

[David Marsden](#)

Shop stewards in Great Britain, West Germany and France

Translation of original article

Original citation:

This article was originally published as Marsden, David (1978) Shop stewards, vertrauensleute, et délégués du personnel. *Après-demain: journal mensuel de documentation politique*.

This translation was made by the author.

© 1978 David Marsden

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/20545/>

Available in LSE Research Online: August 2008

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

Shop Stewards in Great Britain, West Germany and France

In recent years a number of European countries have witnessed the breakdown of the centralised framework of industrial relations established in the early post-war years giving way to a more decentralised system which allowed more room to shop floor movements. The outbreak of the strikes of May and June 1968 in France, and more particularly of the wildcat strikes of 1969 and the early seventies in West Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy, marked a shift in union power towards the shop floor.

Even though the immediate prospect of a new "shop stewards' movement" may have subsided, with the change of economic conditions and the shift of concern from questions of work organisation to the protection of jobs and living standards, with the consequent shift in bargaining strategies, neither the shop stewards nor the shop floor pressure has disappeared. One has only to recall the role of shop floor pressure in the recent German steel strike to realise that this is true even there.

It is therefore of some interest to look at some of the longer term movements which underlay the changes which took shape, the industrial ferment of the late sixties and early seventies, and to compare the relationship between shop stewards and trade unions in these countries, and the complementary nature of their bargaining powers. This may help to explain their persistence in changed circumstances, and their potential for a wider movement of industrial democracy.

In all three countries shop stewards deal mainly with local day to day grievances arising, for example, out of the application of incentive schemes, job evaluation, or work organisation, in the company they work for. Unlike full-time union officials, they are not union employees, although they are usually union members. In Britain, they are usually elected by, and are responsible to, their own work group, but in France they are elected by the whole workforce, and in Germany they may be appointed by the union, or more often elected by union members in the workplace. This difference of constituency can have an important effect both on their ability to mobilise support, and on the work group's ability to put pressure on their stewards. Finally, it should perhaps be said that they are much more widespread among manual workers than among the non-manual workforce in all three countries.

in the late sixties and early seventies
In the period of social ferment, it was usually these shop floor activists who on their own initiative, or pressed by their colleagues, took the lead, and so these movements brought a new set of union activists

into the limelight. At the same time, there developed a new type of union demand relating to work organisation and the conditions for union activity. It has been said that there was a shift from "quantitative" demands (for higher wages) towards "qualitative" ones (on work organisation and conditions), and although there is little agreement on the extent to which these represent a significant move towards self-management, no one can deny the increased prominence of "industrial democracy" in public debate. 1970 saw the publication of the Biedenkopf report on the extension of the West German system of "Mittbestimmung" and 1979 its partial implementation after a long wrangle in the Constitutional Court; 1975 that of the Sudreau Report on company reform in France; and 1977 saw that of the Bullock Report recommending equal participation of employees in the management of their company.

Although these changes may appear to have been sudden and dramatic, the shift of power towards the shop floor remains part of a long term movement. Already in the early 1960s, the German metal workers' union (I.G. Metall) was concerned at the distance separating it from its membership in the enterprise, and began to develop its shop steward organisation. Basing itself on research carried out in the mid-1960s, the Donovan Commission observed the dualism of the British system of industrial relations with its "formal system" of negotiating agreements between trades unions and employers' associations, and its "informal system" of negotiation inside the enterprise between shop stewards and management representatives.

The origin of this shift of power to the shop floor can no doubt be explained by the end of the period of an abundant supply of labour, and the intensification of international competition. The power of the workforce grew as a result of increased difficulty of recruitment, and the need management had of their cooperation in rationalisation plans. However, if the reasons for the shift of power to the shop floor were more or less the same in all three countries, institutional manifestations were very different. It is therefore interesting to compare them from the point of view of their bargaining powers and their relationship with trade unions.

Shop stewards in Great Britain

The shop steward is rightly so called in that he is chosen by his workmates from the same workshop, or department. Having to work alongside the people he represents, he is necessarily exposed to their aspirations and demands, even if he does not always share them directly himself. He is not an employee of the union, but he is a member, and his status, though often imprecise, is protected by the collective agreement.

