

Shop stewards in Ireland: A profile of trade union activists in a general union

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ABSTRACT

The psychological, biographical, and attitudinal characteristics that distinguish between rank and file union members and shop stewards in Ireland, and the social processes by which they become stewards, are explored. The survey and interviews on which the analysis is based are drawn from a sample of members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, which is a geographically dispersed general union. The research was conducted in Drogheda and Dundalk, 2 medium-sized towns in the Irish Republic. The results indicate that, where there are differences between office and non-office holders, it is a result of union-related attitudes and values, which are in turn affected by a number of independent variables. Few stewards were initially motivated to take on the job of shop steward, which emphasizes the importance of factors in the workplace that encouraged these reluctant members to accept the position, as well as particular personal characteristics and attitudes to unions that predispose them to become stewards.

FULL TEXT

INTRODUCTION

Shop stewards are an essential part of union government. However, the role of the shop steward in Irish industrial relations has received little attention--with the notable exception of Murphy (1981) and Wallace and O'Shea (1987). As a result, little is known about union activism in the Irish context. Most of the theoretical and empirical research into union activism can be grouped broadly into two distinct approaches. The first approach focuses on the psychological needs, personal characteristics and attitudes of individuals to explain the differences generally between passive and active union members, and more specifically between office holders and no office holders (see Klandermans (1986)). This stream of research tends to be cross sectional in nature, and data collection mainly utilises self report questionnaire surveys. In contrast, the second approach is more dynamic in focus, emphasising the social processes by which rank and file members become and remain office holders. The research methods preferred are observation and in-depth open-ended interviewing, and the scope of the research is predominantly limited to case studies (Pedler 1973, Batstone et al 1977, Terry 1983).

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS, PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND UNION PARTICIPATION

Research into the causes of rank and file participation in union activities is extensive (Spinrad 1960, Wilensky 1960, Anderson 1979, Fosh 1981, Portwood et al 1981), and here we shall only report the more salient findings. Nicholson et al's (1981) study of membership participation in a white collar union is particularly comprehensive, both for the range and number of independent variables used, and is noteworthy also for its attempt to develop a theoretical model of membership participation which links biographical, attitudinal and situational variables to union activism within a causal framework.

Among the independent variables, political sympathies and allegiances were indirectly found to be the strongest predictors of union participation. Political socialisation acted as a stimulant to participation by enhancing commitment to the union and promoting union-linked social affiliations. Educational attainment was the only biographical item that was significantly related to both needs for involvement in union affairs and overall union participation. However, needs for involvement and 'union . friends', treated as intervening variables, were directly the best predictors of membership participation. McShane (1986) also examined the factors which induce members to participate in union administration. A variable containing eight

measures, which included office holding, was used to measure union administration. His results indicated that the background variables of education (higher levels of formal education leads to greater involvement in union administration) and seniority (increases the likelihood of being involved in union administration) were indirectly related to administrative participation through the intervening variables of job involvement, value of unions and interest in union business. There is, in addition, a considerable literature on attitudinal differences (see Klandermans (1986) for a comprehensive review). A number of differences would seem to be salient: greater interest in politics (particularly politics within the labour movement), class consciousness and willingness to espouse progressive union policies (cf. Nicholson et al (1981)).

ROLE OCCUPANCY AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

Beynon (1973), while acknowledging the importance of personality factors in determining the motivation to take on the role of shop steward, argues that activism is primarily a social process in which values and systems of belief play an important role--a theme developed and refined by the Batstone et al (1977) study. Recruitment into the role, individual characteristics and experiences combine to create diverse performance styles. Two main steward types were identified: 'leader' stewards who view union policy and their fellow stewards as their main source of reference in tackling workplace problems, and 'populist' stewards who view their constituency as their major referent group. Leader stewards, according to these authors, tend to be proactive in initiating demands and seek to develop strategies in support of claims which are congruent with wider trade union values and principles. Populist stewards tend to respond to the demands made by their workgroup in preference to initiating demands themselves. Thus their perspective is more sectional in orientation. These differences in commitment to the pursuit of union principles and the definition of the steward task are the product of social interaction and negotiation, and are related to differing degrees of involvement in the steward network. Those most involved in this network experience a continual reaffirmation of the norms of steward leadership. Leader stewards tended to have proportionally more contact with other stewards than populists. Steward organisation at workplace level is itself a variable which influences stewards' values and beliefs, a point stressed by Terry (1983). Also, shop steward organisation is responsive to managerial influences (such as encouragement or opposition) and to organisational factors such as plant size and payment systems (Beaumont 1986, Winch 1981).

