

JOHN C. LOVELL

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL EMPLOYER ORGANISATION IN THE BRITISH SHIPBUILDING INDUSTRY

SUMMARY: The article takes shipbuilding as a case study in the development of collective bargaining in Britain during the period 1889–1910. During the period shipbuilding employers established an effective national organisation and were successful in drawing the unions into an industry-wide disputes procedure. These developments occurred notwithstanding marked differences in outlook and interest as between the two main centres of activity in the industry, the Clyde and the northeast coast. The more militant posture of the Clyde employers towards the unions is examined in relation to a number of key issues – the apprentice and machine questions, managerial prerogative, wage control. In interpreting the general nature of the transition that occurred in the industry's labour relations, the article questions the view that the move to national bargaining was associated with a general commitment to the joint regulation of employment rules. It further suggests that the general level of employer acceptance of trade unionism may have been less than is sometimes assumed. These conclusions may well have a significance beyond the case in question.

Introduction

In the history of British trade unionism, the period 1889 to 1910 has been presented as being chiefly remarkable for the development that occurred in collective bargaining. Undoubtedly the period did witness, in a wide range of industries, a shift in the locus of bargaining from district or local to national level. As the standard history points out, whereas in 1889 only cotton weaving had a national agreement, by 1910 such agreements had been signed in engineering, shipbuilding, cotton spinning, building, printing, iron and steel and footwear.¹ This change was made possible, indeed largely initiated, by the growth of employer organisation at national level. District variations in wages and conditions continued, but increasingly negotiations at that level were conducted within the context of national procedures. In interpreting this development, Clegg, Fox and Thompson suggested that, at least in the cases of some industries, it arose from the wish

¹ H. A. Clegg, A. Fox and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford, 1964), p. 471.

of employers “to strengthen and extend systems of collective bargaining and to enlarge the scope of joint regulation”. More generally, these writers believed that the elaboration of collective bargaining procedures indicated that most British employers were not anti-union, and “preferred to make a serious attempt to work with the unions”.² It is further suggested that the acid test of the employers’ good faith came during the years 1902–1905, when the combination of economic depression and an exceptionally favourable legal environment, following Taff Vale and other court cases, presented them with an excellent opportunity to rid themselves of trade unions. An opportunity they chose not to take up.

It is the case that British employers generally did not follow the example of their rivals across the Atlantic, who in this very period increasingly opted for freedom from union interference, and used their national associations to promote this objective.³ Whether this abstinence arose from a positive decision to work with the unions is, however, another question. As Clegg, Fox and Thompson’s own account makes clear some national agreements of the period, such as those in footwear and engineering in 1895 and 1898 respectively, were imposed in the aftermath of national lock-outs and were more concerned with curtailing union influence than extending it. One step that may be taken towards a closer understanding of what was actually happening in this period is the removal of the ambiguity that surrounds the term “collective bargaining”. It has been suggested that for the employer one major advantage of this process lies in the fact that by making employment rules a matter of joint determination it enhances their legitimacy and, therefore, the likelihood of their observance.⁴ In the period under consideration, however, the willingness of employers to recognise trade unions as parties to national procedure agreements did not imply a general commitment to the joint regulation of employment rules. As Sisson has maintained, what was really involved in the recognition of trade unions for collective bargaining purposes was their agreement to a situation in which certain rules would be regulated jointly, leaving the rest to be determined by management unilaterally.⁵ Explicitly or implicitly, footwear and engineering are explicit examples, there was in fact a trade-off; the unions’ right to negotiate on pay and certain other conditions was recognised in return for their acquiescence in the exercise of managerial prerogative on other issues. Looked at in this light, it may be true to say that systems of collective bargaining were strengthened and extended during the period, if this is taken to mean the development of procedures at national level; it might be

² *Ibid.*, p. 363.

³ Keith Sisson, *The Management of Collective Bargaining: An International Comparison* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 176–177.

⁴ See discussion in *ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

misleading, however, to imply that the scope of joint regulation was enlarged. Similarly, the development of national agreements cannot necessarily be taken as an indication that employers were making a serious attempt to work with the unions, since their principal function may have been to consolidate managerial authority and minimize union impact.

Bearing these qualifications in mind, it is intended in this paper to take the shipbuilding industry as a case study in the development of collective bargaining over the period from the 1890s to 1910. The experience of this industry makes it particularly suitable for investigation, since the years in question saw the emergence of national employer organisation and the transition to a national system of collective bargaining, and the period closes with a major crisis over the operation of that system. The industry also merits study in its own right, as it was one of the most important British industries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through the 1890s more than 70 per cent of the world's output of ships came from the British yards; in the period between 1900 and 1914 the share was around 60 per cent.⁶ Industrial relations in shipbuilding gain added significance through the industry's close links with engineering. The engineering lock-out of 1897–1898 and the terms of settlement that brought it to a conclusion are sometimes seen as possessing strategic significance for the development of British industrial relations as a whole. These events certainly left their mark on shipbuilding.

The formation of the Shipbuilding Employers' Federation

The first effective national organisation of employers in the industry, the Shipbuilding Employers' Federation (S.E.F.), was not formed until 1899. An earlier National Federation of Shipbuilders and Engineers had been established in 1889. This organisation was comprised principally of Scottish firms and failed to enlist the support of shipbuilders on the English north-east coast. In 1893 it was successful in orchestrating a national movement of shipbuilding employers in resistance to unilateral action taken by the Boilermakers' Society to restrict the supply of apprentices, and this resulted in the industry's first national agreement. The agreement dealt only with the apprenticeship question, and in the following year the northeastern employers went their own way and signed a comprehensive regional agreement with the same union. The National Federation made no further progress and met for the last time in November 1898.⁷

⁶ S. Pollard and P. Robertson, *The British Shipbuilding Industry, 1870–1914* (London, 1979), p. 45.

⁷ Shipbuilders and Repairers National Association (S.R.N.A.) Archives at the National

As the above record indicates, national organisation came no more easily to employers in shipbuilding than to those in other industries. One problem was the close connection between shipbuilding and marine engineering, with many of the larger firms straddling both industries. The National Federation had attempted to embrace both sections, but this may well have been unattractive to shipbuilders pure and simple. In the event, it was in fact the marine engineers who were largely responsible for the establishment of a separate engineering employers' federation in 1896.⁸ This no doubt paved the way for the emergence of a parallel organisation in shipbuilding, but it was not until after the engineering lock-out that such a body was formed.

An important obstacle to the emergence of national organisation, and a possible threat to its viability once established, was the existence of marked regional differences within the industry. Output was concentrated in two main regions, the Clyde and the English northeast coast. So far as industrial relations practices were concerned, the other centres of activity tended to align themselves with one or the other. Barrow, Birkenhead and Hull followed the northeast; Belfast, Aberdeen, Dundee and the Firth of Forth followed the Clyde.⁹ Of course, matters were not quite so simple as this implies. On the northeast coast, for example, the three rivers, Tyne, Wear and Tees, each had their own local employers' association and practices could vary quite significantly. Nonetheless, the general picture holds good, and in certain respects it facilitated the emergence of national organisation. An accord between the Clyde and northeast would bring in the other districts, while the relative geographical proximity of the two main regions made for easy communication between them. Carlisle, which was to become the regular meeting place for the S.E.F.'s Executive Board, was an easy morning's train journey from both Glasgow and Newcastle. The problem, however, lay in the differences between the two regions.

Firstly, there was a division of economic interest. To a considerable degree the Clyde specialised in the building of passenger liners, whereas the emphasis in the northeast was on cargo steamers.¹⁰ Too much should not be

Maritime Museum, Minutes of National Federation of Shipbuilders and Engineers, October 1889 to November 1898.

⁸ E. Wigham, *The Power to Manage* (London, 1973), pp. 22–25. Also Jonathan Zeitlin, "The Labour Strategies of British Engineering Employers, 1890–1922", in H. F. Gospel and C. R. Littler (eds), *Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations* (London, 1983), p. 31.

⁹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Circulars, CL460, 1907.

¹⁰ For a discussion of regional differences see A. Reid, "Employers' Strategies and Craft Production: the British Shipbuilding Industry 1870–1940", unpublished paper presented to the Centre for Economic Policy Research workshop on Employment Strategies, Enterprise Management and Industrial Relations, Cambridge, September 1987, pp. 5–6. Regular listings of launches in the trade journal, *The Shipbuilder*, give a good impression

made of this, since some Clyde firms, Russell and Co. for example, were major producers of cargo steamers, while on the Tyne the firm of Swan Hunter and Wigham Richardson emerged as a leading builder of liners. Undoubtedly the two regions saw themselves as being in competition and this may in fact have been a more potent element in their disunity than differing product markets. A second, and critical, difference concerned attitudes towards industrial relations. Clyde employers were typically authoritarian in attitude and adopted a distinctly hostile stance towards trade unions.¹¹ In consequence, collective bargaining arrangements in the region were of a rudimentary nature and confined to skilled workers. Employers in the northeast showed a much greater disposition toward joint regulation. On the Wear relations between the local association and the woodworking unions were governed by a conciliation board agreement, dating from 1885, that provided for arbitration of disputes.¹² In the early years of the new century employers on the Tyne and Tees concluded their own agreement with the woodworking crafts, though without the arbitration provision; an agreement recommended as “excellent” to Clyde employers in 1906.¹³ In the northeast union recognition and collective bargaining also extended to semi-skilled grades. The Tyne Association, for example, negotiated detailed agreements covering the conditions of drillers and platers’ helpers.¹⁴ So far as dealings with the principal craft union in the industry were concerned, the Boilermakers’ Society, the three rivers came together in 1894 to negotiate the comprehensive regional agreement referred to above. The agreement provided a procedure for regulating general fluctuations in wages on a regional basis, for securing adjustments in local piecework prices made necessary by technical change, and for resolving piecework and other disputes at yard level. Standing Committees for each river were established to deal with local and yard issues.¹⁵ In addition to the above agreements, that related principally to wage determination, local associations entered into agreements covering specific issues, such as demarcation and overtime.