It is the steward who presents the individual or collective grievances to management, but often, as in France, he will prefer to bypass the foreman, to go where he can get a decision. Unlike the French or German shop stewards, the British steward can negotiate with management insofar as the latter accept that the grievances do not go beyond the provisions of the collective agreement. In these negotiations the power of the steward usually depends upon the degree of mobilisation of his work group. Because of the informality of relations within the group, and between it and the steward, it can bring a number of pressures to bear in pursuit of its claims. The group may simply cease to be very cooperative, or may even show too much zeal in insisting on the observance of all the formal rules which are usually waived in the interest of flexibility. The complete stoppage of work is only used in the last resort.

The bargaining power of shop stewards is not without limits. If the withdrawal of cooperation can inconvenience an employer anxious to meet delivery dates, it can also upset other work groups, for example whose earnings depend on payment by results. Endless guerilla warfare harms everybody, and would especially damage solidarity among the workforce.

For this reason there are committees of shop stewards whose function is to coordinate their bargaining strategy, and to help each other. These committees will obviously exert pressure on groups which pursue their own particular interest at the expense of the rest.

A third constraint on the bargaining power of the shop steward is provided by the grievance procedures established by the collective agreement between the union and either the employers' association, or the individual employer. When an employers' association agrees to recognise, and thus to bargain with a union or its representatives (which include shop stewards), it demands in exchange that the union should recognise the rights of management on questions for example of recruitment, the organisation of work, the allocation of bonuses, and the restrictions on the categories of personnel for which the steward can bargain. The employer opens the possibility of bargaining over certain questions in exchange for an agreement not to go beyond these limits. Of course, there is nothing to prevent the individual employer from making additional concessions, but if he wants to contest the procedural legitimacy of a grievance, he can resort to the grievance procedures set up in the recognition agreement. It is always possible for the union to withdraw from such an agreement, and to uphold a steward's grievance against all odds, but it will not do this lightly. The same is true of the employer's side. The procedure agreement in the engineering industry, for example, which was negotiated in 1922 was not finally abandoned by the union until 1971.

Because the nature of shop steward bargaining is quite different from that of collective agreements, it is of some interest to look at this more closely. This examination will bring out the intimate links between bargaining by stewards and the questioning of managerial authority in matters of work organisation. We shall see why this level of bargaining has given rise to theories of "creeping" or "encroaching control" which were at the heart of the shop steward movement between 1916 and 1921, and again at the end of the 1960s.

The root of the problem lies in the fact that the services required of the worker by the employer are of necessity variable, demanding a certain flexibility, and as such cannot be exhaustively defined at the

moment of engagement. Usually a worker is taken on to do a certain type of work whose detail will only be determined later by the foreman, or another representative of management. Moreover, it is unlikely that the set of tasks making up a job can be defined exhaustively. A great deal depends upon the way in which workers are accustomed to doing certain jobs. When a new worker is taken on it is above all his colleagues who will show him how to carry out the tasks. Thus, the content of a job is defined in part by existing practice, or the way in which workers actually carry it out. In the allocation of work tasks, and the control of their execution, the foreman's authority is also partly defined by customary practice. As a result of the importance of practice as opposed to formal description in the definition of job content, precedent plays an extremely important role in workplace relations. It is this importance of practice which underlies the arguments about "custom and practice" used by shop stewards when bargaining, and of which they regard themselves as interpreters rather than creators. To say that a bonus was paid last time a worker did a particular task, or to say that a particular task does not belong to a job, and that to do it the worker must receive a special payment, is to argue from "custom and practice". By insisting on the restrictive definition of a job's content, while trying to push up its price, the shop steward is also questioning the authority of management. On the other hand, in insisting on the broader definition of the job content, the employer is insisting on the authority of the foreman, but is also hoping to pay less. This action by shop stewards and their work groups allows them to bargain their cooperation, and to transform what would have been a unilateral management decision into a bilateral one.