RESEARCH FOCUS AND SAMPLE

This paper is concerned both with exploring the psychological, biographical and attitudinal characteristics which distinguish between rank and file union members and shop stewards, and the social processes by which they become stewards. In the former case the selection of independent variables deemed to be relevant for our purpose reflects those used in previous studies, and found to be significantly related to some aspect of union participation (Form and Dansereau 1957, Tannenbaum and Kahn 1958, Anderson 1979, Fosh 1981, Nicholson et al 1981, McShane 1986). The survey and interviews, on which the analysis in this paper is based, are drawn from a sample of members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (now the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union), which is a geographically dispersed general union. The research was carried out in Drogheda and Dundalk, two medium sized towns in the Irish Republic. Combined membership of the Drogheda and Dundalk branches of the ITGWU was 3,640, spread over 84 employer establishments; these were subsequently reduced to 24 by excluding those with less than 20 ITGWU members, leaving a total sample of 2,094 members. Questionnaires were sent to all members and 768 usable questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 37 percent. Shop steward interviews were carried out at the workplace and branch committee level. Altogether 38 stewards were interviewed.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Nicholson et al (1981) demonstrated the predictive power of 'union orientation' in explaining their composite measure of overall union participation. Union orientation is a measure of psychological attachment to the union and can be considered as a proxy measure of union commitment (Fullagar and Barling 1987). As a result, one would expect that a sample of office holders with lengthy tenure (52% of stewards had a tenure greater than six years) would possess high levels of commitment to the union. This is confirmed by a comparison of union orientation between office and non-office holders (see Table 1). (Table 1 omitted) The representation of activists and ex-activists in the 'reluctant' or 'card carriers' categories is proportionally much lower than for their rank and file counterparts. Office holders (both past and present) are much more likely, as might be expected, to place themselves in the activism section of the union orientation scale.

A majority of ordinary members are either extremely reluctant union members or have no interest in union activities. Fosh and Cohen (1990), using the same question in a survey of five different workplaces in the United Kingdom, found that reluctant union members accounted for 21 percent, 13 percent and 2 percent respectively at three sites, with the remaining two workplaces having no reluctant members. The percentage of card carriers ranged from 21 percent to 38 percent and does not differ significantly from our findings; but selective activists in the Fosh and Cohen study ranged from 40 to 54 percent compared to 27 percent in the present survey. A sizeable percentage of ordinary union members, therefore, do not take part in, or are excluded from, any trade union activities. In fact, the majority of stewards reported that less than 15 percent of members were actively involved in union affairs. Given the centrality of union orientation to office holding in our study, it was decided to further explore the antecedents of union orientation.

EXPLORING THE SOURCES OF UNION ORIENTATION

Union orientation represents a form of psychological involvement/commitment to the union; it is also a measure of activism and has been shown to derive from other antecedents such as interest in politics, parental union orientation etc. (Nicholson et al 1991: 106). Consequently, an analysis using stepwise regression was carried out to establish the antecedents of union orientation.

The following variables are significant predictors of union orientation: age, interest in politics, the importance of exerting influence over one's union affairs, ideological need for involvement, expressive need for involvement and perceived job security. Age is the only biographical variable having a significant effect on union orientation. As seniority (age proxies for seniority/union tenure, $r=0.8$) increases, union orientation increases. This supports the finding by Nicholson et al (1981) on length of service as a predictor of union orientation, and reflects the lower levels of integration of younger workers into the union. Socialisation influences were measured by questions on: father's union orientation, current interest in politics, and number of friends who were active union members. Father's union orientation was found to have no significant relationship with union office holding. The extent of interaction between active and non-active union members outside of normal work roles can be interpreted as a measure of integration within the union, and also as a significant source of influence within the primary workgroup (Anderson 1979). Fifty five percent of the membership sample claimed that at least some of their friends at work or outside of work are active union members. While this variable, 'union friends', had no direct effect on office holding, it may indirectly reinforce union values, providing a potential pool of shop stewards. The political interests of members is the most significant predictor of union orientation. Interestingly, office holders are frequently members of the Labour Party--indicating a strong relationship between their position and their political interests.