It will be apparent that, by contrast with the Clyde, the northeast pos-

of regional specialisation during the period. There is a survey of the regions in Pollard and Robertson, *The British Shipbuilding Industry*, ch. 3.

¹¹ Reid, “Employers’ Strategies and Craft Production”, p. 6.

¹² S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Circulars, CL 508, 1907.

¹³ Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Hartlepool and Wear Shipbuilding Employers, Tyne and Wear Archives Department, Newcastle, Minutes of Conference with Clyde Shipbuilders Association, 11 October 1906.

¹⁴ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Circulars, CL438, 1906. J. F. Clarke, “Labour Relations in Engineering and Shipbuilding on the North East Coast, 1850–1900” (unpublished MA thesis, University of Newcastle, 1966), pp. 455–456 and 460–461.

¹⁵ D. C. Cummings, *A Historical Survey of the Boilermakers and Iron and Steel Shipbuilders Society* (Newcastle, 1905), pp. 190–191.

sessed an elaborate system of industrial relations within which the position of trade unions was securely established. The divergence in attitudes that lay behind the contrast can hardly be explained in terms of economic differences within the shipbuilding industry, since in a range of other industries northeastern employers were amongst the first to recognise unions, whereas the hostility of Clyde employers was an equally general phenomenon.¹⁶ A full explanation would need to take account of the whole range of influences shaping the culture of the respective regions, and this is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Moving from causes to consequences, however, what does appear is that northeastern shipbuilders were increasingly conscious of being at a competitive disadvantage compared with the Clyde, where wages were lower and timeworkers paid by the hour rather than the day, and this factor may well have influenced the course of industrial relations from around the turn of the century; a point to which we shall return.

Against the differences in attitude that set the Clyde and northeast apart may be placed the strong incentive to unity provided by the national organisation of the principal crafts in the industry. The Boilermakers' Society had originated outside the shipbuilding industry, but with the transition from wood to metal in hull construction it became the most powerful shipbuilding union, while still retaining its position in the boiler-shops and bridgeyards of the engineering industry. It combined strong national direction with powerful workplace organisation. The key to its power lay not so much in the skills of its membership, as in its success in combining in one organisation all the main categories of metalworkers engaged in hull assembly.¹⁷ Next to the Boilermakers, the most powerful union was the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, though its stake in the industry was much less. Since the work of joiners involved the fitting out of vessels and came at the very end of the construction process, they possessed particular leverage through their capacity to hold up delivery. In the case of the Joiners, as with the Boilermakers, the period from the late 1880s saw a considerable strengthening of organisation and tightening of union controls.¹⁸ The consolidation of the Joiners' organisation brought it into frequent conflict with the other major woodworking union, the Associated Shipwrights' Society, over demarcation questions. With the

¹⁶ Industries in which unions secured an early foothold in the northeast include coal, iron, railways and shipping.

¹⁷ K. McClelland and A. Reid, "Wood, Iron and Steel: Technology, Labour and Trade Union Organisation in the Shipbuilding Industry, 1840–1914", in R. Harrison and J. Zeitlin (eds), *Divisions of Labour: Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Brighton, 1985), pp. 175–176.

¹⁸ A. Reid, "The Division of Labour in the British Shipbuilding Industry, 1880–1920" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1980), pp. 184–191.

advent of metal construction, shipwrights had ceased to perform the central tasks of hull assembly, but continued to undertake various vital tasks at different stages of the construction process. Originally organised in independent local societies, shipwrights had from 1882 been gradually drawn into an effective national organisation that covered most of the major centres of the industry.¹⁹ These then were the three major crafts, organised on national lines. Many other trades were represented in the industry, their number multiplying with the increased complexity of vessels, but it was with the Boilermakers, Joiners and Shipwrights that employers had principally to contend.

In the engineering industry, though the Boilermakers had an important presence, the principal national craft union was the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. The evidence strongly suggests that it was the signal defeat inflicted upon that union by the recently federated engineering employers, in the lock-out of 1897–1898, that prompted an accord between the shipbuilders of the Clyde and northeast and so permitted the formation of the S.E.F. Attempts to enrol northeastern builders in the National Federation in the early 1890s had been without success, but in January 1898, as the lock-out reached its final phase, an approach by the Clyde Shipbuilders Association, suggesting the formation of a comprehensive federation of shipbuilders constituted on the same lines as the Engineering Employers' Federation (E.E.F.), produced a positive response on the Tyne and Tees.²⁰ An arrangement would have followed swiftly had not the Wear held back. It is clear that employers on that river feared that federation with the Clyde would involve them in aggressive action. Their conciliation board agreement ruled out the use of the lock-out so far as certain trades were concerned, but even when they were assured that they need only federate with respect to the remainder, they still held back. After considerable pressure had been placed upon them they finally agreed to join, on the understanding that a general lock-out would require the unanimous approval of every federated association.²¹ As a result of this delay, the S.E.F. was not formally constituted until August 1899.

The new organisation was composed of ten local associations covering all the major shipbuilding centres, with the exception of Belfast. By 1901 about 90 firms were affiliated through their respective associations.²² In its constitution the S.E.F. was virtually a replica of the E.E.F. and its administration actually interlocked with that organisation. Thomas Biggart and

¹⁹ D. Dougan, *The Shipwrights* (Newcastle, 1975).

²⁰ S.R.N.A. Archives, Correspondence between Clyde and Tyne Shipbuilders' Associations, January 1898 to June 1899.

²¹ *Ibid.*, correspondence between Wear and Tyne Associations, October 1898 to May 1899.

²² *Ibid.*, list of Members of Federated Associations, June 1901.

James Robinson, operating from Glasgow and Newcastle respectively, became joint secretaries of the S.E.F. while continuing to serve the E.E.F. in the same capacity. The two men also acted as secretary to both the engineers' and shipbuilders' associations in their respective areas. The offices in Glasgow and Newcastle thus handled the affairs of the two national federations and their most important constituent associations. The links could hardly have been closer.²³ It seems clear that shipbuilders had been impressed by the effective power wielded by the engineering organisation. The uses to which that power had been put were, however, another matter. The E.E.F. had been formed principally with a view to breaking through the craft controls operated by members of the Amalgamated Society. In particular, engineering employers had wished to win for themselves a free hand in the introduction of new machinery. The union's defeat led, accordingly, to an agreement that gave to management a high degree of unilateral control over matters such as machine manning, work allocation, overtime, apprentice numbers and the hiring of non-union labour. The union was also obliged to accept a disputes procedure that limited the capacity of rank-and-file members to resist changes in workshop practice, by providing that no strike could take place until issues in dispute had been considered at national level.²⁴ Whether such a programme would be seen by shipbuilders as desirable or practicable, within the context of their own industry, remained to be seen.

The issue of craft controls

Craft controls, particularly those administered by the Boilermakers, were in fact very much on the agenda of the S.E.F. in its earliest years, and particularly so during the depression of 1902–1905. Of immediate concern were controls over labour recruitment into the metal-working trades organised by the Boilermakers. In 1893 shipbuilders, acting nationally, had succeeded in making certain apprenticeship restrictions a matter of joint regulation rather than unilateral union regulation. The agreement concluded with the Boilermakers in that year provided for a fixed ratio of apprentices to journeymen and a fixed duration of apprenticeship with an upper age limit.²⁵ However, while the union conceded joint regulation on these questions, the agreement asserted unilateral managerial control over the deployment of apprentice labour. Employer acceptance of the restrictions made the agreement worthwhile to the union though, and when it expired

²³ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 26 September 1899. Wigham, *The Power to Manage*, p. 24.

²⁴ Zeitlin, "The Labour Strategies of British Engineering Employers", pp. 34–35.

²⁵ S.R.N.A. Archives, Minutes of National Federation, 12 September 1893.

shortly after the S.E.F.'s formation the union asked for its renewal. The response of federated associations indicated universal dissatisfaction with limitation of numbers through the ratio.²⁶ The Tees wanted the latter's modification, the rest its abolition, and a number of associations were against the agreement's renewal in any form. The Clyde was particularly militant in its opposition and had already begun to take advantage of the agreement's expiration. It turned out that the balance of opinion was in favour of some arrangement, though the S.E.F. set its face against any limitation of numbers. At the turn of the century boom conditions prevailed and builders complained of serious labour shortages, particularly of riveters. The union argued that shortages arose from unbalanced recruitment into the various metal trades, rather than from overall limitation.²⁷ Although this point was not disputed, the union was in the end obliged to accept the federation's position. After protracted negotiations an agreement was reached, in December 1901, that retained restrictions on age and length of apprenticeship while confirming managerial prerogatives with respect to utilisation of apprentice labour. On the numbers issue, some compensation was offered to the union in the form of an undertaking not to over-stock yards with apprentices. The union was also to be entitled to information regarding numbers and, in cases of excessive recruitment, was enabled to make complaint to the S.E.F.²⁸

Employers in the northeast were satisfied with the bargain and prepared to honour it. The Clyde, however, had been opposed to any element of joint regulation in this sphere and in signing had "yielded to North East builders".²⁹ In consequence, the agreement was a source of controversy from its earliest days. Allegations of excessive recruitment and breaches of the age limit, made by the union against Clyde and other Scottish builders, mounted rapidly, and the rapid build-up of apprentice numbers on the Clyde from 1900 onward was indeed beyond dispute.³⁰ In February 1902 the union requested information regarding numbers. The S.E.F. voted to provide it, but it was with extreme reluctance that the Clyde Association finally agreed to provide a yard by yard listing in August 1903.³¹ The information, however, proved of little value to the union. In deference to the hard-liners, the S.E.F. adopted a particularly restrictive interpretation

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 10 April 1900.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, Conference between S.E.F. and Boilermakers' Society, 3 May 1900.

