrial disputes. Because of their position in society union leaders have been more susceptible to this kind of influence than rank-and-file union members. But even when out of office the Labour

Party has been able to pressurise them into dampening down strike action and dropping left-wing policies, on the basis that this would make Labour appear 'irresponsible' and harm electoral prospects (Miliband, 1972; Coates, 1975; 1989; Taylor 1989; 1993). There have often been tensions between the unions and the Labour Party, for example with an increasingly critical stance being taken by some union leaders towards the New Labour government's neo-liberal policies during the early 2000s (Daniels and McIlroy, 2009). Yet ideological and political loyalty to Labourism has proved to be one of the clearest manifestations of the limitations of trade unionism within the framework of capitalist society.

(d) Centralised Power

Trade unions develop hierarchical and bureaucratic structures with their own specialised personnel. This structure gives a small centralised stratum of union officials authority and power over the rank-and-file. It is true this power 'rarely derives from crude coercion and manipulation but rather from some form of accommodation between the leading officials and other key "lay" participants in the decision-making process' (Hyman, 1980: 73). But nonetheless such power manifests itself in different ways, including financial resources, specialist knowledge, control of internal formal channels of communication, political skills of leadership, and in defining the choices available to the organisation (Michels, 1915).

The degree of internal democracy is likely to vary within different union traditions and be affected by *inter alia* the degree of autonomy of union branches and workplace union organisation, and the number of independent channels of communication available to opposition groups. Outside of periods of dispute union members (as opposed to activists) are usually passive in their demands on the union (Goldstein, 1952; Allen, 1954; Lipset *et al*, 1962; Moran 1974). As such a good deal of permanent power tends to rest with those who hold the highest official positions. Hence the officials' ability to override policy decisions taken at democratic annual national conferences of membership representatives. Historically, there has been a tendency for most FTOs (apart from the senior positions) to be appointed, rather than elected, to office (Undy and Martin, 1984; Daniels and McIlroy, 2009). But even when elected (in Britain it is a requirement of employment legislation that all senior officials are elected) they are still liable to exercise disproportionate decision-making authority, influence and control within the unions. Likewise their intervention within the collective bargaining arena and over strike activity can be crucial.

Having considered the position of trade union full time officials within unions, we now move to analyse in more detail the debates on bureaucracy flowing from Hyman's analysis.

The Trade Union 'Bureaucracy' Debate

Hyman's early analysis of the dynamics of trade unionism within capitalism made a significant contribution to the above analysis. However, he subsequently argued that

the characterisation of *all* union officials as 'villains' who consistently '[sell] out their valiant members' (Hyman, 2003: 189) was one-dimensional. Likewise Kelly (1988: 160) has complained the term 'trade union bureaucrat' has often been misconceived 'as a fixed and invariant type, always and everywhere subject to the same eternal laws of bureaucratic conduct and impervious to historical change'. This particular criticism arguably paints too crude a picture of the revolutionary Marxist position, which recognises in particular the dual social function of trade union leaders within capitalism (Draper, 1970).

We can borrow here from Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to present the interplay between the structural limits to union leaders' actions and their ability to progress the social and political demands of their members. While institutional structures of collective bargaining, mediation, and negotiation (as well as the union itself as an institution) may enable union leaders to advance their members' interests they also act to constrain the potential of those demands. Of course, such constraints also exist for the rank-and-file, bound as they are by the constraints of the capitalist enterprise. But FTO's have a vested interest in preserving the institutions that provide them with social power, whilst the rank-and-file may seek to question the value of the institutions that constrain their struggle for self-improvement. Thus for FTOs' particularised norms of behaviour associated with 'pluralist' industrial relations procedures become embedded, while for the rank-and-file such behaviour is transient and functional.

Nor should we omit the role of the state in making strategic decisions to either facilitate or suppress trade union leaderships within this model of indulgent pluralism (Tarrow, 1998). As Kelly is aware, capitalist rule depends on the 'dialectical interplay of coercion and consent' (1998: 59) and directs attention towards how states (and employers) channel mobilization as well as repress it. Facilitation, of course, means that the state is supportive of the mediating role that FTOs perform, while repression may be used to constrain mobilization. Such a balance is to the fore of trade union leaders' minds, and may provoke surprising retaliation. An example is the response of British TUC General Secretary Len Murray in 1984, who called a one-day General Strike at short notice in response to the Tory Government's Ministerial Decree to 'ban' trade unions from the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham.

