

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

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“RANK AND FILISM” IN BRITISH LABOUR HISTORY: A CRITIQUE*

I

Over the past twenty-five years, the writing of labour history in Britain, as in many other countries, has seen a marked shift away from the institutional focus which had predominated in earlier studies. As the influence of “social history” made itself felt, historians turned their gaze away from trade unions and political parties in search of the authentic experience of the ordinary worker, located above all in the workplace and the community. This shift in focus went hand in hand with the emergence of a more critical perspective on the institutions themselves which questioned their representative character and their relation to the true interests and everyday concerns of their members.¹

This critical perspective on the institutions of the labour movement was fueled by the New Left’s disenchantment during the late 1960s and early 1970s with the achievements of the trade unions – which were often seen as integrated into the capitalist order – and with the policies of Harold Wilson’s Labour governments. At the same time, this perspective also drew its

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¹ For a fuller discussion of British developments, see Zeitlin, “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations”; and for discussion of comparable shifts in American and German historiography, respectively, see David Brody, “The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of the American Working Class”, *Labor History* 20 (Winter 1979), pp. 111-26; and Richard J. Evans, “The Sociological Interpretation of German Labour History”, in *idem* (ed.), *The German Working Class, 1888-1933* (London, 1982), pp. 15-53.

inspiration from the contemporary ferment within the unions themselves, expressed in the growing numbers of shop stewards and unofficial strikes, the emergence of new and often left-wing leaders, and ultimately in the dramatic and highly politicized industrial disputes of the early 1970s.²

In this latter respect, the exponents of what can be termed "rank and filism" shared a surprising amount of common ground with the more orthodox theorists of industrial relations associated with the "Oxford School" against whose ideas they were also reacting. Where the authors of the Donovan Report saw the growth of the so-called "informal" system of industrial relations during the 1960s as a source of normative disorder or *anomie* which needed to be remedied by realigning the procedural rules of the bargaining system with the changing realities of industry, the "rank and filists" celebrated shop steward organization, informal bargaining and unofficial strikes as a basic challenge to the established order of the factory. In this sense, the industrial relations pluralists and their radical critics were substantially agreed in their diagnosis of contemporary developments, to which, however, they attached opposed political valuations. Both sides concurred that official trade union organization and formal collective bargaining procedures tended to institutionalize conflict and contain industrial disorder, while locating the principal threat to industrial peace outside these institutions in "unofficial" action and "informal" bargaining which did not respect the "rules of the game". For the pluralists, of course, these rules were the legitimate product of joint regulation between management and unions, while for their radical critics they were a hollow sham which left managerial prerogatives and the capitalist ownership of industry substantially intact.³

With these intellectual and political preoccupations, historians of a "rank-and-filist" bent were naturally attracted to the more turbulent periods of British labour history, those which appeared most closely to resemble their own times. Hence, particular attention was directed to the decade 1910-20, during which strikes rose to unprecedented levels, indus-

² See, for example, Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn (eds), *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus* (Harmondsworth, 1967).

³ For representative statements of the pluralist position, see Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, 1965-68 [Chairman: Lord Donovan], *Report* (Cmnd. 3623), 1968; and Alan Flanders, *Management and Unions: The Theory and Reform of Industrial Relations* (Oxford, 1970). For the radical critique, see Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London, 1975); and "Pluralism, Procedural Consensus and Collective Bargaining", *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 16, 1 (1978), pp. 16-40. For a fuller analysis of the assumptions underlying the debate, see my "Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: A Contradictory Relationship", in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 1-45; and "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations".

trial relations became highly politicized and trade unions were rent by dramatic internal conflicts. James Hinton's study of the wartime shop stewards' movement, Bob Holton's treatment of prewar syndicalism and Joseph White's account of the Lancashire textile industry during the 1911-14 labour unrest are among the leading examples of this line of research.⁴ Intensive scrutiny has also been devoted to the second half of the nineteenth century, the formative period in the development of trade unions and the British system of industrial relations more broadly: and here Keith Burgess's *The Origins of British Industrial Relations* and Richard Price's study of the building industry are the principal attempts to apply "rank-and-filist" ideas.⁵ In a few cases, historians have tried to take a longer view, building explicit links between the industrial unrest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that of the 1960s and 70s, as in James Cronin's study of long-term strike patterns, Richard Price's interpretative surveys, and the work of Richard Hyman, distinguished both as a labour historian and an industrial sociologist.⁶

In approaching the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the concerns of the 1960s and 70s, "rank-and-filist" historians naturally focused their attention on oppositional and often minoritarian currents within the labour movement, whether syndicalists, guild socialists or shop stewards influenced by Bolshevik ideas, and often took up their vocabulary and critique of official trade union structures. One has only to think of the

⁴ James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973); Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900-1914* (London, 1976); and Joseph L. White, *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy: The Lancashire Textile Workers, 1910-1914*; see also James Cronin, "Coping with Labour, 1918-26", in *idem* and Jonathan Schmeer (eds), *Social Conflict and the Political Order in Modern Britain* (London, 1982), pp. 113-45.

⁵ Keith Burgess, *The Origins of British Industrial Relations: The Nineteenth Century Experience* (London, 1975); *The Challenge of Labour, 1850-1930* (London, 1980); Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control and the Rise of Labour in Building, 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 1980); and "Structures of Subordination in Nineteenth-Century British Industry", in Pat Thane *et al.*, (eds), *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 119-42.

