

## LABOUR-MANAGEMENT CONFLICT: A MODEL AND AN APPROACH

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This article considers the utility of Pondy's general conflict model for understanding industrial disputes<sup>1</sup>, which includes five sets of related elements: antecedents to conflict; perceived conflict; felt conflict; manifest conflict and conflict aftermath. Figure 1 shows the general relationship among these elements.

It is assumed that conflicts between workers and management are largely inevitable in organisations and that they are not the pathological manifestations of 'bad' management or the outcomes of unwarranted belligerence by workers. Understanding the dynamics of conflict episodes may help the parties to a dispute to avoid some of the mistakes that lead to escalation and potential disaster. This is especially true since conflictful behaviour tends to be cyclical in character. In other words, a sequence of behaviour repeats its main features, within specific time periods or within specific settings. Cyclical behaviour can become so habitual as to be beyond the consciousness of the people involved. Indeed people may engage in behaviour cycles in ignorance or in reckless disregard of possibly harmful and self-defeating consequences. Understanding the cyclical nature of conflictful behaviour and the sequence of events from antecedents to aftermath may help managers and workers break out of these damaging cycles.

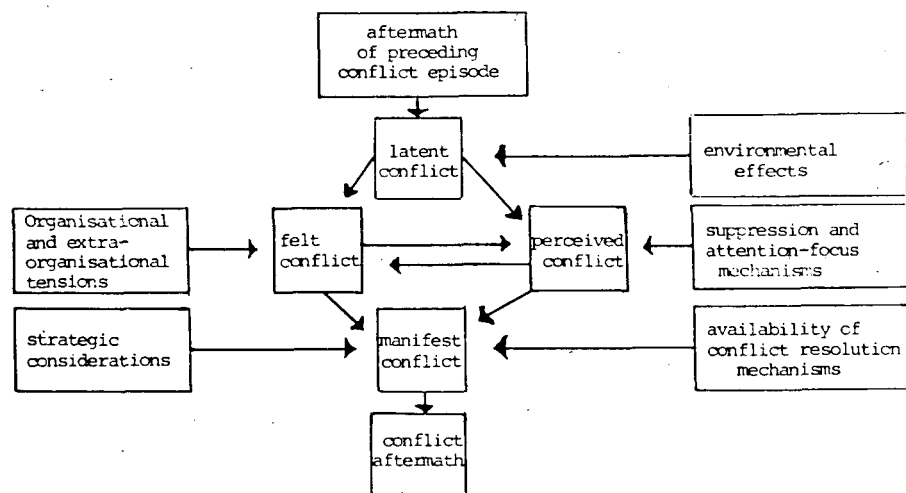
### Pondy's Conflict Model

Pondy views conflict as a process with a number of recognisable elements as depicted in Figure 1. It is pointed out that not every conflict episode reaches the manifest stage, nor do all conflicts follow the same pattern. He considers that certain events which have the potential to lead to manifest conflict precede each episode. The number of antecedents are manifold but Pondy reduces them to three general categories: competition for scarce resources, drives for autonomy and divergence of goals. He develops the point by saying "competition for scarce resources forms the basis for conflict when the aggregate demands of participants for resources exceed the resources available to the organisation; autonomy needs form the basis of conflict when one

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### Figure 1

### The Dynamics of a Conflict Episode



It is clear that all three conditions are common features in industrial disputes. These antecedents ensure that in labour relations matters there is often a considerable potential for conflict; indeed this condition has been referred to as latent conflict. However, conflict may sometimes be perceived when no apparent antecedents exist, and a powerful combination of antecedents may be present in a relationship without any of the participants perceiving the situation as conflictful. Bernard et al. use the 'semantic model' to account for the former.<sup>3</sup> According to this explanation, conflict is said to result from the parties' misunderstanding of each other's true position. It is argued that such conflict can be resolved by improving communications between the parties. Even with improved communication conflict may develop since people often respond, not to the concrete facts of a situation, but to their own definition of reality. Such definitions may not agree with the facts. This point will be developed below in the discussion on the self-fulfilling prophesy. The other case, where some latent conflict fails to reach a level of awareness, also requires explanation. Perception of conflict may be limited by the suppression and attention focus mechanisms reported by Cyert and March<sup>4</sup>. Individuals and groups tend to ignore conflicts that are only mildly threatening or which challenge ideas or actions which are not important to them. In addition people are char-

acteristically faced with more stimuli, including conflicts, than they can deal with given available time and capacities. The normal response is to deal with these problems sequentially, to focus attention on a few problems at a time. This is one reason why behaviours of managers and workers which appear incredible to outside observers, may be perfectly rational to those inside an organisation.