Table 3. indicates that the combined socialist vote of the rank and file members is approximately 22 percent and represents 38 percent of office holders. (Table 3 omitted) Although the majority of rank and file members and office holders would appear not to vote for socialist/leftwing parties, office holders are however more likely to vote labour than rank and file members. Table 2 showed that a higher need for involvement existed among activists than non-activists. (Table 2 omitted) Members who have little desire to exert influence over their union affairs are primarily in the 'reluctant' and 'card carrier' categories i.e. their psychological attachment to the union and their apathetic orientation is consistent. In the Nicholson et al (1981) study of NALGO members in Sheffield the needs for union involvement were important predictors of participation. From Table 4. it can be seen that union membership can be perceived as providing a 'voice' function for almost 60 percent of the membership (Hirschmann 1970). (Table 4 omitted) The 'ideological', 'affiliative' and 'power' needs for involvement receive much less endorsement from the membership. In fact, when the 'not sures' are excluded from our calculations it can be seen that on average, over 55 percent of the members disagree that union membership fulfills these needs. Moreover, there are significant differences in the means of these items between office holders (activists) and rank and file members. However, although there are no significant differences on the 'ideological' need for involvement, activists score higher on the 'expressive', 'power' and 'affiliative' needs for involvement measures. These results suggest that:

* Members who have a higher ideological need for involvement are more likely to be found in the 'apolitical stalwart' or the 'ideological activist' category of the union orientation scale. This result supports the findings of Nicholson et al (1981) on the importance of needs for involvement as a predictor of union participation.

* Members who possess high expressive needs for involvement are more likely to describe themselves as activists ('selective', 'apolitical' or 'ideological') in union orientation terms than their counterparts ('card carriers' and 'reluctant')

union members) who possess lower expressive needs for involvement.

Returning perceptions of job security would seem to be associated with more complacent attitudes to the union (i.e. 'reluctants' and 'card carriers' rate their job security as being high) while perceptions of job insecurity are associated with pro union sentiment (defined as those falling into the activist union orientation categories). Overall, however, 58% of the variance in union orientation between members and shop stewards remains unexplained and the relationship between union orientation and being a shop steward, while significant, is itself relatively weak. Although shop stewards tended to be more committed to the union, 16% of stewards indicated little interest in union activities. Alternatively, 15% of ordinary members were strongly committed to the union and possibly represent a potential pool of shop stewards (see Table 1.). There is, therefore, no clear distinction between the characteristics of many ordinary members and some shop stewards; this supports Klandermans (1986) conclusion that on the whole the number of similarities between a sizeable proportion of members and lay officials is greater than the number of differences. For a number of stewards, entry into the role is as likely to be related to processes which occur in the workplace rather than to any antecedent attitudes or personal characteristics.

BECOMING AND REMAINING A SHOP STEWARD--SOME INTERVIEW RESULTS

The stewards interviewed fell broadly into three of Nicholson's (1976) categories of external forces which act upon individuals to become stewards: 13 percent of the stewards surveyed were propelled into office because "no one else was willing to take on the job" (i.e. accidental occupancy); 11 percent were nominated by members external to the workgroup; and the remaining 76 percent were elected in contested elections (i.e. popular occupancy) emerging as the choice of their constituency. Interestingly, only 18 percent of those interviewed had a high initial motivation to take on the job of steward (Table 5.)