²⁸ J. E. Mortimer, *History of the Boilermakers' Society*, 2 vols (London, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 155–156.

²⁹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Circulars, CL221, 1903.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, Conference between S.E.F. and Boilermakers' Society, 3 May 1900. See also editorial in *The Shipbuilder*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1907), p. 190.

³¹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 26 February 1902 and 13 August 1903.

of the agreement. It was prepared to discuss the proportion of apprentices to journeymen over the federated area as a whole, but not in relation to individual firms. This was profoundly unsatisfactory to the union and it proposed in 1904 that the relevant clause be submitted to arbitration.³² The proposal received some support from northeastern builders, as did a subsequent union suggestion that the Federation should at least make clear what it would regard as an excessive number of apprentices. On each occasion, however, the majority on the S.E.F.'s Executive Board was against concession.³³ The agreement was due to run for six years in the first instance, and in November 1907 F. N. Henderson of the Clyde firm of D. & W. Henderson proposed its termination. Vice-President and subsequently President of the S.E.F., Henderson was an extremely influential hard-liner. On this occasion, he failed to obtain sufficient support to terminate and, instead, sweeping amendments were proposed which were approved by a majority of associations. The Tyne, however, was strongly opposed, announcing that it "would not be prepared to enforce its adoption upon the men". In the light of this, further consideration was deferred.³⁴

By this stage the Boilermakers' Society was in any case thoroughly disillusioned with the arrangement. Attempts to circumvent the S.E.F. by arranging local conferences on the overstocking issue, as in Aberdeen in 1908, got nowhere; local officials surmising correctly that "the reins are being too tightly held" at the Federation's offices to allow of any discretion by local employers.³⁵ Following the Aberdeen episode D. C. Cummings, the General Secretary, wrote to the Federation characterising the agreement's operation as "both a mockery and a farce".³⁶ When it was able, as in the booms of 1906 and 1911–1914, the society reverted to unilateral action as a means of regulating the intake of metalworkers. Underlying this controversy over apprenticeship controls were various issues. In the first place, labour shortages were real enough during peaks of activity, but were felt largely with respect to the two boilermaking trades engaged in the most labour intensive stage of hull construction, riveting. Riveters and their associated holders-up were hard to recruit owing to the extremely arduous nature of their work. The trades had a reputation of "roughness" and parents preferred their sons to take other apprenticeships.³⁷ The problem

³² *Ibid.*, 13 May 1904.

³³ *Ibid.*, Federation Circulars, CL401, 1906: Minutes, 1 May 1906 and 9 March 1909.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 26 November 1907 and 9 March 1909.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Federation Circulars, CL564, 1908.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, CL576, 1908.

³⁷ For a discussion of riveting work see A. McKinlay, "Employers and Skilled Workers in the Interwar Depression: Clydeside Engineering and Shipbuilding, 1919–1939" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1986), ch. 8. Parents preferred their sons to take apprenticeships as platers.

was one for all areas, the northeast included, and was acknowledged by the union.³⁸ Joint regulation on this matter was, however, undermined by the other elements in the controversy. Under the 1893 and 1901 agreements, apprentices were debarred from full union membership and obliged to work at the discretion of their employer; they were also lower paid than journeymen. Here, therefore, was a potential source of dilutee labour that could be used to circumvent union controls over, for example, the use of machinery. Evidence suggests, again, that this was an issue in most areas.³⁹ The final element was peculiar largely to Scotland, and the Clyde in particular, though it crucially influenced general S.E.F. policy. Employers in this region seem to have pursued a policy of “excessive” recruitment in breach of the spirit, and sometimes the letter, of the 1901 agreement. The strategy behind this would appear to be one aimed at shifting the balance of power in the labour market in the long-run. It is not suggested that this was necessarily a concerted strategy, though during the 1920s such a policy was indeed recommended by the Clyde Association to its members.⁴⁰

With respect to craft controls, hard upon the apprenticeship question came that of machines. The machine question is usually held to have been of far greater consequence for engineering than for shipbuilding employers.⁴¹ Nonetheless, it loomed large on the S.E.F.’s agenda in its early years. The first national lock-out threatened in the industry was in response to a joiners’ strike against the employment of a semi-skilled machinist at a Dundee firm, a strike interpreted as part of a drive by craftsmen to obtain control of all woodworking machine tools. The S.E.F.’s threat, in December 1902, secured an unconditional return to work.⁴² It was again, however, within the metal trades that the principal issues arose. Here the appearance during the 1890s of a range of light and easily operated pneumatic tools seemed to open up new possibilities. Caulking and riveting tools impinged on two of the trades organised by the Boilermakers’ Society, and in the case of riveting gained added significance from the labour shortages experienced in this sphere. But shipbuilders were slow to lay down pneumatic plant, especially so in districts that concentrated on cargo vessels. Two specific, but not entirely unconnected, problems concerned the technical capacity of the tools and the controls which the union placed over their operation. In

³⁸ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, Conference between S.E.F. and Boilermakers’ Society, 3 May 1900.

³⁹ In 1904 apprentices were being used on new machinery in the Clyde, Tyne, Tees and Birkenhead districts. *Ibid.*, Pneumatic Tool Committee Minutes, 2 June 1904.

⁴⁰ McKinlay, “Employers and Skilled Workers in the Interwar Depression”, pp. 312–313.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225. Also E. H. Lorenz, “The Labour Process and Industrial Relations in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries from 1880 to 1970” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1983), p. 68.

⁴² S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 11 December 1902.

the case of caulking tools, their technical adequacy was established early on, but for their operation the men would agree to only marginal revisions of existing piecework prices based on hand work. Their potential, furthermore, was disguised by refusal to work them to full capacity. Employers believed that substantial reductions off existing prices were justified, and necessary to make operation of the tools worthwhile. Little progress had been made by 1902.⁴³ So far as pneumatic riveting tools were concerned, considerable uncertainty surrounded their technical capacity, especially in relation to the joining of plates that formed the ship's hull. In the event, even as late as the 1920s, pneumatic riveting was largely restricted to lighter internal and superstructural items that were of greater consequence for liner than for cargo vessel builders.⁴⁴ This limitation was not, however, so clearly apparent at the turn of the century when there was keen interest in the tool's potential for hull riveting. At this juncture, craft controls appeared to represent a major obstacle. The union claimed machine work for its members and insisted that each machine should be worked by a full squad of journeymen riveters. Since the pneumatic tool could be operated by one man instead of the usual two man squad required for hand riveting, and since it was not essential that the operator should be a skilled riveter, the union's ruling represented a severe restriction.⁴⁵

The question of caulking and riveting tools was taken up by the S.E.F. in February 1902. On the Tyne builders had made no progress in negotiations with the union through the local wages committee, and on the Tees the sole firm possessing pneumatic plant claimed that it had "practically abandoned" use of the tools.⁴⁶ One view expressed at the Federation's February meeting was that the new machines provided both incentive and opportunity to weaken the hold of the union. The minutes record that "the question was raised as to whether it was the intention to hand over the working of these tools entirely to the Boilermakers' Society or to claim the right of employing handymen; while some builders thought that now was the time to get some freedom from the trammels of the Boilermakers' Society".⁴⁷ Who these builders were is a matter of conjecture, but it may be worthy of remark that at a slightly later stage the chairman of the Clydeside engineering employers' association was advocating cooperation between the E.E.F. and the S.E.F. on the issue, being of the view that the tools' adoption "afforded employers an excellent opportunity of doing their work by workmen, not members of the Boilermakers' Society".⁴⁸ In any event, the S.E.F.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Federation Circulars, Statement on Working of Pneumatic Tools in Shipyards, CL144, 1902.

⁴⁴ Reid, "Employers' Strategies and Craft Production", p. 11.

⁴⁵ McClelland and Reid, "Wood, Iron and Steel", pp. 173-174.