There is also an important distinction between perceiving and feeling conflict. As Pondy says; "A may be aware that B and A are in serious disagreement over some policy, but it may not make A tense or anxious, and it may have no effect whatsoever on A's feelings towards B".<sup>5</sup> Conflict is felt when it is personalised. One explanation of this personalisation process is put forward by Ellis and Harper<sup>6</sup>. They consider that people become anxious, angry and feel guilty because they try to live up to an image of the real world that others construct for them. Living up to these externally imposed demands can create tensions and pressures which result in anger. The anger may then be displaced against suitable targets like the conflict antecedents mentioned above.

After conflict is felt by the parties one or both of them usually engage in recognisable conflictful behaviour. There are several varieties of this behaviour in labour relations, ranging from refusals to co-operate with management to strikes. However, we must ask ourselves how one can decide when a certain behaviour or pattern of behaviour can be defined as conflictful. The most useful definition of manifest conflict seems to be that behaviour which, in the mind of one party, frustrates the goals of at least some of the other participants. This frustration of another's goals must be done consciously. Indeed, Coser considers that in a conflict episode one party will try to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals.<sup>7</sup> Attempts to accomplish the above objectives will often lead to a residue of discontent after each episode and this conflict aftermath will become one of the antecedents for a new conflict episode. This model provides a useful way of thinking about all conflict situations and we now examine the relevance of the model to labour relations.

## **ANTECEDENTS TO CONFLICTS BETWEEN MANAGEMENT AND WORKERS**

Manifest conflict results largely from factors which originate outside the particular relationship under consideration, or which precede the relationship. In this article eight major types of antecedents are considered: conflicts of economic interests, political cleavages between workers and managers, drives for autonomy by workers, the alienating nature of specialised work, technical versus social organisation, personal skills and traits, agitators and cultural factors.

## **(1) Conflict of Economic Interests**

It is clear that, at least in the short run, there is a distinct clash of economic interests between managers and workers. What is a cost to one side in industry and commerce is a reward to the other. An increase in wage costs without an increase in productivity or increased sales turnover will lead to a reduction in profit, which reduces the return to shareholders and other stakeholders in the business.

Time is another scarce resource in an organisation which has value for both workers and managers. Much industrial work is irksome and reduction in working hours or pace of work is desired by many workers. However, these events may well lead to a reduction in output with resultant marketing and costing difficulties.

A number of writers question whether there is really such a conflict in the long run. Herbert Marcuse argues that workers have the capacity to seriously disrupt organisation, but don't, while Beichman concludes that workers in Western industrial countries demonstrate a stubborn resistance to any and all invitations to bring the house down on all of us.<sup>8</sup> People who write in this vein suggest that in the long run there is a coincidence of economic interests between managers and workers. There is a coincidence of interest in the sense that most workers will try to avoid the demise of an employing firm, but above this threshold level exhortations to increase productivity and reduce costs often fall on deaf-ears. It will be especially difficult to convince workers that economic interests coincide when the market is static or declining. To say, as Sofer does, that it is more advantageous for most groups of industrial workers in Britain, most of the time, to pursue their economic interests within the existing institutional set-up rather than to attempt to disrupt ongoing economic units, is not to say that there is no serious conflict of interests.<sup>9</sup> It is easier to agree with Hyman when he concludes; "Since the denial of any conflict of interests is so obviously false, the only interesting question which arises is why this opinion is so often expressed".<sup>10</sup>

## **(2) Political Cleavage Between Managers and Workers**

It is argued by Marx and others that due to the distribution of power and status in society workers are alienated from capitalists and managers and resent the inequalities in bargaining. Marx predicted that the existence of capitalist society spelt doom for industrial workers, but there have been many developments in society since the 1850's which have contradicted this point of view; these include the enormous intervention by the state in industrial affairs, the extension of educational opportunities, increased living standards, increased power of trade unions, a view that satisfaction in work is linked with improved per-

formance, a separation of ownership from control in industry, the embourgeoisement of workers and a general rise in humanitarian feeling for industrial employees.

