

Matters of concern to unions in the Democratization of Work

Fred Emery, November 1975

1. Reduction in manning levels of plants. (Tariff and markets)
2. Arrangements to allow for fair sharing of productivity gains.
3. Multi-skill and demarcation of craft skills.
4. Participation in design and carrying through of changes.
Although these changes are largely within the traditional areas of managerial there are matters that unions should concern themselves about.
e.g. a) adequate training for new responsibilities, safety and stress dangers)
b) avoidance of the 'bull gang' atmosphere
c) protection of individuals unwilling or unable to change.

Beyond these down-to-earth matters there are four things that concern the longer range future of the trade union movement.

1. Is this just a passing management fad?
2. Will not successful democratization of the work places wean workers away from militant unionism?
3. Will it not result in a shift of the center of gravity in union affairs away from the officers and the courts toward the shop floor reps?
4. Lastly, will not the reduction in foremen jobs reduce career opportunities?

Let us take the first point.

1. If this were just a passing management fad it would certainly be wrong of unions to take their eyes off the main persisting trends. It is certainly not a passing management fad. Over the past twelve years it has grown into a powerful management trend: because it produces the efficiency they want and the atmosphere of co-operation they want. However, it would be a mistake for union strategists to interpret it as just a management trend. It has worked for management because it corresponds to what their workers want,
e.g. surveys of Shell, ICI (A), and Customs and Cameron Study Long sighted unionists should take this trend into account. But not in isolation. Taking this into account simply means they have that much more on their plate, or on their backs if you please.

2. The answer to this, on our Australian evidence, is quite simply yes.

But what does that mean?

Does it mean any more than that the unions have not been seen to be active in furthering these particular interests of the workers? Unions shared a lot of the kudos for achieving safe and hygienic conditions of work because they were active in these matters.

I think that is just a time lag. Certainly in Norway over the past twelve years, the unions, particularly at the lower levels, have been very active and obvious pushers.

3. Again I think the answer must be yes.

Is someone going to argue that this will be bad for Australian unionism?
Against the ideals of the union movement?

4. Some might think that unions should not concern themselves with these desertions. However, some of their members might be. In the long run workers will have to have more paths open to them for career lines into management proper.