It is easy to see the implications of this form of bargaining for joint control, and even workers' control. Indeed, the old procedure agreement of the engineering industry reached in 1922 and abandoned in 1971 was aimed at stemming the advance of "creeping control", and of reaffirming managerial authority.¹⁾

1. (These ideas have received fuller development by the author, in an essay entitled "Industrial democracy, and industrial control in West Germany, France and Great Britain", published as a Department of Employment Research Paper 1978)

The German shop steward

As in Britain, German industry has seen the growth of personnel representatives and shop stewards. With a lapse of rigour uncommon to Germans, both sorts of representative bear the name of "Vertrauensmann", or "man of trust". As in France, the first of these is elected through the formal channels of the electoral colleges in the company, while the latter are elected informally by those workers who are members of the appropriate industry union. The first have only a secondary role for the Works Council (Betriebsrat) and are meant to contribute to the representative functions of the works council members, while the second have a function which is both less clear and more controversial.

Although the presence of shop stewards in the German labour movement goes back a long way, their importance in the post-war era remained fairly limited until the mid-nineteen sixties. About then many of the big industrial unions, and notably I G Metall, became concerned at the stagnation and even the slight decline in their membership, and at the growth of the influence of the works councils at their expense. The latter were winning wage agreements for the workers in their company from a management that was keen to settle such issues "within the family" and to exclude the union. They therefore adopted a policy of building up their strength in the work place through the establishment of a network of shop stewards. Between 1964 and 1973 the number of IG Metall shop stewards rose from about 80,000 to about 120,000.

According to the policy of I G Metall, the stewards' task is to reinforce the position of the union in the workplace by recruiting, by explaining and defending union policy to the membership, and to other workers and to work with the local union branch and the works council, transmitting certain grievances to them. Usually the steward is elected by his work group, these groups ideally consisting of between five and twenty members who have the right of recall. Within the enterprise, the policy of I G Metall envisaged that the union stewards, the union members on the works council, the subscription collectors and the unionised representatives of young workers should come together in the union works section, the "Vertrauensleutekörper", which is a grouping of union activists rather than a simple gathering of all the membership.

In I G Metall, the shop stewards can pass wage grievances on to the local branch, but they do not take any direct part in the formulation of

the union's wage policy. In I G Chemie-Papier-Keramik, the shop stewards are better integrated into the union's structure as they form the electoral level above the membership, and they have thus to elect the higher levels of the organisation; nevertheless they do not take part in the formulation of the union's wage demands.

Many observers have pointed to the important part played by shop stewards in the wave of wildcat strikes that broke out in 1969 and 1973, and the way in which they took an active part in a movement which quickly overwhelmed the central union apparatus. Comparing the German and British shop stewards, one might ask why these movements have not produced a more lasting shift of power within the union, and the development of less restricted bargaining within the company. Because the French works committee may not have prevented the union works section and some of its stewards from taking on certain bargaining functions within some large companies, it is tempting to underestimate the importance of the German works council which fulfills many of the functions covered by stewards. However, this does not explain everything. Two sides are needed for bargaining, which means that company management would have had to recognise the shops stewards as their bargaining partners. But German management already had a well established relationship with the works council which is bound by the peace obligation and compulsory arbitration in the event of disagreement. In any case, a lasting stewards' movement would have required the support of the union, and the unions had a different role in mind for them. It has often been said that German trade unions are deeply suspicious of spontaneous shop floor movements, but the decisive reason seems to be that such movements introduced into the bargaining process at a time of crisis would be no less vulnerable to "integration" than the works council, once the crisis is past. In contrast, British shop stewards have a long experience of bargaining which will usually protect them from these dangers. Clearly, as this form of bargaining often becomes more a form of participation than of representation, such dangers of "integration" are all the greater.

French shop stewards

The present status of the French works steward (délégué du personnel) goes back to the Liberation, but France too saw its own shop steward movement, in the war industries set up by the efforts of Albert Thomas then Minister of

Munitions, and Georges Merrheim, leader of the federation of metal workers, and again at the time of the Popular Front. Union stewards (délégué syndical) hardly go back beyond the law passed in 1968 giving workers the right to set up trade union sections (sections syndicales d'entreprise) within the enterprise.

The 1948 law states that the stewards are to "present all individual or collective grievances which have not been directly satisfied, concerning the application of wage rates and job classifications, of the Labour Law, and other laws and regulations relating to safety, working conditions, and social security...". The stewards have the right to a monthly meeting with management, and in emergencies to more frequent meetings. To facilitate their work they can call on the services of the Labour Inspectorate, and the works committee (comité d'entreprise). A study of grievance procedures in the textile industry shows that the grievances taken up by stewards are similar to those in Britain. It should also be noted that nothing prevents the French work groups from putting pressure on management by withdrawing cooperation if they do not get satisfaction. It is therefore fair to ask why the function of the French works steward has not come to include bargaining. Indeed, the same question can be asked of the works committees which have not developed in this direction either, while the evolution of the British Joint Consultative Committees would lead us to expect consultation to give way to negotiation.