TABLE 5: MOTIVATION, COMMITMENT AND SATISFACTION OF STEWARDS

INITIAL MOTIVATION TO TAKE ON THE JOB AS STEWARD--(%)

I wanted to very much--18

I had mixed feelings--50

I did not want it--32

WILLINGNESS TO ABDICATE STEWARD ROLE--(%)

I would be very glad to pass the job on--62

I cannot decide--3

I would prefer not to give it up--35

FEELINGS ABOUT WORK AS A STEWARD (ROLE SATISFACTION)--(%)

I enjoy it all/most of the time--59

Fifty fifty--27

I only enjoy it occasionally/hardly ever--14

Indeed over 60 percent of the sample indicated a willingness to give up the role provided a suitable replacement was available to take their place. Despite this reluctant activism, 60 percent of those interviewed expressed role satisfaction--which underscores the fact that the factors which propel reluctant stewards in and out of role occupancy and the satisfaction which stewards derive from the role itself are very different. Furthermore, shop stewards experience and length of time in the role does not indicate a serious turnover problem. While 24 percent of stewards had less than two years experience, 76 percent had more than three and 52 percent more than 6 years experience. The majority of stewards in this study have more experience when compared with the stewards in the Batstone et al (1977) study, where 25 percent had been in the role for one or less years, 40 percent for two to four years and 35 percent for over five years. Research into steward stability indicates that a low rate of turnover is related to a high level of support both from full time officers of the union and union members in the workplace (Beynon 1973, Winch 1981). The low initial motivation of many stewards, their willingness to pass on the job and the relatively high satisfaction level with the role indicates the complexity of a position which is rewarding, but at times difficult and stressful. Sectionalism and disunity among members were frequently cited problems faced by stewards in executing their role (Table 6.) and stewards viewed their member's union expectations as primarily instrumental, with 41 percent of respondents rating their members expectations of the union as unrealistic. The

attitude of management is an equally important factor. Stewards who received assistance from management in executing their role reported higher levels of satisfaction than their counterparts facing obdurate managerial opposition. Time spent on union duties is also associated with role satisfaction, which would seem to indicate that freedom to spend sufficient time on union affairs adds significantly to the ease of executing the role.

TABLE 6: PROBLEMS FACED BY STEWARDS IN EXECUTING ROLE

REFERENCES TO:--(%)

Sectionalism/disunity--24

Attitude and opposition of management--24

Unrealistic expectation of members--17

Union-Job role demands--11

Consistent opposition from members--24

N = 29

Source: Steward Questionnaire (Open Question)

As a result of the difficulties of the role, a number of stewards experienced ambiguity and psychological strain. Although 70 percent of respondents are sure of what is expected of them as shop stewards, 30 percent were often unsure; and 44 percent experienced some psychological strain as measured by the extent to which they worried about union duties outside ordinary working time (Table 7). (Table 7 omitted)

Correlational analysis of our data suggests that the more experienced stewards report higher levels of role satisfaction than inexperienced stewards, and role satisfaction is associated with low levels of ambiguity and psychological strain.

CONCLUSION

Two approaches to explaining the differences between office holders and non-office holders were explored in this paper: one which is predominantly concerned with the variation in psychological and personal characteristics, needs and attitudes of individuals; and the second which emphasises the importance of social processes in the workplace. The results from our research suggest that the former approach provides a partial explanation of the differences. Similar to the findings of McShane (1986) and Nicholson et al (1981), our results indicate that where there are differences between office and non office holders it is a result of union related attitudes and values, which are in turn affected by a number of independent variables. However, the overall value of this approach in explaining differences between stewards and rank and file members is, we have suggested, limited. The relationship of the significant independent variables with union orientation provides only a partial explanation of why some union members become shop stewards. While a number of antecedent factors account for 42% of the variation in union orientation, a considerable part of the variation is unexplained--and is either a result of omitting other key variables from the equation, or originates from experiences in the workplace. Such salient factors as the existing shop steward organisation in the workplace, the attitude of management to trade unions, the level of support from union members, and the union organisation, are obviously important aspects which encourage or discourage potential candidates for the shop steward position. The level of satisfaction in the position expressed by a majority of the stewards, and the stability of tenure, would seem to indicate the existence of a supportive union organisation and favourable management attitudes. As our results indicate, few stewards were initially motivated to take on the job of shop steward; this emphasises the importance of factors in the workplace which encouraged these reluctant members to accept the position, as well as particular personal characteristics and attitudes to unions which predispose them to become stewards.

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