

THE UNION COMMITTEE AT THE WORKPLACE: A CASE ANALYSIS OF ITS ROLE, ACTIVITIES, AND INFLUENCE IN UNION DECISION MAKING

T. Murphy*

The purpose of this article is to present for discussion some initial findings of research currently being undertaken by the Industrial Relations Department at University College, Dublin. The programme of research covers a wide range of issues at the level of the workplace, including the extent of shop stewards' involvement and influence in collective bargaining, the occurrence of unofficial disputes and others. The subject chosen for this article is the single union committee at plant level, its role and activities and the more difficult matter of its influence in decision-making. Union committees are an increasingly active feature of Irish industrial relations. They take many forms: they may be intra- or inter-union in character; they may cover single or multi plant situations; and they may comprise shop stewards and other representative rank and file members.¹ The committee which is the subject of this article is known as a section committee and represents a single union/single plant situation and comprises shop stewards and ordinary members of the union concerned. The committee can be said to exercise a dual role, one in relation to the processing of worker-management relations at the workplace (collective bargaining), the other in relation to the organisation of the trade union. This study is concerned with the latter. Since the rule-book of the union concerned says relatively little about the functions of such committees the case provides insight into how a committee functions in practice and raises some questions about its future development. No claim is made that the case is typical or representative of section committees generally. It does, however, provide documented research where none exists and it demonstrates one (and perhaps extreme) version of the relationships which can exist between branch, section, shop stewards and members of the union.

*The author is Lecturer in Industrial Relations in the Department of Industrial Relations at University College, Dublin.

CONSTITUTIONAL POSITION OF A SECTION COMMITTEE

The basic unit of organisation in the union in this study is the branch, and it may be organised on either a geographic or a workplace basis. The geographically based branch, where members of the union within a given town or area are brought together, is the more common arrangement. This is understandable since relatively few workplaces in Ireland are sufficiently large to justify a separate branch identity. The section refers to those members within a branch sharing the same employment. In the case under review the section comprises members of the union within a single manufacturing plant and exists within and under the jurisdiction of a geographically based branch.

Under the union's rules "the business of each section may be administered by a Section Secretary, Chairman and a Section Committee . . . under the direction of the Branch Secretary". The rules also provide that ". . . business transacted at a Section meeting shall be confined exclusively to the affairs of the Section unless the Branch expressly provides that some specified items of general Branch business may be transacted at Section meetings" and finally that the Section Secretary "shall control the affairs of the Section, subject to the supervision of the Section Committee and of the Branch Secretary and Committee, and to the instructions of the Section, Branch and Union".

In order to complete our understanding of the position of Section Committees it is necessary to consider the relationship under union rules of the shop steward with the section committee and the branch. Four extracts from the union's rule book are relevant. These provide that the shop steward shall: (1) ". . . be under the control and direction of the Branch Secretary and Branch Committee. A direction given by a Branch Secretary to a shop steward shall prevail unless, or until, it is amended or cancelled by the Branch Committee . . ." (2) ". . . at all times, act in cooperation with the members of the Section Committee . . ." (3) ". . . endeavour to obtain a settlement or understanding on any domestic or personal problem arising in the employment, provided such action is consistent with the conditions of employment and is in accord with accepted and understood custom and practice obtaining in the employment" (4) ". . . have no authority to authorise a stoppage of work, or to take any action likely to lead to a dispute without the prior approval of the Branch Secretary and Union sanction . . ."

How then can we sum up the rulebook image of the section committee in the context of workplace affairs? Clearly they have no negotiating powers delegated to them by the union. Nor indeed do they appear to possess any powers to represent and act on the union's behalf at the workplace. On the surface, therefore, it is not very clear as to the precise role intended for

section committees and the casual observer might consequently be excused were he/she to find difficulty in visualising a significant role for them and in explaining their increasing presence at workplace level. The evidence of our research to date indicates that committees can significantly impact on both the process of worker-management relations and the union organisation at the workplace and that the impression of impotency given by the absence of negotiating authority is an erroneous one.