⁴⁶ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 26 February 1902.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

set up a special committee to review the position. The committee was representative of the various districts and chaired by H. Withy of the Hartlepool firm of Furness Withy. It quickly resolved to recommend that employers should have complete discretion as to the type of labour engaged to work the new tools.⁴⁹ Full cooperation in their use would not, it was felt, be forthcoming from union members and some measure of dilution was therefore seen as essential. Indeed, because of opposition already encountered, precise information as to the actual performance of the tools was lacking. Interest was focussed principally on riveting tools, and given the uncertainty concerning their capacity the S.E.F. decided to finance an extensive series of tests. Scotts' yard at Greenock possessed extensive plant and the tests were carried out there during July and August 1902. These, however, proved to be inconclusive and the special committee, in an interim report, proposed further experiments with improved tools, which the American manufacturers agreed to supply.⁵⁰ In June 1903 improved machines with heavier hammers still had not materialised, so that further progress in developing a national policy on pneumatic machinery was checked.⁵¹

In the meantime, employers possessing pneumatic plant made what arrangements they could. The firms concerned were mainly liner and warship builders on the Clyde and Tyne and at Barrow and Birkenhead, though a few cargo vessel builders had also installed plant. By mid 1904 experience with riveting tools was still very slight, one Clyde firm reporting that it had possessed them for some years but that the men's attitude precluded their use; in other cases full squads were used. With caulking tools, whose capacity was fairly well established, employers turned to apprentice labour to secure economical operation.⁵² This practice was resisted by the union and resulted in a major dispute at the Hartlepool firm of Gray and Company, in which all the boilermaking trades struck against the employment of apprentices on caulkers' work.⁵³ The strike was interpreted as a serious breach of the apprentice agreement and referred to the S.E.F. The latter demanded, and obtained, a resumption of work and re-convened its special committee. Re-assessing the position nearly two years on from its first report, the committee re-affirmed its view that complete discretion should be reserved to employers respecting the men employed to work the tools. In practice, though, the committee decided to drive a hard bargain with the Boilermakers over the operation of caulking

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1903.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Pneumatic Tool Committee Minutes, 13 March 1902.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 October 1902.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 16 June 1903.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Pneumatic Tool Committee Minutes, 2 June 1904.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Federation Circulars, CL275, 1904.

tools.⁵⁴ Continued uncertainty with pneumatic riveting diminished the incentive to offer a more fundamental challenge. Meeting the union in August 1904, the committee presented a document containing its terms. Union members were offered the work on the tools, subject to satisfactory performance, and deductions of 50 to 60 per cent off hand rates were proposed for the operation of caulking tools, to apply for an experimental period of six months after which, it was suggested, further adjustment might be necessary. It was implied that the union would be well advised to accept, since the employers were considering “throwing the work open to non-society men”.⁵⁵

This was a heavy-handed approach and union representatives, accustomed as they were at local level to something more closely resembling negotiations, resented it. They suggested a genuine conference, rather than “simply a deputation waiting upon an employers’ meeting to receive a statement that might have been posted to us”. Since the employers had not thought it “advisable” to present the evidence on which the new rates were based, the union also desired to visit the principal yards where pneumatic plant was installed.⁵⁶ This was at first ruled out by the federation, and the original terms insisted upon; but by March 1905 divisions were appearing on its Executive Board and there came the first indications of a willingness to negotiate, rather than dictate, terms.⁵⁷ A demonstration of caulking tools was arranged at Barrow, negotiations followed, and in April the union offered to accept deductions of 35 to 40 per cent. For a while the S.E.F. held out for better terms, but with the shipbuilding cycle swinging upwards during 1905 it finally decided to settle on the basis of the union’s offer.⁵⁸

One interpretation of the events leading to the conclusion of the 1905 national caulking agreement is that the union’s strength at yard level, as demonstrated in the strike at Grays, had brought the employers to the bargaining table.⁵⁹ Joint regulation of the operation of these tools, on terms that the union could certainly live with, secured some protection for journeymen against dilution by apprentice labour. But there were advantages for employers also. The deductions were less than they desired, but an improvement on the 30 and 25 per cent for which two major Tyne firms had settled in 1904. On pneumatic riveting, always the major issue, their options were still open. It was observed at the Barrow demonstration that

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Pneumatic Tool Committee Minutes, 13 June 1904.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 August 1904; Circulars, CL304, 1904.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Circulars, CL308, 1904.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 23 September 1904 and 16 March 1905.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Circulars, C349, 379 and 386, 1905; Pneumatic Tool Committee Minutes, 13 October 1905.

⁵⁹ Lorenz, “The Labour Process and Industrial Relations in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries”, pp. 60–61.

riveting tools were in operation, worked by apprentices, and manned on the basis of one riveter and a holder-up.⁶⁰

It will be apparent that the apprentice and machine questions were to some extent interrelated, and both fell within that sphere of managerial freedom for which engineering employers had campaigned in 1897–1898. In 1900 one Scottish shipbuilders' association, in opposing the agreement on apprentices, "further resolved that the freedom of management should be allowed to shipbuilders on the same lines as were arranged in the Conditions of Management which were adjusted at the close of the Engineers' Strike".⁶¹ At the time the call went unheeded, but during the depression of 1902–1905 a campaign on a broad front was contemplated by the S.E.F. The initiative appears to have been taken by Wigham Richardson, the Tyne shipbuilder whose firm was shortly to merge with Swan Hunter. In the 1890s Wigham Richardson had been an advocate of cooperation between shipbuilders and shipowners, organised in the militantly anti-union Shipping Federation.⁶² Early in 1902, on his suggestion, a joint committee representative of federated shipbuilding employers' associations was established, to review general questions relating to labour management.⁶³ The well-known series of articles in *The Times* on union restrictions in a range of industries including shipbuilding, published between November 1901 and January 1902, may possibly have had some influence on this development.⁶⁴ The joint committee's proposals, as finally brought before the S.E.F. Executive Board in August 1903, were explicitly modelled on the engineering settlement, suitably adapted to shipyard conditions, and were in the form of an agreement to be concluded with the Boilermakers and other shipyard unions.⁶⁵ The terms were of the most sweeping kind. They ruled out the closed shop, foremen's membership of unions and restrictions on the number and age of apprentices (subject to the expiration of the existing agreement). Employers were to have full discretion to appoint the men they considered suitable to work new machine tools and to determine conditions of work. They were also to have the right to select, train and employ those they considered best adapted to the various operations conducted in their yards, irrespective of existing lines of demarcation. Other provisions, some of which were seen as matters for local associations, envisaged radical

⁶⁰ S.R.N.A. Archives, Pneumatic Tool Committee Minutes, 2 June 1904 and 24 March 1905.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 10 April 1900.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Minutes of National Federation, 8 and 30 October 1891.

⁶³ Tyne Shipbuilders Association, Minutes, Tyne and Wear Archives Department, Newcastle, 14 February and 24 April 1902.

⁶⁴ Later published in book form; E. A. Pratt, *Trade Unionism and British Industry* (London, 1904).

⁶⁵ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 13 August 1903.

changes in work organisation, as in the proposal to sectionalise plating work. Finally, on the lines of engineering, there was to be a general procedure for avoiding disputes, involving references from local to central conference.

Prior to its presentation to the S.E.F. the programme had been referred to local associations, whose constituents had been asked whether they wanted the federation to take the matter up and, if so, whether they would give “full and complete support to the Federation in carrying the matter to a successful issue”.⁶⁶ The joint committee clearly envisaged a struggle. Detailed responses in the northeast are not known, but the discussion at the special meeting of the Tyne association, in November 1902, throws some light on opinion.⁶⁷ The two association representatives on the committee were from the big warship firms of Armstrongs and Palmers respectively. In introducing the proposals, the former emphasised that the intention was to engage in “friendly” conference with the unions with a view to “amicable” settlement. He stressed that there was “absolutely no idea of smashing the unions”. The association’s chairman, however, detected in the programme precisely such an undercurrent, from which he wished to disassociate both himself and his firm, the Tyne Iron Shipbuilding Company. In his judgement the programme amounted to a “revolution”, and in launching it shipbuilders would appear as the “aggressors”. But this same William Bone also characterised the programme as “ideal”, and although various amendments were put forward, no-one in fact offered opposition on principle. The misgivings expressed were chiefly on grounds of expediency; the current financial position of the unions made them “too strong for us”, the need to get a current dispute with joiners and plumbers out of the way first, and so on. There was also a feeling that “the Clyde was seeking to rush the thing”, and indeed subsequent correspondence between G. V. Hunter of Tyneside and John Inglis of Clydeside, the joint committee’s chairman, confirms that the Clyde was making the running.⁶⁸ On the one hand, Tyneside employers saw the force of arguments that “something would have to be done to bring their yards under better organisation and to secure more economical methods of working”, particularly in view of “foreign competition where new establishments were constantly being brought into existence, with the latest and most up to date machinery” and “free from trade union interference”. In this connection, it may be observed that the continuing competitive

⁶⁶ Tyne Shipbuilders Association, Minutes, 13 November 1902.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 November 1902.

⁶⁸ See J. Melling, “Employers, Industrial Welfare, and the Struggle for Workplace Control in British Industry, 1880–1920”, in Gospel and Littler (eds), *Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations*, p. 61. Also Reid, “Employers’ Strategies and Craft Production”, pp. 6–7, and McKinlay, “Employers and Skilled Workers in the Interwar Depression”, pp. 223–225.

strength of British shipbuilding down to 1914 may be more readily perceived with hindsight, since no assurance on this matter existed for contemporaries.⁶⁹ But on the other hand, Tyneside employers were accustomed to working with unions, and knew full well that the committee's proposals would be totally unacceptable to them, and could only be enforced through their complete defeat. Some were prepared to contemplate this, others drew back, but the proposals went on to the S.E.F. without drastic amendment.