Evidence for a reduction in class warfare through the medium of strikes is provided by the fact that "trials of strength" in industrial relations have fallen significantly in number since the 1930's,<sup>11</sup> while "demonstrations in force",<sup>12</sup> or "downers"<sup>13</sup> have increased in importance. The latter are rarely used in disputes over serious matters of principle. This does not deny that many workers have a different perspective on industrial affairs from management and no matter how well integrated industrial workers are into the existing social and economic institutions many of them will consider their best interests to be served by confrontation with management. The present opposition by trades unions to Mrs Thatcher's government could be viewed as an exercise in group solidarity against a common political enemy.

### (3) Drives for Autonomy by Workers

Selznick defined autonomy as the degree to which a social system has power with respect to its environment.<sup>14</sup> By their hierarchical nature organisations restrict the power of their members, particularly lower members, and hence reduce their autonomy. In spite of the fact that people joining organisations have been socialised to accept authority hierarchies there is a resistance by humans to the notion of being controlled. Indeed, many argue that man has a strong need to self actualise, that is, to achieve the very best that he is capable of, yet the nature of work for the great majority of workers actively prevents self actualisation.<sup>15</sup> They argue that this is an important contributory factor in organisational conflicts.

A specific aspect of work that has received attention in the literature is the loss of autonomy due to the close supervision of workers by their bosses. McGregor argues that this arises because of the negative assumptions managers make about workers, assumptions he labels as Theory X<sup>16</sup>. Managers assume that workers dislike work and need to be threatened with sanctions to get them to work hard.

Due to these negative communications, workers may well live up to management's expectations and this in turn may lead to even tighter supervision. Efforts to maintain or gain autonomy are widespread in modern organisations. These efforts necessarily challenge management prerogatives and sow the seeds of many conflicts. Another area that has received considerable attention in the literature is the importance of rules and procedures. There are excellent managerial reasons for the existence of rules and procedures. They considerably reduce the variability of inputs management has to deal with, make planning and other

forms of forecasting easier, enable workers to understand the limits of their behaviour and allow freedom within these limits. It is also true that many rules protect workers as well as constraining them. But as Gouldner points out the source of most organisational rules and procedures is not the people who must carry them out.<sup>17</sup> In addition the rules and procedures may be rational for the organisation as a whole, but it does not necessarily follow that they are rational for many of the sub-groups in the organisation.

#### **(4) Alienating Nature of Shop Floor Work**

The technical benefits of an extensive division of labour are enormous. Litterer comprehensively shows that specialisation allows the organisation to derive benefits from (1) employing experts to plan, set up and control the production process; (2) developing skills of operational workers and reducing the time required for training; (3) employing people who already possess skills; (4) optimising the abilities of employees; (5) manufacturing using concurrent rather than sequential operations.<sup>18</sup>

However, Litterer also points out that there are social consequences of the division of labour and that, if the process is pushed too far, these social consequences may start to outweigh the cost benefits of specialisation. The essential argument is that the repetitiveness and monotony of much of the modern organisation of production strips work of its meaning for the shop floor worker and that this leads to apathy towards the organisations or provides a basis for active dissatisfaction and conflict. Researchers have been reporting these adverse consequences for many years; for example Vernon found that employees on jobs with a cycle time of less than one minute were frequently bored and restricted production.<sup>19</sup> Walker and Guest, in their study of car workers, found that there were virtually no social groups on the shop floor and that workers were alienated by the assembly line in that they were powerless to influence the pace or method of work.<sup>20</sup> Friedmann commented on the predominance of technical factors in the work environment on the shop floor and the increasing routinization of work, which reduced the necessity for specialist skills and knowledge by workers.<sup>21</sup> Herzberg pointed out that extensive specialisation of work robs it of its capacity to meet human needs for advancement and responsibility.<sup>22</sup> Since these needs are claimed to be the major satisfiers in the work situation Herzberg is saying that highly specialised assembly line work is incapable of producing satisfied workers. However, it is by no means agreed that assembly line type work is resented by all workers. For example, Goldthorpe et al suggested that many workers do not regard their workplace as a situation from which they obtain basic satisfactions, but will press employers to increase economic returns to allow them to pursue family and social satisfactions.<sup>23</sup> Turner and

Lawrence indicated that there were significant cultural differences in workers' responses to enriched jobs.<sup>24</sup> Hulin and Blood and Hackman and Lawler noted significant individual differences in the response of workers to enlarge jobs.<sup>25</sup> On the basis of his study of industrial workers Dubin suggested that the kind of commitment to work found among professional groups was absent among industrial workers.<sup>26</sup> For them, work was not a central life interest in the sense that the family and community are. In spite of these caveats it seems reasonable to assume that long exposure to repetitive, monotonous work will set up tensions in workers that will find an outlet in non-productive behaviour.