THE CASE AND ANALYSIS

The company under consideration is Irish owned and has had a long history in manufacture. It is a "leader" in terms of pay and conditions in the area in which it operates. The general workers in the plant are organised by two general unions, one for female staff and the other for males. The subject of the research reported here is the section committee of the union for male employees, which represents about half the 400 general workers. The committee was formed in 1976 and presently comprises the five shop stewards and eight ordinary members who represent each of the principal work areas in the plant. It was not possible to establish the reasons for the establishment of the committee. The data set out and analysed below and on which the later discussion is based are of two kinds: first, the committee's records of its meetings held over a 49 month period between April 1976 and April 1980, covering 44 meetings in all (37 ordinary meetings and 7 special meetings); and second, critical incidents which occurred in that period and which give insight into how the committee functions and its role at the workplace. Details of these incidents and events were compiled from both section and branch committees records, and discussions held with the branch secretary, section chairman and section secretary and the company's industrial relations manager.

As stated, the committee is composed of thirteen members. While the total membership of the committee was thirteen throughout the period examined the number of shop stewards was raised from three to five in August 1978. Stewards are automatically members of the committee and occupy the posts of officials. The other members are elected at the section's annual general meeting. As a general rule meetings are held on the morning of the first Sunday of each month, either at the function room of a local inn (outside public licensing hours) or the local office of the union. Attendance over the forty-nine month period averaged 74.8%. The stewards had a higher attendance rate on average than other members, 87.7% as against 69.3%. Over the period the branch secretary attended four meetings, two of which were special meetings. Both special meetings concerned pay negotiations in progress, one to obtain the committee's views on an offer by the company, the other involved an effort by the branch secretary to have the committee alter its attitude to a

particular aspect of a pay claim. The effort failed and the committee backed the stewards who, it is recorded, were "... adamant that the claim ... will stand no matter what comes of this meeting". The remaining two meetings attended by the branch secretary concerned the introduction of a faster machine resulting in reduced manning but without redundancy and finally the refusal of a worker (with the committee's backing) to be job-timed. In the latter case the committee "saw no reason to change its attitudes towards the case".

In all there were seven special meetings held by the committee. Five concerned pay negotiations: three of these considered offers by management, one considered the exertion of pressure on the company and resulted in a strike ultimatum being approved by the committee; the final meeting was called by the shop stewards; this was the meeting attended by the branch secretary, described earlier.

PROCEEDINGS OF MEETINGS

The immediate problem presented by the eighty-nine foolscap pages of manuscript records was one of classification. After many efforts the following classification of types of issues was adopted: (1) information sharing; (2) grievances and work-rules; (3) claims (pay and conditions); (4) administrative decisions; (5) enforcement of union standards on members; (6) reports of management complaints and (7) others. In the case of types (2) and (3), the precise nature of the discussion in relation to the item was also identified. Further breakdowns within each classification were also possible and these are discussed later. In the case of the grievances and work-rules classification, an effort to separate grievances of individuals and groups from what might be termed union enforcement on management of rules and basic trade union principles governing the organisation of work was attempted, but without complete success. Grievances were defined as issues initiated by and having an immediate and direct effect on, existing workers. Work-rule issues, on the other hand, were seen as those usually initiated by local union representatives (shop stewards) in response to a perceived breach of some rule or understanding or union principle concerning the organisation of work and resulting in such outcomes as more jobs, maintenance of staffing levels and minimum standards of training, or control of substitution by supervisors. In practice, however, it was sometimes difficult to make the distinction. The results of the classification scheme adopted are contained in Table 1 and are now examined.

(1) *Information Sharing Issues*: the regular section committee meeting provided a valuable opportunity for members to share information in respect of both management activities, plans, etc. and those originating on the union or worker side of the "house". It is interesting to note that on

Table 1: Analysis of Committee Meetings Proceedings

Table 1: Analysis of Committee Meetings Proceedings			
Description of Issue			Instances Recorded
1. Information Sharing			63 (23.2%)
2. Grievances and Work Rules			
	Grievances	Work Rules	Total
(i) Reporting and Decision to investigate	29	13	42 (40.4%)
(ii) Updating Cttee. on investigations	19	5	24 (23.1%)
(iii) Use of Force	9	6	15 (14.4%)
(iv) Outcome reported	17	6	23 (22.1%)
	74	30	104 100%
3. Claims — Pay/Conditions			110* (40.4%)
(i) Contents reported/discussed	6 (12.8%)		
(ii) Updating Cttee. on investigations	22 (46.8%)		
(iii) Strategy, use of force	15 (31.9%)		
(iv) Outcomes reported	4 (3.5%)		
	47 (100.0%)		47 (17.3%)
4. Administrative Decisions			28 (10.3%)
5. Enforcement of Union standards on Members			11 (4.0%)
6. Reports of Management Complaints			6 (2.2%)
7. Others			7 (2.6%)
TOTAL:			272 (100%)
*Includes 6 where precise issue could not be determined because of insufficient information			

*Includes 6 where precise issue could not be determined because of insufficient information

only one occasion in the four year period was information concerning the business side of the enterprise raised; this concerned the failure of the company to win an order abroad. A breakdown of the 63 entries is contained in Table 2.