The programme was endorsed by the federation in August 1903 and a subcommittee was appointed to consider the immediate steps to be taken. The latter resolved that the unions to be dealt with in the first instance should be the Boilermakers, Joiners, Shipwrights and Blacksmiths. A "suitable" covering letter was drafted, to be sent to these societies along with the proposed terms. Clearly envisaging a protracted struggle, the committee also decided to approach the E.E.F. with a view to securing its support, particularly with respect to boilermakers employed in engineering establishments.⁷⁰ Whether the S.E.F. would have pressed ahead had that support been forthcoming is a nice question. The economic and legal conditions of the time were certainly favourable. Respecting the latter, it may be noted that the S.E.F., along with the E.E.F., the Mining Association, the Railway Companies' Association and the Scottish Chamber of Manufacturing Industries, was active in lobbying against proposed trade dispute legislation aimed at restoring union immunities.⁷¹ But the S.E.F. failed to interest the E.E.F. in joint action on its programme. Initially asking for clarification as to how far shipbuilders were prepared to go in enforcing the new conditions on the unions, the engineering employers were informed, in May 1904, that provided their support was forthcoming the S.E.F. would recommend its constituents "to carry through the Conditions of Management to a successful conclusion".⁷² In July John Inglis, who had chaired the committees dealing with the issue, was elected President of the S.E.F., and a meeting with the E.E.F. was arranged in September. At that meeting the E.E.F. asked to be told, "minutely", how the S.E.F. intended to carry out its programme. A series of difficulties were then raised, including that of using the E.E.F.'s funds to support industrial action on an issue that was of limited concern to engineering employers. At

⁶⁹ For the competitive strength of the British industry see S. Pollard, "British and World Shipbuilding, 1890–1914: a Study in Comparative Costs", *Journal of Economic History*, 17 (1957), pp. 426–444.

⁷⁰ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, Meetings of Special Committee regarding Conditions of Labour in Shipyards, 2 October 1903 and 20 January 1904.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 22 April 1903; Circulars, CL268, 1904; Parliamentary Committee Report for 1904.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 13 May 1904.

the end no commitment was made, and in August 1905 the E.E.F. was still prevaricating.⁷³ Its reluctance may be attributed to two main causes. In the first place, having enforced the 1898 terms of settlement on the principal craft union in engineering, its interest in a further confrontation with craft unionism was limited. Secondly, and more importantly, it has to be remembered that the E.E.F. represented a large and very diverse membership. While marine engineering firms, particularly on Clydeside, may have sympathised with the S.E.F.'s objectives, the inland districts had no interest in supporting the shipbuilders. Even within engineering itself, at no stage between 1898 and 1922 was the E.E.F. able to mobilise support for national lock-out action, despite a resurgence of craft militancy.⁷⁴

On the face of things, it does appear that if the S.E.F. had been bolstered by E.E.F. support it would have proceeded with its programme of action. On the other hand, the decision to make action conditional on that support suggests, perhaps, some weakening of resolve. The position on the Wear constituted a definite impediment, since employers on that river were precluded from locking out joiners and shipwrights. Under strong federation pressure, they were subsequently obliged to abandon their agreement with these trades.⁷⁵ As to the managerial freedoms themselves, technical difficulties with pneumatic riveting, that had not been overcome by 1904, rendered the machine question of less immediate consequence. But beyond this a major problem with the proposed new conditions was, as Bone had put it, their "ideal" nature. The elimination of "union interference" was worth the fight if managements were willing and able to step into the vacuum so created. All the evidence suggests that they were not. Shipbuilders were heavily reliant not only on the manual skills of their tradesmen, but on the latter's performance of managerial functions as well.⁷⁶ Sectionalised plating was mentioned in the 1903 "conditions of management", but when improved machinery that would facilitate this reorganisation of work be-

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Joint Meeting with E.E.F., 22 September 1904; Circulars, CL401, 1906.

⁷⁴ See A. McKinlay and J. Zeitlin, "The Meanings of Managerial Prerogative: Industrial Relations and the Organisation of Work in British Engineering, 1880–1939", *Business History*, 31 (1989), no. 2. Also J. Zeitlin, "The Internal Politics of Employer Organisation: the Engineering Employers' Federation, 1896–1939", unpublished paper presented to the C.E.P.R. workshop on Employment Strategies, Enterprise Management and Industrial Relations, Cambridge, September 1987, pp. 11–12.

⁷⁵ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 2 November 1906; Circulars CL508, 1907, and CL559, 1908.

⁷⁶ Lorenz, "The Labour Process and Industrial Relations in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries", p. 68. For a valuable discussion of the labour problems confronting American employers who did succeed in breaking the hold of craft unions see W. H. Lazonick, "Technological Change and the Control of Work: The Development of Capital–Labour Relations in U.S. Mass Production Industries", in Gospel and Littler, *Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations*, pp. 111–136.

came available after World War I, F. N. Henderson was unable to persuade his Clydeside colleagues that the opportunity should be seized.⁷⁷ Such a reorganisation would have entailed the assumption by management of functions performed by autonomous plating squads. Shipbuilding, like other British industries, was dominated to a large extent by medium-sized, family-owned firms whose managerial and supervisory structures were undeveloped by comparison with their American and German counterparts.⁷⁸ While some firms, particularly the largest, may have possessed a vision of what might be achieved through direct control of the production process, it was not widely shared.

National action and a national agreement

In the event, confrontation between the S.E.F. and the unions was to develop over the issues of wage control and labour discipline, within existing patterns of work organisation. The boom of 1906 was the crucial moment in the mobilisation of the collective strength of shipbuilding employers on these questions. Despite the existence of national employer organisation since 1899, collective bargaining over wages had continued at district level as before. Informal contacts were maintained between the Clyde and northeast coast, but the degree of coordination between them was limited.⁷⁹ The event that changed matters was the decision taken by the northeast coast associations to give notice to terminate their wages agreement with the Boilermakers' Society. In the autumn of 1906 members of that society on the Clyde struck for a wage increase. The Clyde Association turned to the northeast for support, suggesting that general wage fluctuations should be made a matter for the federation, in order to strengthen the employers' hand. Accepting that the northeastern associations were for the moment bound by their existing agreements with the unions, the Clyde suggested that they might consider withdrawing from such arrangements, to pave the way for joint action in the future. Responding to this initiative at a joint meeting held in October 1906, the northeastern associations duly agreed to offer "some support" to the Clyde by giving notice to withdraw from their wages agreement with the Boilermakers, though the question of the arrangements with other trades was left over for further consideration.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ McKinlay, "Employers and Skilled Workers in the Interwar Depression", pp. 272–279.

⁷⁸ See, for example, discussion in J. Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XL (1987), no. 2, pp. 173–176.

⁷⁹ Tyne Shipbuilders Association, Minutes, 14 August 1902.

⁸⁰ Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Hartlepool and Wear Shipbuilding Employers, Minutes, 11 and 18 October 1906.

The motives for this action were mixed, as we shall see, but a general underlying factor was the nature of the 1906 boom. This was not an especially profitable one for shipbuilders. The trade journal commented on increased capacity and consequent “over production” and “excessive competition”, and cast about for possible remedies.⁸¹ In such highly competitive conditions, labour costs were of increasing concern. More specifically, though, it appears that the northeast was ready to fall in with the Clyde’s wishes because it was already dissatisfied with the operation of its wages agreement. Dissatisfaction centred not so much on provisions relating to general wage alterations as on those concerned with “sectional” disputes at local and yard level. Despite the limited impact of new machine tools, technical change in the industry at this period was considerable, with the introduction of new ship designs, larger plates and generally improved yard facilities and appliances.⁸² Piecework earnings were intimately related to technical developments, and the 1894 agreement provided a procedure for securing necessary adjustments. By 1906, in the employers’ judgement, this procedure had broken down. On the Tyne, failure to make progress on pneumatic caulking prices has already been noted, but that issue was of course removed to national level in 1904. Generally, the problem remained. It was felt that union representatives on the local wages committees simply blocked attempts to secure revisions in piecework prices that employers felt were warranted by technical changes. During the course of 1906 possible amendments to the agreement were discussed with the union, but Tyne employers in particular felt that these did not meet the needs of the case. In the event of failure to agree on the local committees, there was still no mechanism for securing a final settlement. Furthermore, “so long as the men on disputed jobs received the same earnings as previously, there was no inducement for them to come to a settlement”.⁸³

The deadlock on sectional disputes was particularly serious in relation to the earnings of plating squads on the Tyne and Tees, earnings that had been greatly enhanced by improved handling equipment. Repeated attempts to obtain downward revisions in prices had failed, and employers on these rivers felt themselves to be at a competitive disadvantage compared with the Wear and, particularly, the Clyde.⁸⁴ Plating prices were usually arranged on a yard basis, but on the Tees there was a district list. Following two years of negotiations, employers on that river finally decided to impose a revised list as from October 1906. A platers’ strike followed that lasted until January the following year. In view of variations in equipment from craftsmen were accustomed to imposing their job controls unilaterally, and

⁸¹ *The Shipbuilder*, 1 (1907), no. 4, pp. 189–191.

⁸² Pollard and Robertson, *The British Shipbuilding Industry*, ch. 6.