### (5) Technical versus Social Organisation

A source of divergent goals between management and workers is the tendency for managers to regard the firm as a rational, technical system whose aim is to produce goods and services, following a well thought out plan of action. They tend to forget that the firm is also a social system where patterns of relationships within and between groups are important and that these individuals and groups have feelings towards other groups, including management. Ignoring the realities of the social system will lead to social breakdown. Management are especially apt to ignore social realities when implementing technical innovations. Roethlisberger and Dickson indicated that in the bank wiring room of the Western Electric Company management were solely responsible for devising and implementing rapid changes.<sup>27</sup> Once changes were decided upon orders were given to the men who were doing the actual work and they were supposed to accommodate themselves to the changes. Typically, little or no consideration was given to the wishes of the workers or the possibility that technical change would disrupt existing social structures. The result was that workers developed a blind resistance to all innovations and formed a social organisation at a lower level in opposition to the technical organisation.

Trist and Bamforth report similar problems with the introduction of mechanisation into the Durham mines after nationalisation.<sup>28</sup> Productivity and morale were low and turnover was high after mechanisation, but management sought engineering solutions to the problems. They failed to realise that it was the destruction of the existing social structure by the mechanised methods that lay at the roots of the problem. Trist and Bamforth conclude: "No attempt seems to have been made in the (mechanised) method to achieve any living social integration of the . . . groups into which the cycle aggregate has been differentiated. This, of course, is a common omission in mass production systems".<sup>29</sup> While there are criticisms of the above studies, on the adequacy of their research designs, there is little disagreement about the problems that will arise if technical innovations disrupt social relations.

## **(6) Personal Skills and Traits**

One obvious possibility in management worker conflicts, as in other conflicts, is that these are matters of personality. Walton and McKersie, reviewing experimental studies, found that certain personality attributes, such as high authoritarianism, high level dogmatism and low self esteem, increased conflict behaviour.<sup>30</sup> There is a *prima facie* case that people who have strong desires for upward mobility will frequently tread on the toes of opponents. To enable such mobility to take place a dogmatic determined posture may be necessary and this may mean that people who occupy prominent roles in organisations display the type of behaviour that inclines them towards conflict. Dalton and Thompson found that personal dissimilarities, such as background, values, education, age and social status lowered the probability of interpersonal rapport between people.<sup>31</sup> It is possible that the dissimilar backgrounds of management and workers' representatives could lead to increased interpersonal difficulties and potential conflict.

While it is undoubtedly true that personality clashes occur they are unlikely to be the true cause of consistent labour relations problems. A fiery union leader may carry the men behind him for a short time but unless he articulates underlying grievances, rather than his personal opinions, he is unlikely to be able to sustain a conflictful posture. People's behaviour in organisations is as much the product of their organisational situation as of their personality constructs. Representatives of workers and managers are constrained by the expectations of their interest groups and their roles will have many inbuilt stresses.

## **(7) Agitations**

There is a popular image of the union shop steward, whipping up discontent in an effort to destroy the capitalist system. The shop steward is often referred to as an agitator, but in reality the steward's role is more often associated with attempts to prevent strikes than to foment them. The popular theory fails to explain why agitators are apparently so much more influential in some industrial situations than in others. Turner has argued that where industrial situations are likely to lead to conflict leaders will emerge to organise it.<sup>32</sup> He also argues that the ability of agitators, or other individuals, to create conflict, in the absence of circumstances that would induce it anyway, is very limited. Hyman suggests that attributing industrial disputes to agitators is, at best, to point to the instrument of conflict rather than its cause and that agitator theories of industrial disputes suffer from the same sort of deficiencies as personality theories.<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to foment disputes without widespread grievance.

## (8) Cultural Factors

Relationships between workers and managers do not take place in a vacuum. They are influenced by features of the particular organisation which is the focal point in a dispute and by certain features of society at large.