⁶ James Cronin, *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London, 1979); "Strikes, 1870-1914", in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1875-1914* (Brighton, 1982), pp. 74-98; *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-79* (London, 1984); Richard Price, *Labour in British Society: An Interpretative Survey* (London, 1986); "Rethinking Labour History: The Importance of Work", in Cronin and Schmeer, *Social Conflict*, pp. 179-214; "The Labour Process and Labour History", *Social History* VIII (1983), pp. 57-75; Richard Hyman, *The Workers' Union* (Oxford, 1971); *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London, 1971); "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory", *Capital and Class* no 8 (1979), pp. 54-67; and "Rank and File Movements and Workplace Organization, 1914-39", in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, vol. 2: 1914-39* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 129-58; see also James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974* (Brighton, 1983).

importance texts such as *The Miners' Next Step* or the writings of J.T. Murphy have assumed in the development of the historiography.⁷ As in the 1960s, this oppositional discourse within trade unions was mirrored by the distressed reactions of politicians, civil servants and liberal intellectuals to the overthrow of established collective bargaining procedures and the repudiation of agreements reached with trade union leaders, given added resonance after 1917 by the spectre of the Russian Revolution. As a result, the historiography of the period has become entangled in complex ways with the competing ideological discourses of revolutionaries and government about the labour movement; untangling these various strands and situating them in relation to contemporary debates within trade unions themselves would be a demanding but fascinating task, which I cannot embark on here.⁸ Before going on to examine the substantive assumptions of "rank-and-filist" historiography, however, I want simply to caution against accepting at face value the many contemporary quotations which are so often adduced in evidence of these ideas.

II

As the name indicates, the distinguishing feature of a "rank-and-filist" interpretation of labour history is its insistence on the fundamental division within trade unions between the interests and activities of the "bureaucracy", "leadership" or "officialdom" on the one hand, and those of the "rank and file", "membership" or "opposition" on the other. In the earlier versions of this perspective, which drew heavily on the ideas of Robert Michels and on the more ambivalent formulations of the Webbs, the sources of oligarchy in trade unions were seen as primarily sociological and organizational in character. In this view, the emergence of national trade unions called into being a new stratum of officials who were socially distinct from the manual workers they represented, at the same time as it gave rise to an institutional interest in financial stability and organizational continuity distinct from and often opposed to the day-to-day concerns of the

⁷ *The Miners' Next Step: Being a Suggested Scheme for the Reorganisation of the Federation, Issued by the Unofficial Reform Committee* (Reprints in Labour History no 4, London, 1973; 1st ed. 1912); J.T. Murphy, *The Workers' Committee: An Outline of its Principles and Structure* (Reprints in Labour History no 1, London, 1972; 1st ed. 1917); and *Preparing for Power* (reprinted, London, 1972; 1st ed. 1934).

⁸ See, for example, the quotations from contemporary sources in Cronin, "Coping with Labour, 1918-26"; and Keith Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911* (London, 1979), chs 2-6. For a pioneering discussion of the changing meanings of the term "rank and file" from "a loose military analogy" implying "no more than a functional division between leaders and led" to "an *opposition* of interests, functions or attitudes", see Hyman, "Rank and File Movements, 1914-39", especially pp. 129-30.

membership. Frank Galton's portrait of the career of a labour leader in the Webb's *History of Trade Unionism* illustrates the contemporary perception of the first of these processes. The growth of collective bargaining, with its premium on expert knowledge and negotiating skills, tended to remove the key activities of the union from the effective scrutiny and control of the members; while the officials, who came to identify their personal interests and prerogatives with those of the union, were generally able to deploy their privileged access to information and organizational resources to insulate themselves from any potential challenge from below.⁹ The Webbs, it should be noted, believed that these oligarchical tendencies could be contained by prudent constitutional measures, such as the arrangements in the coal and cotton unions which combined a full-time executive with an elected representative assembly; and Galton's biography of a labour leader appropriately concludes with the now out-of-touch official's removal by his disgruntled constituents.¹⁰

The more recent literature, while incorporating many of these older arguments, focuses primarily on the structural sources of the divergence between union leaders and their members, which it locates in the process of collective bargaining, and in the inherently contradictory position of trade unions in a capitalist society more broadly. In order to survive for any length of time, trade unions must bargain with employers over the wages and conditions of their members; and to sustain this role, they must become acceptable at least in some measure to their bargaining partners. As a result, trade unions are eventually forced to acquiesce in the ground rules of a capitalist economy in the form of market criteria for wage settlements and submission to managerial authority in the workplace. These compromises inevitably involve the unions in moderating the demands of their members and deflecting them from struggles for control at work onto an economic terrain which can be made acceptable to employers. The concern of trade union leaders for upholding collective agreements, particularly where these incorporate formal procedures for avoiding disputes such as conciliation and arbitration, ultimately leads them to adopt an active role in sustaining managerial discipline in the factory. In the more extreme versions of these ideas, such as those put forward by Richard Price, these unintended consequences of trade unionism and collective bargaining become their cause, and employers' need for formal mechanisms to secure their control of the

⁹ Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York, 1962; 1st German ed. 1911); Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London, 1920; 1st ed. 1897); *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920* (London, 1920; 1st ed. 1894), pp. 444-64. For more recent versions of this approach, see V.L. Allen, *Power in Trade Unions* (London, 1957) on Britain; and C. Wright Mills, *New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (New York, 1971; 1st ed. 1948) on the U.S.

¹⁰ Webbs, *Industrial Democracy*, pp. 38-71; and *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 469-71.

labour process against pervasive customary resistance is assigned the central explanatory role in their emergence.¹¹

For the “rank and filists”, unlike the pessimistic exponents of the “iron law of oligarchy”, the story does not end there. Ordinary workers, unlike trade union officials, have no vested interest in the capitalist order, and their everyday exploitation in the workplace periodically leads them to rebel against managerial authority and against the trade union structures and collective bargaining procedures which have become fetters on their self-activity.¹² Under propitious circumstances, as during and immediately after the First World War, such insurgent movements can come to challenge not only the structure of factory authority, but also the stability of the state itself.¹³

Within this overall framework, there remain differences of interpretation concerning the potential achievements of alternative forms of worker organization and their relation to politics, differences which reflect older controversies within the labour movement. Some writers appear to see the differences between insurgents and incumbents primarily in terms of their degree of militancy, taking up contemporary polemics against devices such as the sliding scale or conciliation and arbitration, together with contemporary proposals for the reform of trade union structures such as amalgamation and industrial unionism.¹⁴ In a more extreme vein, Richard Price

¹¹ For the theoretical basis of this view, see Tom Clarke and Laurie Clements (eds), *Trade Unions under Capitalism* (London, 1977); Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unions; Industrial Relations*, pp. 67-9, 87-92, 142-5; and “Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism”, especially pp. 54-5: “those continuously engaged in a representative capacity perform a crucial mediating role in sustaining tendencies towards an accommodative and subaltern relationship with external agencies (employers and the state) in opposition to which trade unions were originally formed [. . .]. Because of their *ongoing* relationship with external parties, officials normally become committed to preserving a stable bargaining relationship and to the ‘rules of the game’ which this presupposes.” For historical applications, see *inter alia*, Burgess, *Origins of British Industrial Relations*, pp. vi-xi and 309-10; and Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, pp. 104-235, and especially p. 8, where he observes that “the conflict relationship between official unionism and the rank and file” evident from the 1890s “was a *structural* not a behavioural tension, inherent to the negotiated compromise between labour and society that emanated from the acceptance of organised labour’s role as an agent with bargaining rights over industrial conditions”.