⁸³ Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Wear, Minutes, 12 December 1905 and 4 July 1906.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 December 1905.

yard to yard, the Tees Association had perhaps been unwise in insisting on standard revisions, and some concessions had to be made in the January settlement. The latter did not end the matter, however, as the union began raising cases firm by firm, concessions obtained from one being used as the basis for application to another. By March 1907 it seemed to the employers as if "the men were endeavouring to get back all they had conceded".⁸⁵ Nonetheless, when the notice to terminate the agreement expired in April, and the Boilermakers asked what arrangements were to take its place, Tees employers still wished to retain the local wages committees. The general view taken by the three associations, however, was that the existing procedure had outlived its usefulness.⁸⁶

Respecting general wage fluctuations, the northeastern associations had decided in October 1906 that these should be made a matter for the federation, as the Clyde had proposed. When the S.E.F. drew up a scheme, in February 1907, reactions in the northeast were mixed. The scheme provided for national regulation of general wage changes of members of the Boilermakers' Society, and proposed that such changes should apply to all federated districts simultaneously. The idea was that the union would be prevented from picking districts off one at a time and financing strikes from members still at work. But simultaneous movement also obliged local associations to keep in step, and the Tyne and Wear associations were against taking matters this far. As one Tyne builder put it: "the rates of wages on the Clyde were lower than the North East coast and it would mean the North East coast would be called upon to assist the Clyde in retaining its favourable position".⁸⁷ These reservations alarmed the Tees association, which strongly favoured national action, not only with respect to the Boilermakers, but to the woodworking trades as well.⁸⁸ In the interests of unity the three associations agreed on a compromise formula which, in May 1907, became the basis of S.E.F. policy. The simultaneous movement proposal was dropped for the moment, and the federation was simply given the "opportunity" to coordinate national action. As things turned out, the first occasion on which this opportunity was exercised was to the northeast's advantage. At the end of May the Boilermakers applied for an advance in that region and the associations referred the matter to the federation. The S.E.F. resolved to impose a national lock-out in the event of the union striking to enforce its claim, and the latter was subsequently withdrawn. The circumstance that the Clyde was at this juncture looking for federation

⁸⁵ Tees and Hartlepool Shipbuilders Association, Minutes, Tyne and Wear Archives Department, Newcastle, 3 and 12 December 1906, 11 January and 1 March 1907.

⁸⁶ Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Wear, Minutes, 25 March and 17 April 1907.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1907.

⁸⁸ Tees and Hartlepool Shipbuilders Association, Minutes, 1 and 26 March 1907.

support in resisting a union imposed overtime ban provided added incentive for solidarity with the northeast.⁸⁹

Although the federation had successfully assumed power to mobilise national action on general wage changes of the Boilermakers, there had been a strong feeling in the northeast that the now expired regional agreement should be replaced by a national arrangement with the union.⁹⁰ The original agreement, by limiting movements to 5 per cent at not less than six-month intervals, had provided some stability of labour costs in an industry subject to extreme fluctuations in activity. It was, therefore, agreed that the S.E.F. should negotiate with the union a national arrangement, containing these features.⁹¹ In the summer of 1907, however, the federation's priorities lay elsewhere and negotiations were postponed. There developed, in August of that year, a general crisis in relations between the S.E.F. and the Boilermakers, centred on the issues of managerial authority and labour discipline. Although the general conditions of management programme lay in abeyance, the federation was clearly ready to flex its muscles in individual cases where issues of general principle arose. Only the Wear and Barrow had failed to indicate support for a proposed national lock-out in support of the firm D. and W. Henderson in May 1906.⁹² The immediate cause of the 1907 crisis was a strike of caulkers against the employment of apprentice platers on work they claimed as their own at the Tyne firm of Armstrong Whitworth. The strike was seen as a breach of the apprentice agreement and a general infringement of management's freedom to deploy labour as it saw fit. When the Tyne Association failed to secure a resumption of work, the matter was referred to the federation. The Boilermakers refused to order a resumption, arguing that in cases of disputed work the status quo should prevail pending a settlement. This was the issue that had bedevilled the sectional disputes procedure in the northeast; settlements through that procedure could not be obtained, and when unilateral action was resorted to, stoppages were the result. The S.E.F. now decided that management's right to make unilateral changes should be insisted upon and a list of demands was drawn up, backed by the threat of a national lock-out. The demands were accepted by the union a matter of hours before the lock-out notices were due to expire. On going to a ballot of the members they were thrown out, and further lock-out notices were posted. These were only withdrawn when a subsequent ballot of the whole membership produced a favourable result.⁹³

The settlement so achieved was known as the Edinburgh agreement. It

⁸⁹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 2 May, 14 June and 10 July 1907.

⁹⁰ Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Wear, Minutes, 25 March 1907.

⁹¹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 2 and 24 May, 14 June 1907.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1 and 8 May 1906.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1, 12, 15, 19, 20 and 23 August, 17 September 1907; Circulars, CL521, 1907.

was designed as a temporary arrangement pending the negotiation of a permanent national agreement. Its principal feature was a sectional disputes procedure, providing for discussion of disputes at yard, local and finally national level, stoppages of work being prohibited until the final stage was exhausted. Other clauses obliged the union to desist from any interference in overtime working, pending the negotiation of a national agreement on that issue, and to cease disputing management action in a range of specific cases, including that of Armstrongs. These terms, and the manner of their imposition, undoubtedly constituted a humiliation for the union. Its financial position had deteriorated since 1902, a circumstance of which the S.E.F. was well aware, and it was in no position to resist.⁹⁴ On the other hand, the S.E.F.'s commitment to enter into negotiations for a permanent national agreement was serious. As we have noted, a national agreement regulating general wage changes had been proposed by the federation prior to the August crisis, and at that stage consideration had also been given to the idea of a supplementary agreement covering sectional questions. Now, in September 1907, the S.E.F. decided in favour of a single comprehensive agreement, covering both spheres, in the manner of the 1894 northeast coast agreement.⁹⁵ Early drafts suggest that a major concern was to remedy deficiencies in the latter's sectional disputes procedure. Thus in piecework disputes employers were to be allowed to give a temporary decision, pending discussion on the local wages committees. In the event, the federation was unable to carry through negotiations on the new agreement, owing to the rapid deterioration in business conditions at the end of 1907. Requests from certain local associations that the federation should use its recently acquired powers on general wage questions to impose unilaterally a national wage reduction on the Boilermakers were initially resisted, as such action would undoubtedly jeopardise negotiations. But the pressure was so insistent that the S.E.F. was obliged to give notice of a national reduction and, as anticipated, the union suspended negotiations on the agreement. From its viewpoint, the national notice was a major departure in practice that appeared to assume the actual existence of an agreement then under discussion.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, it was obliged to accept the reduction early in 1908.

Wage reductions in the other shipbuilding trades did not go so smoothly. Though these had the blessing of the federation, they were still subject to local arrangement, and in the northeast severe resistance was encountered. While this resistance exposed divisions within the shipbuilding community, its end result was to consolidate further the federation's authority. Faced

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Circulars, CL476, 1907.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 10 September 1907.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 September, 10 and 24 October, 26 November, 11 and 27 December 1907.

with a strike of the woodworking trades on the Tyne and Tees, the north-eastern associations proposed that the S.E.F. should assume power to coordinate national action with respect to general wage movements of all shipyard trades. More immediately, the associations proposed that the federation should intervene in the current dispute.⁹⁷ On the first question, the federation acted promptly. General approval having been obtained, local associations were instructed to terminate all existing wage agreements.⁹⁸ On the second question, there was considerable delay. A major problem was that the Tyne and Tees employers had increased their demands on the unions. In February 1908 the latter were told that they would now be required to accept the same rates of pay and conditions of work as prevailed on the Clyde. This was to raise the stakes in drastic fashion, and such behaviour certainly did not find favour in the eyes of the President of the Board of Trade, who was attempting to conciliate the dispute. As reported by one builder, Lloyd George commented: "comparison with the Clyde was recognised but he did not see how we could double our demand and expect to get it".⁹⁹ Of more immediate relevance was the S.E.F.'s reaction. In effect, its support was made conditional on a reversion to the original claim. The Tyne and Tees employers withdrew to this position, and when the unions still refused to settle, the S.E.F. imposed a national lock-out that lasted from 2 May to 1 June 1908.¹⁰⁰

The 1908 woodworkers' dispute was a bitter and costly one, but it served the purposes of the S.E.F. The basis of settlement was the unions' acceptance of the original reduction and an agreement by the two sides to enter into negotiations with a view to establishing a national procedure for the avoidance of disputes. Such an arrangement had already been under consideration by the federation so far as the Boilermakers' Society was concerned, but it was now enabled to encompass all the major shipyard trades. The Shipyard Trades Agreement was negotiated during the summer and autumn and was finally signed, in March 1909, by 17 trade unions. Negotiations were conducted at a time of deep depression and their outcome bore all the marks of the employers' bargaining advantage.¹⁰¹ Following the draft agreement with the Boilermakers, the 1909 scheme combined procedures for dealing with general wage alterations and sectional disputes. Regarding the former, movements were restricted to 5 per cent at six-month intervals and were to apply to all trades covered by the agreement "and in every federated firm at the same time and to the same extent". During the

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6 February, 6 March 1908; Circulars, CL556 and 559, 1908.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 6 February and 6 March 1908.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Circulars, CL568, 1908.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 6, 17 and 25 March, 24 April, 1 and 28 May 1908.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 28 October, 1 December 1908, 9 March 1909; Circulars, not numbered, dated 26 June, 17 August and 8 October 1908.