Dunlop considers that the attributes of the industrial relations system have an important bearing on the probability of occurrence of disputes.<sup>34</sup> The industrial relations system, composed of workers and their organisations, managers and their organisations and government agencies, creates a commonly shared body of ideas and norms, which guide the behaviour of the parties in a conflict episode. Certain courses of action may be avoided because it is just not the done thing. Sofer also reminds us that the social and economic environment of an industry, the history of labour relations and the legal framework are important influences on the frequency, intensity and form of industrial conflict.<sup>35</sup>

Pondy's model would not assert that the above antecedents cause industrial disputes. However, they provide the potentials for conflict and the conditions which are likely to lead to disputes. When one examines the statistics on Britain's strike record, (see Table 1), it is immediately clear that certain industries, such as motor vehicles, docks and coal mining have a much greater propensity to strike than others. It would, therefore, seem that certain industries have a greater concentration of antecedents or that the same antecedents have a much greater impact in some industries compared to others. Pondy's model indicated that perception might account for differing responses to similar antecedents; therefore, it is proposed to examine this proposition now.<sup>36</sup>

## PERCEIVED AND FELT CONFLICT

It is undoubtedly true that human behaviour is influenced by social forces like the system of industrial relations, administrative arrangements or other antecedents to industrial conflict mentioned above, but man is not the plaything of social forces. He has his own perception of social forces and he consciously interprets the social situations in which he finds himself and assigns his own meanings to them. His behaviour will be influenced by his own definition of reality and by the goals and motives which he brings to a situation. It is proposed to spend a little time in developing this idea in a general way before returning to instances from labour relations.

### The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The meaning which men assign to social events can be illustrated, in a

Table 1: Stoppages of Work in the United Kingdom: Incidence Rates 1975-1978

| INDUSTRY GROUP<br>(Standard Industrial Classification<br>1968) | Number of working days lost<br>per 1,000 employees |       |       |       |                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|----------------------|
|                                                                | 1975                                               | 1976  | 1977  | 1978  | Average<br>1975-1978 |
| Coal Mining                                                    | 172                                                | 235   | 295   | 664   | 341                  |
| Drink                                                          | 600                                                | 350   | 1,301 | 681   | 733                  |
| Iron and Steel                                                 | 760                                                | 763   | 1,596 | 802   | 780                  |
| Motor vehicles                                                 | 1,814                                              | 1,751 | 5,455 | 7,214 | 4,058                |
| Woollen and worsted                                            | 45                                                 | 49    | 9     | 143   | 62                   |
| Footwear                                                       | 91                                                 | 54    | 308   | 111   | 141                  |
| Printing, publishing etc                                       | 133                                                | 86    | 427   | 741   | 346                  |
| Port and inland water transport                                | 4,337                                              | 585   | 1,629 | 1,359 | 1,977                |
| Insurance, banking, finance                                    | 2                                                  | 4     | 4     | 1     | 3                    |
| Professional and scientific<br>services                        | 8                                                  | 7     | 13    | 6     | 8                    |
| Total, All Industries and<br>Services                          | 265                                                | 146   | 448   | 414   | 318                  |

Source: Department of Employment Gazette.

general way, using the theorem of the self-fulfilling prophesy. Thomas sets forth the theorem in the following manner: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences".<sup>37</sup> The concept provides an unceasing reminder that men respond not only to the objective features of a situation, but also, and sometimes primarily, to the meaning this situation has for them. And once they have assigned some meaning to the situation, their subsequent behaviour is determined by the assigned meaning. An example may render the above less abstract. Two nations may believe that war between them is inevitable; actuated by this conviction, representatives of the two nations become progressively alienated, apprehensively countering each "offensive" move of the other with a defensive move of their own. Stockpiles of armaments grow larger and eventually the anticipation of war helps create the actuality.

As a result of their failure to comprehend the operation of the self-fulfilling prophesy, many people of good will often retain enduring prejudices. For example, managers may make the assumption that workers are unco-operative, undependable people. As a consequence of this assumption, which may be entirely wrong in practice, they will treat workers in an overbearing manner, closely supervise them and apply work rules rigorously. The natural response by the workers to this situation will be to behave in an unco-operative manner, which, of course, confirms managements views as accurate. The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new be-

haviour which makes the originally false conception come *true*. This phenomenon is peculiar to human affairs having no counterpart in the natural sciences.

### In-group Virtues and Out-group Vices

Blake et al. and Sherif have shown that when groups engage in conflicts false definitions of the other (out) group are common.<sup>38</sup> Negative stereotypes of the out group become common and these stereotypes influence future relations between the groups, reinforcing the cyclical nature of the self-fulfilling prophecy. These studies reveal that one of the most sinister consequences of a win-lose struggle is the sizeable distortions it creates in the judgement and perceptual processes of the opposing groups. Group members see the work of their own group as excellent and downgrade that of the opposition, even when quality is measurable. They also develop and exhibit hostile attitudes towards the others and particularly denigrate their leaders or spokesmen. We therefore have a possible sequence of events in labour relations; first, group A assumes group B is truculent; second, group A imposes sanction on B; third, group B reacts by being truculent; fourth, open aggression starts and negative stereotypes proliferate; fifth, further cycles of sanctions and responses commence.