Table 2: Breakdown of "Information Shared" by Type

1. Information originating with management	19	30.1%
2. Information concerning job evaluation and other conditions	19	30.1%
3. Advising and clarifying union/section policy and employment rules	10	15.9%
4. Branch and union news	6	9.5%
5. Others	9	14.3%
Total	63	100%

The information originating with management was largely to do with recruitment (16/19) both from external and internal (promotion) sources. The remaining three instances concerned plans and actions by management to tighten up controls on workers e.g., restrictions on pass-outs due to abuse. The reporting of information concerning job evaluation accounted for 12/19 instances and concerned forthcoming evaluation of current jobs (on appeal) and new jobs. The other seven recordings concerned changes to conditions of work, output levels achieved by individual machines, and overtime opportunity. The

inclusion of "advising and clarifying union/section policy on matters and employment rules" under "information sharing" perhaps obscures its real significance to worker-management relations at plant level. These represent "failed" grievances so to speak, failing, that is, to pass the scrutiny of the committee and its interpretation of union policy and accepted rules of the workplace. Finally, the meetings provided the opportunity to circulate news both from the local branch and the rest of the union organisation. However this information almost always had a strong "Section" interest.

(2) *Grievance and Work Rule Issues*: a total of 110 recordings appear in the committee's records concerning grievance and work-rule issues. Each reference in the record was labelled according to a four item classification as follows: (1) initial reporting of issue — decision to investigate; (2) updating on progress of investigations/negotiations; (3) use of force — consideration and decision to use or threaten use; (4) reporting of outcome. The most notable feature of the result of this classification was the relatively high (15/104) incidence of "force" issues. Seventy nine separate grievance/work-rule issues were also identified in the records. The discrepancy between this figure and those contained in Table 1 is explained by the fact that in the first case some issues would have been mentioned at more than one meeting; secondly, not all issues would have been reported at committee in the first instance; some would have been raised with stewards between meetings and may or may not have been noted at committee whether in terms of an "update", "use of force" or an "outcome". Table 3 shows a breakdown of the 79 separate grievance/work rule issues under seven headings. These are further grouped under two internally matching groups, one incorporating reward, compensation and benefit and the other involving conditions of work. The result of this grouping shows an almost equal splitting of grievance and work-rule issues between those involving some reward or compensation and those involving conditions at work.

It is appropriate to dwell for a moment on the meaning of grievance as adopted by the author. Some might dispute the use of the term grievance so freely, suggesting that some grievances might not in fact constitute a grievance at all, but a desire on the part of workers and their representatives to clarify some aspect of work regulation with management. This argument is reasonable. It does not however, enable us to determine the point at which a grievance comes to exist and would not have aided the analysis of the records in the case. The more operational notion of grievance potentiality was therefore used. Whether one accepts or rejects some or all of the seventy nine grievance type issues identified as true grievance cases, there can be no denying that they each at least possess the potential of a "full-blown" grievance. Selekmán's comment that "a grievance is never 'not a grievance' . . ." expresses the point adequately.²

Table 3: Breakdown of "Grievance" and "Work Rules" Issues Handled by Committee

	Grievance	Work Rules	
Reward, Compensation, etc.:			
1. Attendance (overtime, etc.)	12	Nil	
2. Status (promotion, seniority, etc.)	11	Nil	
3. Benefits (bonus, holidays, sick leave)	11	Nil	
Sub-Totals	34 (43.0%)	Nil (0%)	34 (43.0%)
Conditions at Work:			
4. Supervision and Control	4	1	
5. Work Content, Methods, Efforts, etc.	4	12	
6. Conditions (catering, health etc.)	8	6	
Sub-Totals	16 (20.3%)	19 (24.1%)	35 (44.3%)
Other Issues:			
7. All others			10 (12.7%)
Totals	50 (63.3%)	19 (24.1%)	79 (100%)

(3) *Claims – Pay and Conditions*: three separate sets of pay negotiations are discernible from the records. Approximately two thirds of the items recorded represent the reporting and discussing of the content of claims, updating the progress of negotiations and reporting final outcomes. However, a significant one third of all recordings were either of discussions on how to bring pressure to bear on the management side or decisions on coercive action to be taken including threats of action.