negotiations the unions had pressed for an arrangement that would allow fluctuations to be discussed at district rather than national level, but this had been resisted. Nonetheless, the S.E.F. had faced pressure from within its own ranks for some degree of district autonomy. It will be recalled that in 1907 the Tyne Association, in particular, had opposed the principle of simultaneous movement, and as the woodworking dispute had indicated the same association remained concerned about the disparity in wages and conditions between its own area and the Clyde. In 1909 the Tyne asked for an assurance "that any district may with or without permission or support of the Federation take steps to secure district reductions in the direction of equalising wages and also to secure improved working conditions".¹⁰² In the latter case, the introduction of payment by the hour was a particular concern. The S.E.F. was able to give this assurance, since the agreement contained a clause reserving some autonomy to districts on wages and other questions. While representing a concession to its own side, the federation felt the clause was of little consequence so far as dealings with the unions were concerned. As the employers' confidential notes explained, from their standpoint there was "always this safeguard, that the Federation can at any time convert a sectional or district demand into a national question".¹⁰³

Of greater concern to the unions than the general wage provisions of the new agreement were those concerned with sectional disputes. While these followed the usual pattern of references through from yard to local and central conference, with stoppages ruled out until the procedure had been exhausted, there was an additional feature designed to overcome what employers had regarded as a major weakness in the northeast coast agreement. As a development from earlier drafts, it was now provided that two or three employers, unconnected with the matter in dispute, should be empowered to hand down a temporary decision in advance of the final stage of the procedure being reached. As Cummings of the Boilermakers commented during the later stages of the negotiations: "the sore point with us is still the three employers".¹⁰⁴ The unions were worried about the capacity of employers to make unilateral changes in piecework prices and other working conditions. They argued for consultation prior to any change, for the maintenance of the status quo pending a final settlement, and for the introduction of a neutral element into the procedure.¹⁰⁵ None of these

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Minutes, 9 March 1909.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Circulars, 17 August 1908.

¹⁰⁴ Webb Trade Union Collection, at the British Library of Political and Economic Science, Section B, vol. 88, Material Relating to Shipyard Trades Agreement, Verbatim Report of Conference held on 28 October 1908.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Also S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 1 December 1908; Circulars, 8 October 1908.

points were carried. So far as the agreement's operation was concerned, the issue proved to be of fundamental importance.

The national agreement in operation

From the outset of the new agreement the S.E.F. exhibited a determination to clamp down on yard stoppages, and immediately following its signature unilaterally introduced the discharge note system. Designed as an instrument of labour discipline, and already in operation on the Clyde, it was now available to penalise those who struck in breach of procedure. Its adoption nationally had been advocated for some time by Henderson, now the dominant influence within the federation, and its President since August 1908. The unions claimed that the introduction of the system was a violation of the agreement and there was strong resistance in the northeast and at Leith. Employers insisted that it was a matter of "yard management"; nonetheless, negotiations took place and some modifications were agreed.¹⁰⁶ The introduction of time recording clocks and job cards at various firms was similarly claimed by the federation to be a matter of yard management.¹⁰⁷

Between the agreement's signature in March 1909 and the autumn of 1910 the S.E.F. threatened a national lock-out on three occasions, on the last of which the threat was actually carried out.¹⁰⁸ All three came in 1910, and in each case the Boilermakers' Society was the union involved. The disputes concerned were all sectional in nature, and of the five firms involved four were on Clydeside. This is to count Henderson's own firm twice, since it was involved in two of the occasions. The prelude to this sequence was a dispute of a similar nature. In May 1910 riveters at the Clydeside firm of Fairfield struck to enforce a guaranteed minimum rate; against the background of a rising cost of living, this was to become a common demand in shipbuilding, mining and other industries. The stoppage was in breach of the agreement and the S.E.F. demanded, and obtained, an immediate resumption of work. The union was warned, however, that the federation was determined to prevent such strikes in the future.¹⁰⁹ Back in 1907, at the time of the Armstrong Whitworth dispute, Henderson had proposed that the federation's rules should be changed so

¹⁰⁶ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 17 March, 24 April, 16 December 1908, 9 March 1909; Conferences between S.E.F. and Shipyard Trades Committee, 22 February and 3 March 1910; Circulars, CL662, 1909; Central Conference Committee Papers, September 1909.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Federation Minutes, 18 May 1910.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 27 May, 3 August, 1 September 1910.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1910.

that the Executive Board could authorise a lock-out without going through the procedure of reference to local associations.¹¹⁰ Nothing came of the proposal at the time, but the idea was now taken up once more and the streamlined procedure officially instituted. In accordance with this decision, federated firms were instructed to amend their yard rules so that employment could be terminated at a day's notice. The change was not received with enthusiasm on the Tyne and Tees, but it went through in the end, and the new arrangement was fully operational when a national lock-out was actually implemented in September 1910.¹¹¹

The picture outlined above suggests a considerable degree of employer militancy, directed principally against the Boilermakers, and spear-headed by the Clyde. Henderson undoubtedly gave a strong lead. His role in relation to discharge notes, the apprentice question, lock-out procedure and sectionalised plating has already been noted. In addition, he was a key figure in the 1906 Clyde initiative on wage questions. A decision taken by the S.E.F. in 1910 to support the enrolment of foremen in the employer dominated Foremen's Mutual Benefit Society, as a means of detaching them from union influence, may well also have owed something to his influence.¹¹² The record of his firm is remarkable; in 1906 and twice in 1910 it was, as we have noted, at the centre of a national dispute. On the last occasion it is clear that the crisis arose from the firm's strict adherence to established piecework prices, at a time when other employers in the district were giving way to sectional demands.¹¹³ Yet Henderson could not have carried the industry against its will in a policy of militant action. The repeated use of the lock-out threat must be set against the background of a rising tide of sectional stoppages, as activity in the industry quickened following the depression of 1908–1909. According to returns obtained by the federation there were thirty stoppages between March 1909 and May 1910, twenty-two of which involved members of the Boilermakers' Society. Between 12 July and 18 August 1910, fourteen stoppages in breach of the agreement were recorded, five of which were on the Clyde, but six were on the Tyne. Most of these disputes were over piecework prices and riveters were the group most typically involved.¹¹⁴ If, from the employers' standpoint, an important function of the agreement was the containment at yard

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 August 1907.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6 June, 3 and 16 August 1910. Tees and Hartlepool Shipbuilders Association, Minutes, 12 August 1910.

¹¹² S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 31 March 1910.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 1 September 1910.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1910; Circulars, 19 August 1910. During the preceding boom of 1906 employers had also complained of frequent work stoppages by members of the Boilermakers' Society; northeastern employers had established an emergency committee to deal with strikes in breach of the 1894 agreement. Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Wear, Minutes, 12 December 1905, 20 February, 10 April and 31 May 1906.

level of upward pressure on piecework earnings, particularly during periods of boom, then its procedure had to be enforced. On this there appears to have been consensus. When a national lock-out was actually enforced against the Boilermakers' Society in September 1910, observance of the agreement was the central issue.¹¹⁵ Having taken the decision to lock-out on this issue, the S.E.F. felt the opportunity should be seized to introduce other issues into the dispute. It had pursued a rather similar tactic in 1907. Local associations were asked for suggestions; among those received were the machine question, overtime, revision of piecework price lists, the apprentice agreement and employment of non-union labour. But in the end the local associations voted against the inclusion of issues other than observance of the agreement in the terms for settlement, and they played no part in the negotiations that brought the lock-out to a close in December.¹¹⁶

By employing the sanction of a national lock-out, with its threat to union finances, employers believed the unions could be compelled to discipline their membership. Under certain circumstances, the Boilermakers' Society was in fact prepared to fine members for unauthorised action.¹¹⁷ Union leaders certainly struggled to secure their membership's compliance with the procedure. The task proved beyond them. In the circumstances of the time, the operation of the agreement itself placed the maximum stress on the unions' capacity to control their members. Against the background of rising price and employment levels the shipyard trades, in May 1910, activated its general wage provisions, but the S.E.F. declined to concede an advance until employment in the industry reached a specified level. The unions rejected the employment criterion, on the ground that technical changes were reducing labour requirements in the industry. By August negotiations had reached deadlock.¹¹⁸ Inability to make progress nationally intensified the pressure at yard level, where the restrictive aspects of the agreement were keenly felt. "The men are tired of the agreement", a Boilermakers' official reported in August 1910.¹¹⁹ Particularly resented was the controversial clause allowing a temporary decision to be given by employers. The clause, coupled with the destabilising effect of technical change on piecework earnings, contributed directly to the crisis in September. Thus in a case of a new method of ship construction, the Isherwood system, employers claimed deductions off existing riveters' price lists. The

¹¹⁵ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 1 and 14 September 1910.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 and 14 September 1910; Circulars, 12 September 1910. Lorenz, "The Labour Process and Industrial Relations in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries", p. 64.

¹¹⁷ It did so in the case of strikes by riveters at Palmers in 1909. S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 24 November 1909.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 and 18 May, 6 June, 12 July and 16 August 1910.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Circulars, 19 August 1910.

Boilermakers' Society succeeded in getting the issue referred to a joint committee, only to find that at two yards temporary decisions were given under the procedure resulting in a loss of earnings by union members. When the union failed to secure a refund the men at one of the yards, that of Armstrong Whitworth, struck; it was this stoppage, together with that at Hendersons, that led to the enforcement of a national lock-out.¹²⁰

Unwilling to concede a favourable bargaining environment on wages, at yard or national level, the S.E.F. was also reluctant to give ground on matters relating to the unions' institutional security, a sphere in which concessions might have seemed appropriate given the emphasis on their role in the enforcement of industrial discipline. On the eve of the 1910 lock-out the shipyard trades, taxed with their failure to secure observance of the agreement and at the same time facing problems with the maintenance of union membership, had proposed that if the federation would guarantee that lapsed members would not be employed at federated firms then they would be prepared to take drastic action with unionists who failed to observe the agreement, even to the extent of expelling them from the union.¹²¹ The offer was not rejected, but the S.E.F. required prior assurances as to the agreement's observance.