Eldridge has recognised that the views and beliefs of workers are directly related to their willingness to engage in specific forms of conflict and has applied this prescription to an essay on industrial relations in the British steel industry.<sup>39</sup> He contrasted the militant history of the industry in South Wales with amicable relations that existed in North East England. He suggests that in certain circumstances a succession of minor incidents can prove mutually reinforcing and so set relationships in a persistent mould. Phelps Brown makes the same point when he says: "One man's initiative would be reciprocated by someone on the other side; no economic storm came to break-up the arrangement they made between them; a tradition was established, and drew strength from its own success. Human relations build up like that, but in either direction. Started in the wrong direction, not by malevolence, but perhaps by some twist of circumstance, they can generate ever new conflicts out of the bitter memories of past ones. Each friendly act is suspect as a trap, each unfriendly one is vital to self-defence; and all because that is how it was yesterday".<sup>40</sup>

In our model conflict aftermath was seen as an antecedent to a further episode. The importance of conflict aftermath will be of greatest significance in firms with endemic strike records. Relations become so embittered that the strike becomes the weapon of first rather than last resort and a self defeating cycle of strikes becomes the norm accepted by both sides as inevitable.

## STRIKE PRONENESS OF INDIVIDUAL PLANTS

Particular combinations of antecedents, differences in perception and endemic strikes may well account for the difference in strike proneness of different industries shown in Table 1. It is true, however, that within strike prone industries there are many plants which rarely, if ever, experience a strike. It would thus appear that there may be particular characteristics of organisational structure, size, age or managerial behaviour in individual plants which would have an important impact on organisational relationships. Turner, Clack and Roberts, in their comprehensive study on labour relations in the British motor industry, were struck by the fact that Vauxhall and Rolls Royce had much less labour trouble than other car firms. They also noted that less than one establishment in five experienced in any one year a stoppage big enough to be reported to the Ministry of Labour. They observed that in one major car firm the incidence of lost time from strikes was four times higher than in other firms.

Turner and his colleagues began to suspect that the approaches of individual firms to labour relations was a crucial factor in producing industrial unrest. Little research had been conducted into the effects of the internal organisation and practice of management on industrial relations. Consequently Turner, et al. conducted the first systematic attempt, in Britain, to explore the connection of managerial and organisational characteristics with the conflict experience of individual firms.<sup>42</sup> They studied forty five enterprises from a variety of regional, economic and technical backgrounds and concluded that while many of the antecedents outlined above are important in labour unrest, managerial practice has a considerable effect. Their main conclusions were that the degree of standardisation and formalisation in general management, but especially in labour relations affairs, was directly linked to the incidence of disputes. Formalisation leads to a rigidity by management which spills over into a rigidity in dealing with labour questions. Evidence was also found to support the view that relatively good pay and benefits, formal provisions for worker/management communication and less frequent changes reduced the extent of labour disputes. Surprisingly, they found no evidence to support the conclusion of the Donovan Commission<sup>43</sup> that sophisticated personnel and industrial relations departments will reduce the incidence of disputes. Active joint consultation was shown to be associated with higher conflict experience, and possibly reduced managerial efficiency and the use of formal conciliation procedures were shown to increase the number of stoppages. This research project seems to point the way to a useful line of enquiry in labour relations research.

## CONCLUSIONS

Labour disputes are complex affairs having a number of causes. This

article attempts to promote an understanding of such disputes by applying a general conflict model which will clarify and simplify some of the major issues. It is felt that, while many people in organisations experience labour disputes, a practical understanding of the dynamics of the process is not similarly widespread.

It is the opinion of the authors that it is possible to use the model of conflict and the related theories to intervene within organisations in order to conduct labour relations in a more positive atmosphere. The model could be used to draw up a series of antecedents for particular organisations. The antecedents could be grouped into those over which the organisation has a lot of control, such as those embodied in the work content, the work context and managerial structure, and into those over which the organisation has little control, such as the political views of employees. In this way it should be possible to study conflict antecedents, identify resulting conflicts and aftermath accumulations.

Knowing that perceptions differ could encourage management to discover what the perceptions of various groups actually are, using, for example, survey feedback approaches, and motivate them to reduce false perceptions and resulting distortions. Such approaches could contribute to a reduction in the incidence of labour disputes.

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