¹² See, for example, Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 199: “The process of institutionalisation is itself beset by contradictions [. . .]. It does indeed achieve a *provisional* containment of disorder; but where workers grievances and discontents are not resolved, they give rise eventually to new forms of conflict [. . .]”; cf. Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, p. 17.

¹³ See Hinton, *First Shop Stewards’ Movement; Labour and Socialism*, pp. 96-118; Cronin, “Coping with Labour, 1918-26”; Burgess, *Challenge of Labour*, pp. 153-94; and from a different perspective, Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society*.

¹⁴ Burgess, *Origins of British Industrial Relations*; V.L. Allen, “The Origins of Industrial

celebrates what he calls “autonomous regulation”, the tradition of unilateral control exercised by workers, unorganized as well as organized, at the point of production; and though Price sees such practices as an implicit challenge to the wider capitalist social order, he also appears to believe that these spontaneous and informal struggles for control are more effective than official trade union organization in achieving their ends within the confines of capitalist society itself.¹⁵ More Leninist writers, on the other hand, such as James Hinton, believe that the fruits of workplace struggles must ultimately be gathered at the political level, and would probably agree with Richard Hyman’s observation that, “No doubt *some* form of accommodation with external forces [i.e. employers and the state] is inevitable (at least outside a revolutionary situation).”¹⁶

But whatever their disagreements on the precise relations between workplace militancy and politics, most proponents of a “rank-and-file” approach implicitly subscribe to two underlying but highly problematic assumptions. The first is that trade unions as organizations have an inherent interest in accommodation with capitalism while their members do not. Thus following Gramsci, it is often argued that trade unions are by definition institutions of the working class within the framework of capitalist society. As he put it in a famous article in *L’ordine nuovo*: “Trade unionism is evidently nothing but a reflection of capitalist society, not a potential means of transcending capitalist society. It organizes workers not as producers, but as wage earners, that is as creations of the capitalist system of private property, as sellers of their labour power.”¹⁷ Workers, by contrast, are thought to have an objective interest in the supersession of capitalist relations of production, an interest rooted in the exploitation and subordination inherent in the experience of wage labour, whatever their subjective consciousness.¹⁸ While few historians would put the point so baldly, without the imputation to workers of such objective anti-capitalist in-

Conciliation and Arbitration”, *International Review of Social History* IX (1964), pp. 237-54; and White, *Limits of Trade Union Militancy*.

¹⁵ Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*; “Rethinking Labour History”; “The Labour Process and Labour History”; and *Labour in British Society*.

¹⁶ Hyman, “Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism”, p. 55; Hinton, *First Shop Stewards’ Movement*; and *Labour and Socialism*.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unions*, pp. 43-44. For a fuller discussion of Gramsci’s views, see Martin Clark, *Antonio Gramsci and the Revolution that Failed* (New Haven, 1977); and John M. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford, CA, 1967).

¹⁸ Thus for Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, p. 8: the “effort to exert a control over the productive process is essentially a product of the employer-worker relationship; it is implicit in the subordination in which workers are placed [. . .]”; while for Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 23: “between these two classes there exists a radical conflict of interests, which underlies everything that occurs in industrial relations”.

terests, it is hard to see on what basis one might disregard the myriad empirical concerns which bind workers to their employers in a relationship of conflictual cooperation; and without a similar conception of the essential interests of trade unions, their internal conflicts would become the product of contingent empirical circumstances rather than an expression of deeper structural contradictions.

A second assumption which forms an essential complement of the first concerns the intrinsic power of subordinate classes. To lend plausibility to a "rank-and-filist" analysis, workers must be endowed with a vast reservoir of latent power which is contained by the institutions which represent them. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to argue that the compromises negotiated by trade union officials are intrinsically inadequate, or to claim that more militant strategies would yield greater payoffs under all circumstances. In this latter sense, "rank and filism" joins hands with the many explanations, sociological and historical, which have been proposed to account for the proletariat's failure to fulfil its ascribed revolutionary potential.¹⁹

III

Many of the conceptual and empirical difficulties which beset "rank-and-filist" interpretations of British labour history are now well known; indeed, most are acknowledged in some form by the more sophisticated writers within this tradition itself. The remainder of this article examines the relationship between trade unions and job control in Britain since the late nineteenth century as a means of assessing the explanatory power of the "rank-and-filist" paradigm; where possible, the argument will be illustrated with examples drawn from my own research on the engineering industry, as well as from recent work on other sectors such as shipbuilding, cotton textiles and iron and steel.

The first major problem is one of definition. Who precisely are the "bureaucracy" and the "rank and file"? Can we draw any clear line of demarcation between them? Does "officialdom" end with national trade union officers, or does it reach down to the local level as well? Can lay union representatives working at their trades, those "annually elected branch officials and shop stewards" whom the Webbs termed the "non-commissioned officers of the Movement"²⁰ be regarded as members of the rank and file? And in a period when trade union membership remained a minority

¹⁹ For insightful discussions of these debates, see Charles F. Sabel, *Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry* (Cambridge, 1982); and Alastair Reid, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Economic History Society pamphlet, forthcoming).

²⁰ Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 577.

phenomenon, how far can trade unionists themselves be identified with the working class more broadly?