FTOs are therefore not simply 'fire extinguishers of the revolution'. Rather 'they perform a dual role, both shackling their members to the system and bringing home limited benefits within it' (Anderson, 1967: 272-77). Yet Hyman's early analysis (notably in *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*) did not always integrate this 'other side' of the dual social function. One consequence was that he (inadvertently) allowed the critics of the rank-and-file/bureaucracy model to present the analysis in too crude a fashion of being just about 'selling out'. It was this 'simplified' notion from which Hyman was to distance himself. We can examine some of the main elements of the traditional critique mounted against the notion of the 'trade union bureaucracy'.

(a) *An Explanation of the Dual Social Function*

There have been periods when union officials have opposed practically all strikes, as from 1940 to the mid-1950s, and in the immediate aftermath of the 1984-5 miners' strike many union officials argued that strikes were counter-productive. But there have also been periods when (even right-wing) union officials have led strikes, as during the 1970s and early 1980s, and despite the massive decline in the level of strike activity over the last 30 years there have been a number of officially-led strikes. Sometimes officials have been prepared to lead strike action against Labour governments, as with the 1978-9 'Winter of Discontent' or in opposition to aspects of New Labour policy in the early 2000s. Nor are officials always forced into calling action by an insurgent rank-and-file. On occasions they have taken the initiative even when there has been little pressure from below. So how do we explain such divergent and ambivalent behaviour?

Cliff and Gluckstein (1986: 27-8) compared the ambivalent nature of union officialdom with the Roman God Janus that presents two faces: 'It balances between the employers/state on the one hand, and the workers on the other. It holds back and controls workers' struggle, but it has a vital interest not to push the collaboration with employers and the state to a point where it makes the unions completely impotent'. If FTOs failed to articulate their members' grievances or lead strike action that delivered at least some improvements in pay and conditions, there would be the danger they would lose support in the union. The rank-and-file might bypass them by acting unofficially, mounting an internal challenge to their position, or even relinquishing their membership of the union. As a consequence FTOs cannot ignore their members' interests and aspirations completely. On the other hand, if they collaborated too closely with the employers/state the union officials' power would be totally undermined because the only reason they are taken seriously is that they represent social forces that pose the potential for resistance. Hence sometimes, as we have seen, particularly when severe constraints are placed on the unions or when they find themselves completely ignored at the negotiating table, they may feel obliged to threaten or organise strike action 'from above'. Thus the need to preserve the security of union organisation can be served occasionally and in certain contexts by the mobilisation of the rank-and-file and a challenge to employer/state prerogatives.

In addition officials are conscientious, committed and hard-working, motivated by the desire to defend/improve their members' pay and conditions, and supportive of shop stewards and union reps' efforts to organise and recruit. Yet the fact that the conservatism of FTOs is 'contingent and historically determined' does not mean they are 'merely ciphers who carry out the members' wishes in a direct and uncomplicated manner' (Bramble, 1993: 24). Endorsement of militant action or taking the lead in recommending a strike might appear to be the most prudent course. But sometimes this can be part of an exercise in 'controlled militancy' (Hyman, 1973: 109), whereby the officials lead the struggle in part at least in order to keep control over its main direction. They are generally motivated by the desire to restrict the action to a merely demonstrative or token form, and to bring it to an end

at the earliest opportunity irrespective of the merits of the issue, thereby ensuring the members 'let off steam' in a relatively harmless fashion.

Hyman (1983: 64) pointed out that 'the terrain of union politics is not merely given' by pressure on FTOs from employers, government and/or union members – in fact there is a degree of autonomy. However, in many respects the boundaries of such autonomy are determined by their social position as an intermediary between capital and labour (Bramble, 1993: 32-3). Caught between these contradictory social forces the FTO tends to *vacillate*: their 'task is to sustain a balance between grievance and satisfaction, between activism and quiescence' (Hyman, 1971: 37). Hence the way in which officials vacillated in the late 1970s between support for Social Contract wage controls 'in the national interest' and their rejection under pressure from low-paid rank-and-file members (Coates, 1980).