(4) *Administrative Decisions*: the twenty eight items covered such areas as rules of attendance and venue, elections/co-options to section committee, elections to branch committee, elections to company job evaluation committee and to factory council and election of new shop stewards.

(5) *Union Standards on Members*: eleven occasions were reported where the conduct of members at the workplace was deemed to be in breach of union standards, or not in the best interests of the union, the section committee and its members. Five of these concerned the undertaking of work duties not consistent with job specifications. The remainder concerned reporting on fellow workers, an unproven accusation against the chairman and vice-chairman of the section committee of making underhand deals with management, a contribution to a discussion at the factory council which was not in the best interests of members, a worker going on leave indicating to management that he would be available for

overtime or call-out if needed, refusal by a worker to share with fellow workers unpleasant overtime hours and some security workers going to the branch secretary "behind the back of the section committee . . . to see if he could arrange for them to go to work during any more strikes". The decision to keep the security men out during the strike had been taken by the general members and as recorded by the committee, "only they would change it".

(6) *Complaints by Management*: the six recordings included two clashes with local management over the function of the section committee and in particular the status of its decisions; two represented complaints made by management about the excessive time being spent by stewards on their union activities; others included a notification by a local manager of his intention to issue a warning to a worker and a notification of an investigation about to be undertaken by management following the discovery of a carton of the company's product on the premises.

CRITICAL EVENTS

Several incidents which occurred in the course of the four year recorded period appear to offer significant insight into the role and functions of the committee. These include an unofficial strike, the attendance of security men during industrial action and a case involving compensation to three workers (one of whom was chairman of the committee) as a result of reduced manning and the elimination of night work. The strike took place as a result of the dismissal of a member who had a history of transgressions and who had in the past received several warnings from management. These were made known to the union at the time with copies of correspondence to the relevant shop steward and branch secretary. The final incidence arose when the employee was given a passout to leave his car to a garage. He failed to return to work on that day, and also failed to report for the following two days on the second of which his holidays commenced. On his return from holidays he produced a medical note from his doctor dated four days after his initial day's absence. This was not accepted by management and despite pleas from two shop stewards he was dismissed. Almost immediately the two shop stewards called on workers to strike, which they did. Later, pickets were removed to allow negotiations to take place between the branch secretary, stewards and management. A proposal was worked out which involved a suspension of the dismissal pending an investigation by a Rights Commissioner whose recommendation the company agreed to accept. A meeting of the union's members was held in the local townhall to consider the proposals and in a secret ballot these were rejected by 49 to 18 votes. Three days later a further meeting of members took place at which the branch secretary's recommendation for a return to work was not supported by the stewards. A secret ballot resulted in a second rejection of the proposed settlement,

this time by a narrow majority, 65 to 59 votes. From this point workers belonging to other unions in the plant began to waiver in their support of the strike. Soon after the branch secretary and stewards met management. The proposals reached at this meeting were similar to those of the first day of the strike. On this occasion the secret ballot of members resulted in acceptance by 102 to 27 votes. The strike has lasted two weeks and at the next section meeting two members "wanted to know why the strike happened the way it did without the section committee being notified". The record continues, "The chairman explained the situation clearly to them. He also explained the right way to do things".

A second incident concerned whether or not security men should continue to work in the event of a strike. The question was first raised at a meeting of the branch committee where the policy of the union was outlined and it was agreed that the following instruction should be issued to security men in the event of a strike — "They would not undertake any additional duties that would not be normal to their everyday duties. In the event of they not complying with this instruction they would then be ordered to join in the strike". At a general meeting of members of the company organised by the section committee the general body of members decided that the security men should not work during a strike. During the two week strike described earlier the security men did not work.

The final incident concerns the manning of the company boilerhouse, which was formerly manned by five men on a 24 hour, 7 day basis. One of the men concerned left the company and another had submitted a request for a transfer to another department. This gave the company an opportunity to eliminate night working altogether, with a potential saving of the wages of the two men concerned. This seemed all the more feasible as the remaining three men were interested in coming off night work because of the impact of the shift on their social lives. The issue was raised at a section committee meeting and despite the fact that six of the eight members present expressed serious reservations about the prospect of the two jobs in question being "sold away" this did not prevent a deal being made *by the three men concerned*, and management, a deal which gave approximately £10,000 to each of the three men concerned in compensation for their loss of earnings.