Some of the ramifications of these questions can be grasped by a glance at the internal politics of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and its successor, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU).²¹ From its foundation in 1851 to the 1890s, the ASE, despite its “new model” heritage, remained a loosely organized body, whose centralized benefit system was administered by a part-time Executive Council in London, while trade policy was set more or less autonomously by the branches and district committees. The movement towards greater centralisation, from which sprang a full-time executive and a set of paid professional organizers, was largely the product of an opposition campaign led by Tom Mann and other socialists. After the union’s resounding defeat in the engineering lockout of 1897-98, George Barnes, the socialist General Secretary, sought to strengthen the authority of the executive in order to work within the Terms of Settlement imposed by the employers, which entailed the acceptance of managerial prerogatives and a new disputes procedure. The principal opposition to these policies came from the union’s own local officials, both from the district committees which resisted any curbs on local strike action, and from the organising district delegates, full-time national officials elected on a regional basis who tended to side with the constituencies to which they were ultimately accountable. The *coup de grace* to Barnes’ policies was administered by a series of elected union bodies, the Delegate Meeting and the Final Appeals Court, which progressively eliminated the executive’s power to withhold dispute benefit from unauthorized strikers. Barnes himself was driven to resign in 1908 and by 1913 his successors had been replaced by a new Executive Council pledged to the defence of craft regulation.²²

²¹ The AEU was formed in 1920 as an amalgamation of the ASE and three smaller craft societies; it became the Amalgamated Engineering Federation (AEF) in 1967 and the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) in 1970 as a result of mergers with the Foundrymen and the Draughtsmen and Allied Technicians’ Association respectively; with the departure of its Technical and Supervisory Section (TASS) in 1986, it has reverted to its original title.

²² On the internal politics of the ASE, see James B. Jefferys, *The Story of the Engineers, 1800-1945* (London, 1946) pp. 68-113, 136-91; B.C.M. Weekes, “The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, 1880-1914: A Study of Trade Union Government, Politics and Industrial Policy” (Ph.D., University of Warwick, 1970); Richard Croucher, “The ASE and Local Autonomy, 1898-1914” (M.A., University of Warwick, 1971); Hinton, *Shop Stewards*, pp. 76-84; Jonathan Zeitlin, “Engineers and Compositors: A Comparison”, in Royden Harrison and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Divisions of Labour: Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Brighton/Champaign, IL, 1985), pp. 231-5; and “Craft Regulation and the Division of Labour: Engineers and Compositors in Britain, 1890-1914” (Ph.D., Warwick, 1981), pp. 77-81, 181-7, 352-429. A fuller treatment of these issues will appear in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Adversarial Bargaining: Industrial Relations in British Engineering, 1880-1939*.

This strong support of the local machinery for craft militancy in defiance of agreements reached by the ASE's national executive continued throughout the First World War. As Hinton himself tacitly acknowledges, only on Clydeside did any major cleavage appear between shop stewards and district officials, who worked together harmoniously in all the other major engineering centres. Even on the Clyde, moreover, recent research shows that resistance to the Munitions of War Act in 1915-16 was led by local trade union officials, while by 1919, the Glasgow district committee of the ASE had assumed the leadership of the famous unofficial strike for the forty-hour week.²³ The ASE's national executive itself remained a staunch defender of craft prerogatives in successive negotiations over wartime manpower policy, and were not above using veiled threats of unofficial action to put pressure on the government at crucial moments such as April-May 1917 and January-March 1918.²⁴ Local activists, for their part, were well aware of the complementary relationship between unofficial strikes and official bargaining power: as the leaders of the great strike wave of May 1917 told the Minister of Munitions, "We are desirous, first and foremost, of strengthening the hands of our executive. We know and understand that our executive have tried to do what they could, but [. . .] you have check-mated them and held them off. So we have been forced to be the driving force behind our executive, in order that the point of view of the men who are operating under the conditions that are operating at the present time should be made known."²⁵

²³ For this reading of Hinton, *First Shop Stewards' Movement* and the wartime industrial unrest on the Clyde, see Alastair Reid, "Dilution, Trade Unionism and the State in Britain during the First World War", in Tolliday and Zeitlin, *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State*, pp. 46-74; Joseph Melling, *Rent Strikes: People's Struggles for Housing in West Scotland, 1890-1916* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 50-58; Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 1983); and Gerry R. Rubin, *War, Law and Labour: The Munitions Acts, State Regulation and the Unions, 1915-21* (Oxford, 1987).

²⁴ The active role of the ASE executive in defending the position of skilled workers during the war is extensively documented in G.D.H. Cole, *Trade Unionism and Munitions* (Oxford, 1923); the official *History of the Ministry of Munitions* (London, 1920-22), especially vols IV and VI; and, despite the author's intentions, in C.J. Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the British Labour Movement* (Brighton, 1976).

²⁵ Public Record Office, London [hereafter PRO], MUN 5/20/221.1/29, "Minutes of the Proceedings of a Conference with the Executive Council of the ASE and a Deputation from the Walworth Conference, 19 May 1917", pp. 11-12, quoted in *History of the Ministry of Munitions*, vol. VI, pt. I, pp. 116-117. Cf. PRO LAB 2/254/13, E.S.T. Chorley, "Memorandum on the Strike of Engineers in May 1917 – Commentary and Complement to the History Compiled by the Ministry of Munitions Intelligence and Records Section, 9 November 1917, pp. 1-2; "It is now fairly clear that however much the executives of the unions objected to the methods pursued by the strikers their sympathies were entirely with the objects of the strike. The strike was unofficial, because to all intents no strike can be official [. . .]. In most cases a strike will take place in two sections,

The formation of the AEU in 1920 recast but did not fundamentally transform these complex and ambivalent relationships between national, local and workplace organization. While the constitutional changes associated with wider amalgamation (long advocated by left-wing activists in the ASE) strengthened the authority of the Executive, the continuing powers of elected bodies of lay representatives to reverse its decisions acted as a bulwark of district autonomy and political dissent through the 1920s and 30s, paving the way for the highly-developed system of factional competition which has dominated the union's internal politics since the Second World War. The AEU constitution also provided a recognized place for shop stewards within the official union structure along lines agreed with the employers in 1919, but mass unemployment and the district committees' attachment to standard time rates severely restricted their bargaining role until the rearmament boom of the late 1930s. After a period of effective collaboration during the Second World War, relations between shop stewards and national officials in engineering moved through various shades of cooperation and conflict as political control of the union shifted from right to left in the late 1960s and back again in the late 1970s. But shop stewards, too, could find themselves in conflict with their members on questions of union policy, as can be seen from the 1979-80 dispute at British Leyland when a majority of the workforce joined hands with the national executive in supporting the management's recovery plan against the opposition of the Shop Stewards' Combine Committee.²⁶

firstly the negotiations [. . .] by the trade union executives; secondly if the men are dissatisfied with the result, they take the matter into their own hands and strike."