(b) *Left Officials versus Right Officials?*

A criticism levelled at the notion of the 'trade union bureaucracy' is that there is internal differentiation within the ranks of full-time officialdom, and that such divisions may be as significant as those between officials and members (Heery and Fosh, 1990). The existence of hierarchy can mean there are differences between the general secretary and other national officials, between national and local officials, and between officials with responsibilities for collective bargaining and a cadre of dedicated 'organisers' focused on union recruitment. Likewise there can be differences in terms of gender and ethnicity, with potential implications for the behaviour of officials and their relationship with members (Heery and Kelly, 1988). In addition, ideologically and politically union officials are not all the same, with the differences between *left* and *right*-wing officials sometimes of significance. Thus in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain many of the politically moderate national union leaders of the previous period were replaced by new left-wing individuals such as Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon of the transport and engineering unions respectively In part this change in leadership was a response to greater shop-floor activity, and in turn figures such as Jones built their reputation by encouraging the development of shop stewards' organisation. In very different circumstances, the New Labour years were widely seen as producing a new generation of so-called 'awkward squad' union leaders who were more assertive industrially and more left-wing politically than their predecessors (Murray, 2003).

A long and enduring tradition inside the British trade union movement (notably associated with the Communist Party) has argued that the main division inside the unions is a political one between left and right and so it is necessary to support left-wing officials elected via 'Broad Left' coalitions so that the unions can be won to more militant policies (Roberts, 1976). Yet arguably the weakness of the Broad Left strategy is that it places emphasis on winning left-wing control of the *official union machine* rather than the building of strong *rank-and-file organisation.* One graphic example of this was the way the miners won their greatest victories in the national strikes of 1972 and 1974, despite the leadership of a right-wing president (Joe Gormley), essentially because the independent initiative and momentum from below

(combined with the active solidarity received by other workers) was so powerful. By contrast the miners suffered their greatest defeats under the left-wing presidency of Arthur Scargill, arising from the relative weakness of rank-and-file organisation within the NUM (and among trade unionists generally) by the early 1980s (Callinicos and Simons, 1984; Darlington, 2005).

We suggest here that the *differences* between left and right-wing union officials are ultimately less important than what *unites* them at the most primary level and at decisive moments. As Hyman's own assessment of the 1926 General Strike confirmed, the in-built structural pressures meant that at the end of the day left-wing officials are just as capable of holding back workers' struggles as their right-wing counterparts (Hinton and Hyman, 1975: 59-60). Likewise during the 1974-79 Labour government, it was the left-wing Jones and Scanlon who played an instrumental role in securing support for Labour's 'Social Contract' (Coates, 1980; 1989; Taylor, 1993). While the political differences between left and right-wing officials are important in influencing their behaviour, they are *secondary* to the common material role, position and interests which bind *all* officials together as a distinct social group. We need now, however, to consider the particularities of the 'rank-and-file' as a subject.

The Rank-and-File

The term 'rank-and-file' provides a broad categorisation of the layers of union member that exist below the level of FTOs. It would be wrong to exaggerate the homogeneity of this grouping given that the membership of unions is fractured along a number of lines based on industry, occupation, skill, gender and ethnicity. Moreover, rank-and-file members differ in commitment to trade unionism (Hyman, 1989a: 247; 1984: 233; see also Goldstein, 1952; Moran, 1974). We cannot assume a complete identity of interest between the minority of *militant activists* and the mass of members (Gore, 1982: 69). For example, the revolutionary syndicalists of the early twentieth century regarded themselves as the voice of the rank-and-file, in so far as their arguments chimed with the ill-articulated discontents of the mass of workers, and they attempted to constitute an alternative leadership to that of full-time union officialdom (Holton, 1976; Darlington, 2008a; 2008b). However, they only gained the allegiance of a minority of the working class movement, and they were not the only influential political forces.

We should also recognise that conflict within trade unions over policy and strategy can give rise to factional struggles that *cut across* hierarchical levels. This can bring together a broad layer of FTOs, regional and local officials, union branch officers, stewards, activists and members, into left-wing caucuses. Within such caucuses the simple dividing line between 'officials' and 'rank-and-file' can be blurred (Cronin, 1989: 82; Price, 1989: 69-70; Zeitlin, 1989b: 95). Indeed one of the key aspects of recent developments in public sector trade unionism has been the way strikes have been orchestrated by rank-and-file activists and lay national executive committee members working with full-time union officials. In the case of PCS there is some

evidence that one of the reasons for the union's recent organising and recruitment success has been the establishment of a left-leaning 'political congruence' between a critical mass of activists at workplace level and the national union leadership, involving a shared frame of reference and willingness to mobilise against the employers (Upchurch *et al*, 2008). Notwithstanding such differentiation, it is the exploitative social relations at the heart of capitalist society to which the mass of rank-and-file union members are subject that provides the material basis for collective workers' struggles which distinguish them from FTOs. It is this which makes the idea of the 'rank-and-file' a term not devoid of analytical use even if it encompasses an internally differentiated layer of members (Bramble, 1993: 17-19).