DISCUSSION

For the purpose of the discussion which follows four areas are singled out for special attention. Firstly, the part played by the committee in terms of trade union *communications* is considered. In addition to the communications flow to and from trade union membership it is necessary to consider the equally important aspect of communications between stewards and between stewards and other committee members. An

offshoot of this latter aspect of communications involves the educational value of the process. Secondly, there is the *policing role* of the committee which is perhaps its central function. Thirdly, the committee's role in *sanctions administration* is considered and fourthly, there is the question of *decision making* and the extent to which the committee is in a position to make decisions and influence decision making.

Communications: since the research concerned the particular trade union in the case and its organisation at the level of the plant it is not necessary to dwell on communications from the points of view of management and other unions in the plant. Two comments will, however, be made. Firstly, it was noticeable how seldom other unions and their activities featured in the discussions at meetings. The records of the committee suggest a relatively self contained workplace unit with little communication with other unions. The second comment concerns communications between management and the union's members. Among the informational items raised at committee meetings it was significant that almost one third concerned information originating with management (see Table 2). It is not clear, however, whether or not management relied upon the committee as a medium of communication with workers (this is very much doubted by the author). Neither is it clear whether or not workers relied upon the members of the committee for the information in question.

The facility for information processing which committee meetings represented was distinctly impressive. The evidence was plentiful as regards information flow from members as well as to members, both to and from local representatives and to and from the branch. There seems little doubt that the committee, comprising as it does non-steward as well as steward members, achieved a higher level of communications penetration in the plant than the stewards by themselves could possibly achieve. Having said that, however, one needs to introduce the qualification that no measures are available as to the quality or the effectiveness of the communications flow, or its adequacy in terms of the needs of members and the union organisation. Despite this, however, the existence of the committee appears at least to provide the opportunity for enhanced communications between members and union than might otherwise be the case. There is a further aspect of the communications process to which the work of a committee seems to make a very valuable contribution and this is the flow of information between members of the committee. This has the beneficial effect of not just enabling and assisting information flow but of achieving the coordination of activities as well as providing instruction for activists in day to day industrial relations administration and procedures. In this, one can readily see the potential of the committee as a learning ground for future stewards.

Committee's Policing Role: the central activity of the committee was its

policing role. Interestingly enough, however, the actions and plans of management, although the dominant focus of the committee's attention, were not the only issues scrutinised by the committee. Members themselves had their behaviour monitored and even the shop stewards were not exempted, although the latter represented a development noticeable only towards the end of the four year period for which the records apply. Actions and particularly achievements of other unions in the plant were also the subject of monitoring by the committee.

In the first instance the committee provided the opportunity for the grievances of workers to be evaluated: the evaluation was made in terms of the committee's understanding of established rules and practices in the workplace and its view of what was in the best interests of workers. The evaluation of a case reported to committee generally (though not always) resulted in an investigation being called for by one or more stewards. This investigative stage, however, was not confined to investigation but also involved discussions and negotiations with management to resolve the grievance. Occasionally where management resistance was met the issue would be taken back to committee where the next step would be decided upon. The records do not allow an accurate measure of the success or failure of grievances investigated with management. In a similar fashion the committee provided the opportunity for actions and contemplated actions of management to be evaluated against established work rules and practices in the plant as well as against union policies and principles basic to the general interests of workers. It will be recalled how the attempt to distinguish between grievance and work-type issues in the analysis was only partly successful. Among the clearer examples of work-type issues were, the use of outside contractors, use of foremen as substitutes for absent workers, use of inadequately trained workers, use of work measurement, and the introduction of new and faster equipment.

The second area where the committee's policing role was evident was in the monitoring of member's behaviour and actions on the job in so far as these constituted infringements of union or section behaviour standards. The procedure employed was again similar to before — a consideration by the committee of a reported malpractice, a decision to have a steward "see the man" and if necessary the pointing out of the relevant rule in the union book concerning "behaviour unbecoming of a member" and the prescribed penalties for breach. This appeared to be sufficient to have the behaviour corrected in all cases. The third aspect of the committee's policing role concerned actions and more particularly achievements of other unions in the plant. It is not clear from the data where such information came from and it would appear to have been gathered through informal contacts with either members or activists of other unions since no formal links existed between unions on a day to day basis in the plant.