²⁶ On the internal politics of the AEU and the changing relationships between national, district and workplace organisation, see Hyman, "Rank and File Movements, 1914-39"; Jefferys, *Story of the Engineers, 1800-1945*, pp. 191-4, 217-65; Steven Tolliday, "Management and Labour in Britain, 1896-1939", in *idem* and Jonathan Zeitlin, (eds), *The Automobile Industry and Its Workers: Between Fordism and Flexibility* (Cambridge/New York, 1987), pp. 29-56; "Government, Employers and Shop Floor Organization in the British Motor Industry, 1939-69", in Tolliday and Zeitlin, *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State*, pp. 108-47; Alan McKinlay, "Employers and Skilled Workers in the Interwar Depression: Clydeside Engineering and Shipbuilding, 1918-39", (Ph.D., Oxford, 1986), pp. 82-219; Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War, 1939-45* (London, 1982); David Edelstein and Malcolm Warner, *Comparative Union Democracy: Organization and Opposition in British and American Unions* (2nd ed., New Brunswick, 1979), pp. 263-318; Roger Undy, "The Electoral Influence of the Opposition Party in the AUEW Engineering Section, 1960-75", *British Journal of Industrial Relations* XVII (1979), pp. 19-33; and Larry James, *Power in a Trade Union: The Role of the District Committee in the AUEW* (Cambridge, 1984). For a detailed account of industrial relations at British Leyland in the late 1970s and early 80s, see Paul Willman and Graham Winch, *Innovation and Management Control: Labour Relations at BL Cars* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 65-148.

The engineering union has always ranked among the most democratic in Britain, and it is hardly surprising that its internal cleavages belie any simple division between officials and the rank and file. But similar problems in other sectors have led Van Gore to observe in a recent survey of "rank-and-file dissent" that the term applied as much to "a minority of activists distinct from the official labour leaders" as to the "mass of ordinary workers". "The relationship between the two groups was problematic", he continues; "an identity cannot be assumed; at best it existed as a partial or potential phenomenon which had to be positively struggled for and sustained, since in reality the rank and file (in the second sense) consisted of *several* ranks and files, each subject to internal divisions."²⁷ A.J. Muste, an American labour radical writing in the 1920s, put the same point more sharply: "The opposition, it is of the utmost importance to bear in mind, is not the rank and file, but a rival group of leaders."²⁸ Much of the contemporary rhetoric of rank-and-file opposition to bureaucracy, on which historians have drawn so heavily must be interpreted in this light as the product of an ongoing struggle for power between rival factions of would-be leaders, each seeking to present themselves as the authentic spokesmen for the interests of their members.²⁹

More recently, Richard Hyman, reflecting on tendencies towards centralization and formalization within shop steward organizations during the 1970s, has taken a further step towards dissolving these categories altogether. He notes that, "it is not too fanciful to speak of the 'bureaucratization of the rank and file'" and goes on to argue that "the problem of 'bureaucracy' denotes not so much a distinct stratum of personnel as a relationship which permeates the whole practice of trade unionism. 'Bureaucracy' is in large measure a question of the differential distribution of expertise and activism: of the *dependence* of the mass of union membership on the initiative and strategic experience of a relatively small cadre of leadership – both official and unofficial."³⁰ At this point, however, the concept has been unmoored from any specific sociological or institutional location, and has become transformed into an unavoidable tension within any form of ongoing collective activity.

²⁷ Van Gore, "Rank-and-file dissent", in Wrigley, *History of British Industrial Relations, 1875-1914*, p. 69.

²⁸ A.J. Muste, "Factional Fights in Trade Unions", in J.B.S. Hardman (ed.), *American Labour Dynamics in the Light of Postwar Developments* (New York, 1928), p. 343.

²⁹ Thus, as Hyman observes, the rhetoric of "rank-and-file" opposition to trade union officialdom between the wars was closely associated with the struggles of the Communist Party and other leftwing groups to constitute themselves as "a putative alternative leadership"; and on his own account, the formally organized "Rank and File Movements" of the period "increasingly represented artificial constructs". See Hyman, "Rank and File Movements, 1914-39", pp. 146, 154.

³⁰ Hyman, "Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism", pp. 59-61.

IV

But even were it possible to draw a clear line of demarcation between trade union officials and the rank and file, would it be historically accurate to identify the former with moderation and economism and the latter with militancy and the struggle for control? There are a number of reasons to doubt this equation. The first is the problem of “rank-and-file” passivity and conservatism: for every case where workers have rejected officially negotiated settlements as inadequate, there is another where they have failed to support their leaders’ call to militant action, as in the dispute at British Leyland discussed above. In Lancashire textiles before 1914, to cite an example from an earlier period, textile workers occasionally formed “rank-and-file committees”, which according to Turner opposed “not the *caution* of union leaders, but the militancy of their industrial policy”, and most textile workers resisted their leaders’ efforts to win the abolition of the half-time system of child labour in the mills, from which they often benefited personally.³¹

It is easy in fact to envisage an alternative version of “rank and filism” – informed by recent developments in industrial relations – which would depict conflicts between trade unions and their members as clashes between ideologically-motivated union bosses and moderate workers anxious to cooperate with their employers rather than as expressions of a deeper contradiction between the interests of capital and labour. A “rank and filism” of this stripe might build on the growing literature about working-class conservatism and deference, as well as on studies of organizations such as the National Free Labour Association, the British Workers’ League and the Nottingham Miners’ Industrial Union which document the support these bodies received from often considerable bodies of genuine workers.³²

³¹ H.A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy: A Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions* (London, 1962), p. 318, quoted in Gore, “Rank-and-File Dissent”, p. 71, n. 25. See also White, *Limits of Trade Union Militancy*, pp. 56-63.