Workplace Union Reps' Organisation

In Britain since the late nineteenth century, shop stewards' and other forms of lay workplace union representation have provided a classic example of rank-and-file organisation. In the 1960s the willingness of stewards to mobilise their members bred a degree of self-reliance and self-assertiveness which was termed the 'challenge from below' (Flanders, 1970). It was this which provided the springboard for the generalised industrial and political militancy that followed during the early 1970s. In the process, the Communist Party's self-proclaimed 'official unofficial' body the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions played a central role in linking together a layer of militant stewards across different unions, maintaining pressure on union officials and stimulating strike action (McIlroy and Campbell, 1999; Darlington and Lyddon, 2001). During an earlier period of mass industrial struggle after the First World War it became possible for a network of shop stewards to transform fragmented forms of *organisation* in different workplaces into a national rank-and-file *movement*. J.T. Murphy and other stewards' leaders began to believe this rank-and-file movement could supersede the trade unions to challenge the economic and political power of the capitalist class as a whole, effectively becoming organs of workers' power or embryonic workers' councils - as had occurred in Bolshevik Russia (Murphy, 1941; Pribicevic, 1959; Hinton, 1973; Darlington, 1998).

However, if rank-and-file organisations have the potential to become organs of workers' power, there is nothing inevitable about this happening. In Britain the strength and militancy of shop stewards' organisation has varied depending on the balance between labour and capital. In the wake of the defeats in the 1980s and 1990s, stewards' organisation became a faint echo of the early 1970s with the 'challenge from below' at its lowest ebb since the early 1930s. Moreover as Hyman, drawing on the work of other commentators (Turner, Clack and Roberts, 1967; McCarthy, 1967; McCarthy and Parker, 1968; Royal Commission, 1968; Cliff and Barker, 1966; Cliff, 1970; Beynon, 1973; Lane 1974), pointed out: 'workplace trade unionism has always displayed contradictory tendencies, involving certain parallels with the role of full-time officialdom' (1980: 74). This is because steward's dependence on 'management's goodwill' to preserve stable workplace union organisation, together with the quest for incremental concessions, can draw them into an 'orderly' bargaining relationship in which they sometimes utilise a restraining and disciplinary role over their members (1975a: 168). Thus although often stewards

express rank-and-file members' grievances through collective action, they can also sometimes be an important moderating influence.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a qualitative accentuation of the trend towards bureaucratisation and a partial incorporation of hitherto independent and disruptive steward organisations (Lyddon, 1977; Terry, 1978; 1983; Cliff, 1979; Hyman, 1979a; 1979b; 1980; Beecham, 1984; Beynon, 1984). According to Hyman (1979b: 42) the result was that: 'shop stewards too [became] "managers of discontent": sustaining job control within the boundaries of negotiation with management authority and capitalist priorities, rather than (apart from the most exceptional circumstances) pursuing frontal opposition'. Arguably such an interpretation overstated the tendencies towards hierarchy, centralisation and bureaucracy that operated within stewards' organisations *as a whole* at the time and downplayed some of the important counter-tendencies (Darlington, 1994: 26-39).

Nonetheless the stewards' bureaucratisation analysis, to which Hyman made a major contribution, *was* undoubtedly valid and has remained of enduring relevance. Restructuring and job losses in areas once bastions of workplace union strength, an unrelenting neo-liberal offensive under successive governments, and a series of workers' defeats, all combined to inflict a toll on stewards' organisation, the legacy of which has become evident in the decline in the total numbers of stewards/reps in the UK from some 300,000 in 1980 to approximately half that figure today (Charlwood and Forth, 2008; WERS, 2004; Nowak, 2009; BERR, 2009). With about 13 per cent of union reps on full-time release from work (WERS 2004), some senior stewards (particularly those representing large union branches) have continued to be remote from their members. Even though stewards generally have often displayed an extraordinary level of commitment in holding together workplace union organisation for many years, some of them (often feeling beleaguered and defensive in relation to employers) have also displayed similar features to that of FTOs in terms of their disinclination towards militant resistance and strike activity (Danford *et al*, 2003; Cohen, 2006; Darlington, 2010) and in some contexts have even been a barrier to union organising initiatives (Waddington and Kerr, 2009). This process has been reinforced by the decline in workers' struggles, lack of rank-and-file confidence vis-à-vis management, decline in the number of on-site stewards (with some reps effectively covering a number of different geographical work locations), increase in the ratio of members to stewards, longer average tenure of office than previously, and an ageing of union representatives.