In France it is quite common for stewards to have easier access to management than to their fellow workers. This can be explained in part by the selection of the French stewards by a system of proportional representation based on lists established by each union with representative status. They represent therefore one of two groups within the enterprise (blue collar and clerical workers grouped in one electoral college, and engineers, technicians, foremen and managers in the other), and so do not have any special relationship with any particular work group. Moreover, the stewards are bound to the unions which have proposed them, which - like the German unions - fear the dangers of integration to which a body of shop stewards they do not have the strength to support is open. Thus the French stewards, deprived of rank and file support, and of that of their union organisation, have not been able to force management into bargaining with them.

French

The /trade union works section

The situation has changed somewhat with the rapid growth in the number of trade union works sections since 1968. The strategy of the two main union confederations, the CGT and the CFDT, has been to introduce bargaining into the workplace by the development of union works sections. From the union point of view, union stewards are those union activists chosen by the section to bargain with management. Because such a system is closer to ordinary workers, and so less exposed to the dangers of integration, it can offer a more reliable method for the extension of workplace bargaining, and of bilateral control of the enterprise. However, the extent of such a system is limited, and the degree of bargaining at this level is only increasing slowly. There is of course a degree of management opposition, but where management is more liberal, they appear to wait until the rate of unionisation has reached a certain level before accepting union sections as bargaining partners capable of ensuring the acceptance of any agreement thus reached.

A bargaining strategy based upon the union works section entails a reversal of the relationship between the organs of worker representation, and the subordination of the works committee and the works stewards to the union works sections. It would certainly appear to be better geared to the handling of the "qualitative" demands which have developed in recent years.

Finally, even if such a bargaining strategy should develop within the workplace, the end result would be quite different from the British system, if only because of the political pluralism of French trade unions.

Joint control

In such a short article it has only been possible to sketch the broadest outline of a picture of shop stewards in the three countries. Although incomplete, and doing very imperfect justice to the great diversity existing within each country, this sketch does allow us to suggest some general hypotheses about the significance of the growth of shop stewards and their future development.

The rapid growth in the number and in the degree of organisation of shop stewards is a manifestation of the general shift of power towards the shop floor in companies, and towards the rank and file in

trade unions. Management's need for measures of rationalisation of work organisation to meet the pressures of new competition has made them more dependent upon the cooperation of their workforce, and at the same time, these measures have awakened a new interest among their workforce in questions of work organisation and control over the decisions affecting it. Although the development of workplace bargaining does not represent a complete transfer of managerial authority to the work group, it does nevertheless represent a sharing of control. It is less a question of workers' control than of shared control. Even in Great Britain where the movement has developed the most, this shared control remains limited to the daily running of the company, and hardly touches managerial authority on such strategic questions as investment. Moreover, even if the shop steward system appears to represent the idea of combative trade union action directly related to the aspirations of the rank and file members without any "bureaucratic middlemen", one should not lose sight of the constraints which limit the scope of such action.

The association between shop stewards and the wave of wildcat strikes and the shift of power to the shop floor could lead one to believe that such a movement was independent of, and even rising up in opposition to, the official trade union movement. But the reality is much more complex.

We have seen that theoretically the bargaining over "custom and practice" which has been a major element in the growth of shop stewards in Great Britain could develop in France and Germany. It has not done so because of the power of the other institutions already in place. In Germany, employers and unions were not prepared to see the demise of the works council. In France, employers have been unwilling to recognise stewards' functions as extending beyond the representation of grievances, and the unions have been wary of too much shop floor spontanéité. Only in Britain are their bargaining powers at all developed, and it would seem that their recognition by unions and management in collective agreements is an important factor in their continued strength in the face of a worsening economic climate.

David Marsden

Sussex European Research Centre

The University of Sussex

This article originally appeared in a special issue of "Après Demain" on "L'Europe des Travailleurs"; (January 1978) and has been translated into English by the author.