³² See Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian Britain* (Brighton, 1980); Alan Lee, “Conservatism, Traditionalism and the British Working Class, 1880-1918”, in David E. Martin and David Rubinstein (eds), *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville* (London, 1979); Geoffrey Alderman, “The National Free Labour Association: A Case Study of Organised Strike-Breaking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, *International Review of Social History* XXI (1976), pp. 309-36; Roy Douglas, “The National Democratic Party and the British Workers’ League”, *Historical Journal* XV (1972), pp. 571-91; J.O. Stubbs, “Lord Milner and Patriotic Labour”, *English Historical Review* 87 (1972), pp. 717-54; A.R. Griffin and C.P. Griffin, “The Non-Political Trade Union Movement”, in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History, 1918-39* (London, 1977), pp. 133-62; and Robert Waller, *The Dukeries Transformed: The Social and Political Development of a Twentieth-Century Coalfield* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 108-30.

But like its radical counterpart, such a “unitarist” approach to labour history would necessarily depend on prior assumptions about the objective interests of social actors – but ones which take cooperation rather than conflict to be the natural state of relationships between workers and employers.³³

The example of Lancashire textiles likewise raises the problem of sectionalism: individual militant work groups are often all too anxious to defend their shop-floor prerogatives not only against employers but also against other workers, even members of the same union, as well as to sabotage attempts at a coordinated strategy. Union officials, by virtue of their wider perspective, often support proposals for amalgamation and wider recruitment strategies against the narrow and parochial opposition of their constituents. In the ASE, for example, it was George Barnes and the national Executive who called for the admission of the less skilled to union membership, a policy which was frustrated by the refusal of their members in the branches to accept applications for the new semi-skilled sections established in 1901 and 1912.³⁴

Most damaging to the “rank-and-filist” case, however, are the findings of recent historical research which show that institutional defences played a crucial role in the enforcement of job control strategies. Two key points stand out: the restraints on managerial prerogatives imposed by formal collective bargaining procedures in a number of industries; and the salience of central coordination in the imposition of job controls both by official unions and shop stewards’ committees.

Conciliation and arbitration procedures have been taken by “rank-and-filist” historians such as Burgess and Price to represent the nadir of union accommodation to the rules of the capitalist game, pegging wages to market criteria and subjecting workers to unchallenged managerial authority in the workplace.³⁵ But several recent studies of the practical operation of these

³³ For a discussion of the “unitarist” approach to industrial relations, see Alan Fox, “Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations”, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations, *Research Paper*, no 3 (London, 1966), pp. 2-15.

³⁴ See Jefferys, *Story of the Engineers, 1800-1945*, pp. 127, 166; Weekes, “The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, 1880-1914”, pp. 41-53; and Zeitlin, “Craft Regulation”, pp. 185-6, 374-6. For similar opposition to the AEU’s conversion to industrial unionism in the 1920s, see T.J. Claydon, “The Development of Trade Unionism among British Automobile and Aircraft Workers, 1914-46”, (Ph.D., Kent, 1981), pp. 355-66; and Tolliday, “Management and Labour in Britain, 1914-39”, pp. 47-8.

³⁵ See especially Burgess, *Origins of British Industrial Relations*; and Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*. More recently, however, Price has acknowledged that in industries such as cotton spinning and steel, “Those same structures that had secured the social peace of the mid-Victorian period also served to obstruct managerial freedom once the balance of the mid-Victorian compromise was disrupted by organisational change”: see *Labour in British Society*, pp. 100-1.

procedures tell a substantially different story. Not only were such agreements initially *opposed* by many employers outside the craft sectors, but in cotton textiles Lazonick has shown convincingly that once in place these arrangements safeguarded the spinners' control of the self-acting mules, while at the same time preventing the employers from increasing the speed of the machinery without compensating the operative proportionately.³⁶ Similarly, in iron and steel, Wilkinson and his colleagues have argued that joint boards and tonnage rates based on sliding scales helped to dilute managerial power by removing key decisions on manning from the hands of the individual employer, and by giving the operatives a disproportionate share of the proceeds of technological change.³⁷ What these examples suggest is the impossibility of a purely economic collective bargaining: the negotiation of wage rates is meaningless unless some link is established with the level of effort demanded in exchange; and the latter in turn soon places constraints on manning, the operation of machinery, and other key managerial functions.

If we examine job control practices in the craft sectors, one of the most striking phenomena is the growing vulnerability of autonomous regulation in the face of attacks by organised employers during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the building industry, for example, by the middle of the century, loose local coalitions of organized and unorganized workers were proving unable to defend customary work rules against increasingly cost-conscious and aggressive employers' associations; and the unions were defeated in a series of crucial disputes in London in 1859 and in a number of provincial centres during the 1860s. Contrary to Price's interpretation, his own evidence suggests that the strengthening and centralization of union organization was a necessary response to the employers' prior adoption of coordinated strategies. Autonomous regulation had been tried and found wanting in building, and it is significant that the closed shop had become the central demand of militant activists by the early twentieth century, a devel-

³⁶ William Lazonick, "Industrial Relations and Technological Change: The Case of the Self-Acting Mule", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* III, 3 (1979), pp. 231-62; "Production Relations, Labour Productivity and Choice of Technique: British and US Cotton Spinning", *Journal of Economic History* LI (1981), pp. 491-516; and *idem* and William Mass, "The Performance of the British Cotton Industry, 1870-1913", in *Research in Economic History* IX (1984), pp. 1-44.