Conclusion

The national lock-out did not secure observance of the 1909 agreement. On the contrary, the union against which it had been enforced availed itself of the first opportunity that arose to withdraw from the arrangement. It had been provided that the agreement should continue for a minimum period of three years. When this expired in March 1912, the union membership voted decisively to withdraw.¹²² In other industries a somewhat similar pattern emerged. Unions in cotton, building and engineering withdrew from national procedure agreements during the boom that preceded the First World War.¹²³ Against this background, the achievements of national collective bargaining in the period since 1889 look questionable.

A fundamental problem in a number of cases, including shipbuilding, was that neither trade unions nor employers were fully committed to the joint regulation of employment rules. On the union side, as is well attested,

¹²⁰ Use of the Isherwood system was related to the growing market for oil tankers. For details as to its novelty see *The Shipbuilder*, vol. 2, no. 8 (1908), pp. 263–264. For Armstrong dispute and background, S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 14 September 1909, 11 and 28 July, 1 September 1910; Circulars, 30 August 1910.

¹²¹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 16 August 1910.

¹²² J. E. Mortimer, *History of the Boilermakers' Society*, (London, 1982), vol. 2, p. 39.

¹²³ H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 79–81.

the increased strength of their workplace organisation following 1889 enhanced their capacity to do so.¹²⁴ For employers, there existed a range of possible responses. Firstly, to the extent that the enforcement of craft controls was dependent on the formal organisation and central coordination provided by the union, a point disputed by some writers, there existed the option of breaking the union's power.¹²⁵ Secondly, there was the option of forcing the union to negotiate on its rules, so substituting joint regulation for unilateral union action. Finally, employers might force the union to accept management's right to impose employment rules unilaterally. These responses were not mutually exclusive, though the sustained pursuit of the first objective would obviously reduce the relevance of the remaining two. Between the latter, however, scope for trade-off existed, as noted earlier in this paper. Indeed the final option was indistinguishable from the first unless managerial rights in certain spheres were traded against those of unions in others.

Respecting the first response, it is the case that open shop campaigns were not a characteristic feature of British industrial relations. However, generalised assertions of managerial prerogatives could be carried to a point where the union's influence was virtually eliminated and its job territory fundamentally undermined. The initial terms proposed by the E.E.F. for the settlement of the engineering lock-out came close to this point, though these were subsequently modified.¹²⁶ In the case of shipbuilding, the authors of the conditions of the management programme of 1902 denied that "smashing the unions" was any part of their intention, but few seriously supposed that the unions could be brought voluntarily to accept such a programme. In this, and in their initial stance on the machine question, shipbuilders perhaps came closer to a frontal assault on craft unionism than is generally recognised. But a fight to the finish was not really practical politics in well-organised British industries. Concerted employer activity carried to this extent would not have been viewed sympathetically by government or informed public opinion, as was evident during the engineering lock-out.¹²⁷ In any case, in the British context, the reluctance of

¹²⁴ This is not to suggest that craft unions were unaware of certain advantages to be gained by the joint regulation of working rules, where such regulation could be obtained on terms satisfactory to themselves. See, for example, discussion in Sisson, *The Management of Collective Bargaining*, p. 163.

¹²⁵ For a discussion emphasising the importance of formal union organisation in the enforcement of job controls see Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations", pp. 165–173. For the contrary view, stressing the importance of informal worker activity independent of union organisation, see especially R. Price, *Masters, Unions and Men* (Cambridge, 1980).

¹²⁶ Zeitlin, "The Labour Strategies of British Engineering Employers", p. 34.

¹²⁷ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*, pp. 166–167.

employers in many industries to assume direct control over the production process removed much of the incentive for an extreme response to the presence of craft unionism. Even in engineering, where as we have seen the final terms of settlement of the lock-out did allow for the assertion of managerial prerogatives on a wide range of issues, Zeitlin has shown that employers did not in practice transform the production process in such a way as to reduce significantly their dependence on skilled workers.¹²⁸

Since employers typically drew back from the first response, their relations with the unions were necessarily governed by the remaining two. In the case of shipbuilding, the conduct of industrial relations was much affected by the divergent traditions and economic rivalry of the two main centres of activity. Commitment to joint regulation was obviously much stronger on the northeast coast than on the Clyde, and as we have seen the 1901 national apprentice agreement as administered by the S.E.F. represented an unhappy compromise that did much to sour relations with the Boilermakers' Society. Again, on the machine question, while in the early stages there existed widespread support for an assertion of managerial prerogative in opposition to craft control, when the issue came down to the question of pneumatic caulking tools opinion on the desirability of reaching a compromise settlement with the union was divided, and resistance was led from the Clyde.¹²⁹ Even on wages, a sphere where considerations of market control made joint regulation more generally acceptable, a significant difference of emphasis existed between the two regions. In 1906 the Clyde possessed no wages agreements with the Boilermakers whereas a comprehensive arrangement existed on the northeast coast. When the termination of that arrangement was proposed by the Clyde, it was principally with a view to enabling the federation to take unilateral action on general wage questions.¹³⁰ Northeastern employers, however, were anxious to couple the S.E.F.'s new powers on wages with a national arrangement with the union, though it was not until 1909 that such an agreement was concluded.

The form taken by the 1909 agreement was such as to bring together, to a considerable degree, the divergent traditions represented within the industry. Clyde employers could see some merit in a system for the joint regulation of general wage changes that gave a degree of predictability to the movement of labour costs, while for the northeast the agreement allowed some scope for independent action to remedy what it saw as its position of competitive disadvantage. But it was the sectional disputes procedure that

¹²⁸ Zeitlin, "The Labour Strategies of British Engineering Employers", pp. 35–45.

¹²⁹ S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Minutes, 23 September 1904, 16 March and 23 May 1905.

¹³⁰ Joint Meetings of Tyne, Tees and Wear, Minutes, Conference with Clyde Shipbuilders Association, 11 October 1906.

was the key to the agreement's value so far as employers were concerned. The unions' adherence to the procedure implied a commitment to prevent workplace stoppages, a commitment to which they could be held by the sanction of national lock-out. Such a system would, employers believed, facilitate unilateral steps taken to vary piecework prices in line with technical change and to improve labour discipline. Critically, the procedure was also designed to prevent pieceworkers exploiting boom conditions to enforce upward adjustments in prices by strike action. Though formally a system of joint regulation, it represented in fact a framework for the containment of union power at yard level. A measure of that power, particularly in the case of the Boilermakers' Society, was the extraordinary lengths to which organised employers were prepared to go to enforce the national procedure. It is true that enthusiasm for the streamlined lock-out arrangements of 1910 was rather more evident on the Clyde than in the northeast, but the federation had no difficulty in mobilising support for action on the three occasions that it was threatened between May and September of that year.

Such extreme steps were to no avail. Where was the inducement for the Boilermakers, against whose yard level organisation the sectional procedure was principally aimed, to remain party to the agreement? The interest of union leaders in the maintenance of centralised bargaining procedures is frequently emphasised, since such systems conferred authority in dealings with members at branch and yard level.¹³¹ In their communications with union officials shipbuilders, like other masters, were ready enough to emphasise this aspect.¹³² But the interest of the Boilermakers' officials in the centralised exercise of authority had nothing to do with the neutralisation of the members' power at yard level, where organisation had traditionally been deployed to secure favourable adjustments in piecework prices and to enforce job controls. Centralised authority was of value only in relation to the defence of the interests of the trade, whether achieved unilaterally or through mechanisms of joint regulation.¹³³ The union's

¹³¹ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*, p. 471. For the shipbuilding case, a balanced appraisal of this issue is to be found in Lorenz, "The Labour Process and Industrial Relations in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries", pp. 63–67.

¹³² They did so, for example, during negotiations to end the 1910 lock-out. S.R.N.A. Archives, Federation Circulars, 17 November 1910. See also Lorenz, "The Labour Process and Industrial Relations in the British and French Shipbuilding Industries", p. 66.

¹³³ In the case of this union an appearance of extreme moderation in leadership was combined with exceptionally strong trade defences. For a valuable discussion of the relationship between these aspects see Reid, "The Division of Labour in the British Shipbuilding Industry", pp. 227–231.

continued influence was not dependent on the employer recognition conferred by the latter.

At the beginning of this paper two questions were raised in connection with the development of collective bargaining in Britain between 1889 and 1910. Firstly, did such development entail an enlargement of the scope of joint regulation? Secondly, a closely related point, did employers demonstrate through their national organisations a clear preference for working with unions, rather than against them? In the case of shipbuilding the answer to both these questions must, on balance, be negative. In moving to deal with unions nationally, rather than at district level, employers in the industry were concerned less with the advancement of joint regulation than with the assertion of their own authority in the workplace. It follows that their interest in working with the unions was strictly limited. Given this general bias in employer policy it is hardly surprising that the unions' experience with national bargaining procedures was an unhappy one, and one that the Boilermakers' Society at any rate was determined not to prolong.