The policing role of the committee provides what is perhaps the most challenging opportunity of all from an internal organisational point of view, that is the opportunity by which shop steward behaviour may be evaluated. As already noted, however, there was little evidence that this was an active function of the committee. On each of the two occasions where an effort was made at committee to open for consideration actions of the stewards (once in connection with the unofficial strike and the other in connection with the compensation for productivity to a group of three workers) the debate proved ineffective. These were critical tests of the committee's ability to effectively supervise the actions of stewards and it failed them. They represented, however, important lessons for the committee and towards the end of the four year period under review some signs were evident of an effort to strengthen the committee's control of steward behaviour. This would obviously mark a very significant development. Finally, let us be clear about the value of the opportunity which the committee provides for reviewing and monitoring actions and behaviours of management, members, other unions and shop stewards. Such an opportunity is valuable in itself but the real value lies in the fact that firstly, it allows the formulation of a coordinated approach to the issue; secondly, it provides for review on a regular basis which to some extent injects speed into the process and thirdly, it ensures consistency of approach to workplace issues. Each of these add up to a valuable policing role on the part of the committee.

The Committee and Sanctions: sanctions were a regular feature of the workplace situation judging by the frequency with which the committee discussed their use. Three situations in particular have been identified as typical of their use: (a) the enforcement on management of work rules as perceived by the workers and their representatives; (b) the use of pressure in collective bargaining negotiations; and (c) the curbing of union rule violations by members. It is difficult to be specific about the committee's role in the use of sanctions. From the records it appears very definitely to have been actively involved in decisions on the use of sanctions even though it had no authority to do so under the union rules. In the case of the unofficial strike, however, the committee clearly played no role and had no say either in the calling of the strike or in its termination. This apparent contradiction will be explored in the next section. The forty-one instances set out in Table 1 (2(iii) + 3(iii) + 5) of a sanction type nature comprise the following: 14 cases involving decisions concerning strategies to be adopted in collective bargaining negotiations — often endorsing approaches recommended for adoption by shop stewards and sometimes supporting the more aggressive approach of shop stewards against the preferred approach of the branch secretary; 12 cases involving decisions to resist actions or contemplated actions of management often to the point of refusing to do work under certain circumstances and withholding cooperation from management; 2 cases involving decisions to threaten management with strike action; 2 cases involving decisions to seek

mandates from members for actions which were not specified in the records and 11 cases involving decisions to curb union rule violations by members.

In the case of the last mentioned (11 cases) the action of the committee was nothing more than might be reasonably expected, i.e., the drawing of members' attention to union rules where their behaviour represented an infringement. In each case this seemed to be sufficient to ensure compliance. As regards the effectiveness of the remaining 30 recordings of sanctions type issues one can only venture guarded comments (based principally on the records themselves). No threat of strike action or other severe form of overt industrial action appears to have been implemented. Judging from the records there was no evidence of adopted strategies having failed, but, in fact, abundant evidence of their success. For example on several occasions motions were passed at committee congratulating shop stewards on their handling of negotiations.

The Committee and its Power to Decide: the records provide an impressive commentary of the committee as decision maker — or do they? Certainly the committee is not a "talk-shop", but a forum where issues, significant at the workplace, are discussed and actions decided upon. Of course the committee does not negotiate with management, but relies on the stewards to execute this particular function. It does, however, play an influential part in the negotiations process and may be seen to be involved in the formulation of claims, in the design of strategy and in the imposition of sanctions. What this adds up to is a centre of power of great importance, not just to the collective bargaining process at the plant, but to the trade union as an organisation. This impression of the committee's status as a unit of trade union organisation does not always fit neatly with the data. For example, its non-involvement at any stage of the two week unofficial strike and its failure to exert any influence on the productivity deal arrived at between management and three workers despite the fact that a majority of members at the particular committee meeting voiced dissent with the arrangement, leads us to look for some possible alternative power source. What we have, therefore, to consider is the committee not as a decision maker but as an agency which endorses decisions arrived at elsewhere. This line of reasoning leads us inevitably to the group of shop stewards within the committee.