³⁷ Frank Wilkinson, "Collective Bargaining in the Steel Industry in the 1920s", in Briggs and Saville, *Essays in Labour History, 1918-39*, pp. 103-32; Bernard Elbaum and Frank Wilkinson, "Industrial Relations and Uneven Development: A Comparative Study of the American and British Steel Industries", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* III, 3 (1979), pp. 275-303; and for a wider range of sectors, Roger Tarling and Frank Wilkinson, "The Movement of Real Wages and the Development of Collective Bargaining in the U.K., 1855-1920", *Contributions to Political Economy* I (1982), pp. 1-23.

opment which demonstrates the increasing importance of formal union organization in the enforcement of job controls.³⁸

There were a few occupations, such as patternmakers, whose skills were sufficiently indispensable to allow them to rely on autonomous regulation through most of the nineteenth century. But for the vast majority of skilled workers, formal organization and central union coordination were also essential to maintain a measure of job control. The very notion of craft control implied the formulation of a set of rules which reached beyond the individual workplace to regulate the labour market as a whole. Craft unions sought to protect the market value of their members' skills by controlling access to the trade, establishing rights over a particular job territory, and standardizing wage rates and working conditions across as wide an area as possible. Since skilled workers changed jobs frequently in most industries, wider organization was required to ensure that they encountered similar conditions in each workshop; and craft unions deployed their substantial benefit funds to ensure that their members did not accept jobs on terms which undercut the interests of the trade as a whole.³⁹

A key case in point was that of the Boilermakers' Society, often taken as the archetype of a hyper-centralized union whose concern for its bank balance led it to advocate collaboration between capital and labour. While the Boilermakers were scrupulous in upholding agreements with employers, a growing body of recent research confirms the view of the Webbs and other contemporaries that they were also among the most aggressive and successful of nineteenth-century unions in imposing rules on apprenticeship, demarcation, manning and the closed shop on employers. Many of these rules were formally embodied in collective agreements, and despite their emphasis on centralized trade politics, the Society's leaders were always careful to leave space for their interpretation by the men in the yards. Though the Society was forced to accept revisions in work rules together with conciliation and arbitration procedures during the recession of 1907-10, it soon repudiated them during the boom which followed, and the Boilermakers successfully maintained their control over the key hull

³⁸ For this interpretation of Price's evidence, see Alastair Reid, "Labour and Society in Modern Britain", pp. 494-6; and for a discussion of employers' associations in the building industry, see J. McKenna and R. Rodger, "Control by Coercion: Employers' Associations and the Establishment of Industrial Order in the Building Industry of England and Wales, 1860-1914", *Business History Review* LIX (1985), pp. 203-31.

³⁹ For the craft sector in general, see Alastair Reid, "The Division of Labour and Politics in Britain, 1880-1920", in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Hans-Gerhard Husung (eds), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914* (London, 1985), pp. 154-8; and for engineering and printing in particular, see Zeitlin, "Engineers and Compositors"; and "Craft Regulation and the Division of Labour", especially pp. 51-90.

construction tasks in the shipyards despite the introduction of pneumatic rivetting during the First World War and of welding during the 1930s.⁴⁰

Nor were formal organization and central coordination less important in the development of job control in the mass-production sector after the Second World War. In the motor industry, for example, the wartime growth of shop-floor bargaining was cut back sharply by the managerial reaction of the late 1940s and early 1950s, while support from the national trade unions proved crucial to the establishment of workplace organization on a durable basis at firms such as the British Motor Corporation in the late 1950s and Ford in the late 1960s. Although much shop-floor bargaining remained informal throughout the postwar period, a number of detailed studies have shown that formal agreements and central coordination within the plant were central to the consolidation of effective controls over issues such as manning, mobility and layoffs; conversely, the absence of such coordination at the company level played a major part in the decline of shop steward organizations in the late 1970s and early 80s.⁴¹

V

A final point which casts doubt on a “rank-and-filist” analysis is the pervasive evidence of trade-union responsiveness to pressure from below. We

⁴⁰ Keith McClelland and Alastair Reid, “Wood, Iron and Steel: Technology, Labour and Trade Union Organization in the Shipbuilding Industry, 1840-1914”, in Harrison and Zeitlin, *Divisions of Labour*, pp. 151-84; Alastair Reid, “The Division of Labour in the British Shipbuilding Industry, 1880-1920” (Ph.D., Cambridge, 1980); James McGoldrick, “Crisis and the Division of Labour: Clydeside Shipbuilding in the Interwar Period”, in Tony Dickson (ed.), *Capital and Class in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982); “Industrial relations and the Division of Labour in the Shipbuilding Industry since the War”, *British Journal of Industrial Relations* XXI (1983), pp. 197-220; “A Profile of the Boilermakers’ Union”, in Jan Kruse and Anthony Slaven (eds.), *Scottish and Scandinavian Shipbuilding: Development Problems in Historical Perspective* (University of Gothenburg Conference Series, 1980), n.p.; Edward H. Lorenz, “Two Patterns of Development: The Labour Process in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries, 1880-1930”, *Journal of European Economic History* XIII (1984), pp. 599-634; “The Labour Process in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries, 1880-1930: Two Patterns of Development” (Ph.D., Cambridge, 1983); and McKinlay, “Employers and Skilled Workers in the Interwar Depression”, pp. 220-331.

⁴¹ Tolliday, “Government, Employers and Shop Floor Organisation in the British Motor Industry, 1939-69”; “High Tide and After: Coventry’s Engineering Workers and Shop-floor Bargaining, 1945-80”, in Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason (eds), *Life and Labour in a Twentieth-Century City: The Case of Coventry* (Coventry, 1986), pp. 204-43; Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin, “Shop-floor Bargaining, Contract Unionism and Job Control: An Anglo-American Comparison”, in Tolliday and Zeitlin, *The Automobile Industry*; Eric Batstone *et al.*, *Shop Stewards in Action* (Oxford, 1977), especially pp. 178-211, 231-51;

have already had occasion to note the democratic ferment which secured the triumph of local autonomy and craft regulation in the ASE before the First World War; and unfavourable settlements and disputes procedures imposed by employers were also thrown off during the same period as a result of membership agitation in shipbuilding, printing and building. Insurgent campaigns were also successful in turning established leaders out of office in a variety of unions; even in the tightly controlled Boilermakers’ Society, Robert Knight’s retirement was followed by the capture of the union Executive by his leading opponents.⁴² As Allan Smith, the chairman of the Engineering Employers’ Federation (EEF) and an acute observer of trade union affairs, commented in 1916,⁴³

At one time the members of the Executive Councils were nominated by the localities and voted on by the whole society; then they were national representatives who represented everybody; but now these individuals come up for particular divisions of the society and they are [really] representatives of their own fellows, subject to their vote for re-election, and the tendency of late years has been not to re-elect the people who have been serving or to keep them for a while and then throw them out in their old age, with the result that the central authorities are fearful over their own existence, and they curry favour with their people rather than rule them.