Yet stewards still remain the backbone of the trade union movement in dealing with workers' grievances and they retain the latent ability to provide a significant counterweight to union officialdom. Moreover despite their sometimes full-time status inside the workplace, stewards generally remain *qualitatively different* from FTOs in their potential responsiveness to rank-and-file pressure. They are subject to election/re-election and directly responsive to a 'constituency' whose day-to-day problems they share. Most stewards do not move away geographically and organisationally to carry out their representational duties. Instead they spend most of their time working alongside those whom they represent. They can thus be

subordinated to the rank-and-file in a more direct fashion than any FTO however left-wing (and whether elected or appointed) could ever be. While the bureaucratisation of workplace unionism *has* to some extent potentially blurred the distinction between the 'union bureaucracy' and the 'rank-and-file', we cannot claim that it has removed the *underlying fundamental cleavage of interests* within trade unionism.

The Relationship between the Rank-and-File and the Trade Union Bureaucracy

The relationship between shop stewards and FTOs has been characterised as a tension between *independence* and *dependence* (Boraston *et al*, 1975; Hyman and Fryer, 1975; Darlington, 1994). The relationship is clearly not a fixed phenomenon, but depends on the ebbs and flows of the class struggle. Thus during the early 1970s the high level of workers' struggle encouraged the development of strong stewards' organisations that were combative in their relationship to employers and the government, which in turn encouraged stewards to act independently of the officials and sometimes in open defiance. By contrast in the 30-year period since there has been a weakening of rank-and-file organisation, with stewards becoming more dependent on officials in the absence of a strong grassroots organisation (Cliff, 1979; Darlington, 2002; Cohen, 2006). Most strikes, even those of a national character, have been limited and short-lived (usually only one or two-days of action) and officials have remained firmly in control.

Nonetheless there have been some important exceptions such as the unlawful strike activity that flared up in 2009 by thousands of construction workers at sites across the country, based on a combative shop stewards' activist network able to take the initiative semi-independently of union officials. Likewise there have been a number of disputes in other areas of employment over recent years that have underlined the centrality of workplace organisation to the process of collective mobilisation, for example by rail, tube, postal, local government and civil service workers (Darlington, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2010; Kimber, 2009; Smith, 2002). At the very least the historical record suggests there is no justification for assuming that the present weaknesses of shop stewards' organisation will be either permanent or irreversible. Not only could the balance of class forces be reversed at some stage in the future but even the most bureaucratised stewards' organisation could be forced into leading action or be bypassed by an influx of a new generation of activists. In the process the balance struck between the contradictory tendencies we note within stewards' relationship to FTOs could be radically altered.

Conclusion

Richard Hyman made an enduring contribution to the analysis of the dynamics of trade unionism and the problem of bureaucracy. But arguably the wider set of implications he drew from the accentuated pressures towards the bureaucratisation of workplace union organisation that were identified 'bent the stick' too far in the opposite direction. In attempting to defend and refine the classical revolutionary

Marxist analytical framework, we have argued that the dichotomy within trade unions between the 'rank-and-file' and the 'union bureaucracy' is indeed a meaningful generalisation of a real contradiction. Unless the *fundamental* and *primary* dynamic of such relations are at the centre of analysis the significance of the secondary and more complicated sub-features can easily be misunderstood. Of course, it is true that theoretical and analytical concepts 'should reflect, organise and inform empirical evidence, rather than compress it into neatly labelled boxes at the cost of distortion' (Daniels and McIlroy, 2009: 3-5). But so long as we draw out and specify variation and nuance and remain alert to reductionism, then the most useful way of understanding intra-union relations is through the rank-and-file/bureaucracy lens. Moreover it is through such an overall analytical framework that the role of a so-called '"semi-bureaucracy' of lay activists with quasi-official functions that operate between the mass of union members and national officialdom' (Hyman, 1980: 73) can best be understood.

In conclusion Hyman's refutation of the rank-and-file/bureaucracy division effectively liquidates the whole concept of bureaucratisation so as to render it virtually meaningless. Not only does it obscure the real conflicts of interest inside the unions, it also effectively lets FTOs completely 'off the hook' and downplays the significance of rank-and-file struggle and independence. Yet arguably one of the most important obstacles to the emergence and/or development of workers' struggle over the last 30 years – and particularly in response to the current global economic recession and budget deficit cutbacks - has been the unwillingness of union leaders to mount an effective fight back, combined with rank-and-file workers' lack of confidence to act independently.

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