To understand the relationship between the stewards and the committee in this instance one must address the questions, firstly, as to what it is that gives stewards a superior status which allows them overcome the minority position they occupy in the committee and secondly, given this position of power why it is they should participate as fully as they do in the committee? The answer to the first question is bound up in at least four aspects of the shop steward position which represent important sources of their power: their superior status as negotiators; their superior

experience and knowledge in trade union matters and procedures; their effective control over cooptation of members on to the committee; their control of information which their position gives them and particularly through the contacts made by them in the course of their collective bargaining activities. The answer to the second question is related to that of the first, but now the committee becomes a very considerable source of shop steward power. The committee represents a process through which legitimacy is obtained especially for those decisions of dubious constitutionality under union rules. In addition, it is a process which insulates the shop steward body against possible branch recrimination. The decision concerning the position of security men during strike action by the union is a case in point and demonstrates the convenience of the committee to the steward body. The decision of the branch committee was in compliance with union policy on the non-involvement of security personnel in strike action. This decision was overturned at section level but not by any act which could be "laid at the door" of the shop steward body. The decision was first and foremost a section decision, made by the general body of section members through a ballot which was instigated by the section committee. As well as shielding stewards the committee also provided important support to the winning over of the branch secretary to the choice of collective bargaining strategies favoured by stewards. All in all then the image of the section committee in this case is one of subservience to shop steward power. It is important to appreciate, however, that such is not inevitably the case and other circumstances would undoubtedly create very different relationships between branch, section and shop stewards.

CONCLUSIONS

By now it will be appreciated that the impression of impotency on the part of a committee through the absence of a negotiating role is clearly an erroneous one. On the contrary, it would appear to possess at least the potential of being a significant influence on the conduct of worker-management relations and also on trade union organisation. It can be an important supplementary link between the union and the workplace in situations of some scale. To shop stewards a committee can be an important source of support and power in dealings with management and also in dealings with the branch. Equally, however, it can constrain shop steward efforts within constitutional limits and thereby lessen their flexibility of action. To the branch (the local embodiment of the union) lapses in constitutional restraint at workplace level can represent a most challenging problem. Of course, whether or not a committee acts constitutionally depends on many factors and it would be over optimistic to see in them the promise of totally removing the unconstitutional acts of local groups. After all, are not conflicts of interest between members of a section and the universal membership as represented by the union organisation, its constitution and rules, to some extent inevitable.

Perhaps so, but this is something which always has and always will need reconciling within the trade union organisation. What the local committee represents first and foremost is an opportunity to provide an important constitutional focus for workplace matters which the branch (except for those which are workplace based) cannot reasonably be expected to provide.

Indeed the branch, although the basic unit of organisation, appears in many cases to have grown less and less relevant to the felt needs of members and has become disconnected from the workplace.³ This problem is highlighted in the case and is one which some commentators have sought to resolve by the abolition of the geographically based branch in favour of self-contained and self-regulated units based on the workplace.⁴ This, however, would provide no real answer. Although it would help the union to become closer to the needs and aspirations of its members in their respective work groups it would not secure the equally necessary task of bringing local work groups closer to the wider needs of the union collective and avoid the danger of a commitment to trade unionism restricted to narrow group loyalties.⁵ The dilemma for trade union leadership is how to accommodate, organisationally, the upsurge in involvement at local level and at the same time avoid creating more effective centres for local dissension and opposition within the union.⁶ The dangers are very real and are well understood by trade union leaders.

REFERENCES

1. The principal distinction between shop stewards and the other activists arising in this case i.e., ordinary committee members, is that the shop stewards alone exercise a negotiating role: they may raise grievances and complaints with management directly and with the Branch Secretary form the negotiating team in local pay negotiations.
2. B.M. Selekmán, *Labor Relations and Human Relations*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1947. P.90.
3. J. Hughes, "Trade Union Structure and Government: Part II: Membership Participation and Trade Union Government", Research Paper No. 5 (Part 2), *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations*, HMSO, London, 1968. P.37-40.
4. *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employer Associations, 1965-1968*, London HMSO, 1968, pp. 271-272: W.E.J. McCarthy, "Shop Stewards and Workshop Relations", Research Paper No. 10, R.C.T.U.E.A. London, HMSO. 1968. P.75.
5. *ibid*, P.6.
6. McCarthy, W.E.J., "The Role of Shop Stewards in British Industrial Relations", Research Paper No. 1, *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employer Associations*, HMSO, London, 1966. P.75.