Union leaders thus remained acutely conscious of the need to keep in close touch with the aspirations of their constituents, a concern which helped to keep internal tensions within tolerable bounds. In some cases, in fact, the pursuit of democratic accountability could be carried so far as to undermine the leadership’s capacity to pursue a coherent strategy in negotiations with powerful groups of organized employers: thus it seems to have been the inability – or unwillingness – of the AEU Executive to secure their members’ observance of national agreements which led the EEF to abandon its postwar search for a bargained accommodation with the union in

The Social Organisation of Strikes (1980); and Eric Batstone, *Working Order: Workplace Industrial Relations over Two Decades* (Oxford, 1984).

⁴² Zeitlin, “Engineers and Compositors”; Reid, “The Division of Labour in the British Shipbuilding Industry”; Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*; and James E. Mortimer, *A History of the Boilermakers’ Society, 1834-1939*, 2 vols (London, 1973 and 1982).

⁴³ PRO BT 55/22, Minutes of Evidence to the Committee on the Engineering Trades after the War, 10 August 1916, p. 16. Cf. EEF Archives (London and Warwick), W(4)3, Smith to J.R. Richmond, 2 February 1915, p. 3: “The unions are essentially democratic. Their Executive Councils are hide-bound in their actions not only by the history of the movement, but by the actual terms of their constitutions. A breach of their constitutions or an action *ultra vires* of their power under the constitution would render the Council liable to immediate impeachment and the tribulation which the Councils of several very important Unions have come through naturally makes the members of the Councils doubly careful that they protect themselves by acting strictly within the limits of their mandate.”

favour of the unilateral reimposition of managerial prerogatives through a second lockout in 1922.⁴⁴

VI

Thus even a cursory examination of the realities of British industrial relations since the late nineteenth century undermines the plausibility of a “rank-and-filist” analysis. No clear line can be drawn between trade union officials and the “rank and file”; leaders were often more militant than their members; formal organization and central coordination were vital bulwarks of job control; and the policies of even quite authoritarian trade unions turn out in practice to have been responsive to pressure from below. Taken together, these critical observations suggest that the “rank-and-filist” paradigm is fundamentally unsatisfactory and should be abandoned outright rather than further refined; the many qualifications added by its more sophisticated exponents have expanded the paradigm’s empirical reference only at the cost of diluting its explanatory power.

How then should we understand internal conflict within trade unions? No comprehensive new paradigm is yet available, but some brief suggestions may be offered in conclusion.⁴⁵ Conflicts within trade unions stem from two central tensions within the institution itself, neither reducible to a cleavage between moderate leaders and a militant “rank and file”. Externally, trade unions are torn between the demands of opposition and negotiation; internally, between those of centralization and mobilization. Trade unions are based on conflict, but the limits of their bargaining power normally oblige them to strike some compromise, however temporary, with their adversaries. The negotiating process in turn demands central coordination, but as voluntary organizations trade unions’ leverage at the bargaining table ultimately depends on the mobilization of their members’ active support; and this process of mobilization calls forth new demands and new forms of struggle which constantly threaten to overturn established accommodations with employers and the state.

In this ambivalence, however, trade unionists are no different from their members. If we abandon the essentialist claim that workers’ only true interests lie in the abolition of capitalism, it becomes apparent that however unequal and exploitative the wage relationship, workers are bound to their

⁴⁴ This interpretation will be developed more fully in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Adversarial Bargaining*.

⁴⁵ This approach draws on the theoretical framework elaborated in Charles F. Sabel, “The Internal Politics of Trade Unions”, in Suzanne Berger (ed.), *Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism and the Transformation of Politics* (Cambridge, 1981).

employers through complex and shifting ties of cooperation and conflict, whose precise balance cannot be determined in advance. Outside of a revolutionary situation (and historical experience allows us to maintain our scepticism even then), workers, like trade unions, are not faced with a clear choice between emancipation and accommodation, but rather with a choice between alternative bargains whose outcome is far from predetermined. The limits of trade union power are thus the limits of their members' power, and it is for this reason that the same dilemmas which beset national trade unions reappear within each new form of workers' organization such as shop stewards' committees or workers' councils.

Since no objective criteria exist for adjudicating the merits of any particular compromise, the road stands open for factional power struggles within trade unions. At any moment, a new group of potential leaders, whether entrenched within the official machinery or not, can challenge existing accommodations with employers and the state in the name of the members' true interests, and in so doing regenerate ideological debate about the union's underlying strategy and purpose. The emergence of such challenges depends on many factors, from the movement of the business cycle to ideological ferment in the wider society and generational processes within trade unions themselves. Their outcome, too, is fundamentally contingent, depending on the external economic and political context, on the internal constitutional structure of the union, and on the strategies and tactics adopted by the contending parties. But even when they fail, as such challenges often do, they force the incumbent leadership, however oligarchical and self-interested, to reassert its claim on the active loyalty of the members, and so reaffirm the union's character as a mobilizing institution which must ultimately remain responsive to the aspirations of those it represents. Our theoretical understanding of political processes within trade unions remains limited, as the preceding remarks indicate; but it is unlikely to be advanced unless we abandon the attempt to force their complex internal divisions into an opposition of objective interests, however nuanced or mediated, between moderate officials and a militant "rank and file".