

The Work of the Trade Union Field Officer

La tâche des permanents syndicaux

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Article abstract

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The Work of the Trade Union Field Officer

Roy J. Adams

This exploratory survey aims at presenting some of the characteristics of full-time union field officers.

The ability of any trade union to successfully bring to fruition its various programs is dependent to a large extent on the activities of full-time field officers. However, these officials have attracted very little scholarly attention, especially in North America. In comparison, top leaders, specialist staff and local union lay officials have been studied in more depth.¹

It was in recognition of this gap that the present study was undertaken. The basic procedure consisted of interviewing a sample of 21 officers from 18 different unions which represented a wide variety

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¹ Studies of top leaders include C. Wright MILLS, *New Men of Power*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948; Abraham FRIEDMAN, «The American Trade Union Leader: A Collective Portrait,» in Joel Seidman (ed.), *Trade Union Government and Collective Bargaining*, New York: Praeger, 1970; and John PORTER, «The Labour Elite,» Chapter XI in *The Vertical Mosaic*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965. Notable studies of local union leadership include L. SAYLES and G. STRAUSS, *The Local Union*, New York: Harper, 1953; and R. W. MILLER, F. A. ZELLER and G. W. MILLER, *The Practice of Local Union Leadership*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1965. Specialist staff have been studied by Harold WILENSKY, *Intellectuals in Labor Unions*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956. Among the sparse literature on North American field officers are: Myron JOSEPH, «The Role of the Field Staff Representative,» *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol. XII, 1959, pp. 353-369; W. R. KRAUSS and V. D. KENNEDY, *The Business Agent and His Union*, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, 1955; George STRAUSS, «Control by the Membership in Building Trades Unions,» *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 61, 1956, pp. 527-535; and H. ROSEN and R. A. Hudson ROSEN, «Decision Making in a Business Agent Group,» *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations*

of union types.² A modified version of the interview schedule developed by Brown and Lawson for use in the U.K. was the primary research instrument.³

Since the study was largely exploratory, we did not adhere to the interview format rigidly but rather encouraged the respondents to talk freely about their work. In addition to the core sample, we also interviewed another dozen or so people who were familiar with the work of field officers. By these procedures, we sought to acquire information about the following aspects of the field officer's work:

- a. their pattern of activities
- b. the preparation which they had for the job
- c. how they kept their skills current
- d. how their activities were monitored by their unions
- e. their satisfactions, dissatisfactions and strains on the job.

VARIETY IN THE FIELD OFFICERS JOB

The sparse literature on union administration in North America usually lists two basic types of field officer: the service representative who is typically appointed to his post and reports to a vice-president or district director and the business agent who is typically elected from

Research Association, 1955, pp. 287-297. There is a more extensive British literature which includes H. A. CLEGG, A. J. KILLICK and Rex ADAMS, *Trade Union Officers*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961; W. BROWN and M. LAWSON, «The Training of Trade Union Officers,» *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. XI, no. 3, 1973, pp. 431-448 and N. ROBERTSON and K. I. SAMS, «The Role of The Full-Time Union Officer,» *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, October, 1976, pp. 23-41.

² The following unions were represented: International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America; Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association; Service Employees International Union; Labourers' International Union of North America; Association of Canadian Television and Radio Artists; Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers; International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers; Ontario Public Service Employees Union; Seafarers' International Union; Bricklayers' Masons and Plasterers' International Union of America; International Longshoremen's Association; American Federation of Musicians of the United States, and Canada; United Steelworkers of America; United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum and Plastic Workers of America; International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America; American Newspaper Guild; Canadian Union of Public Employees; United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada.

³ BROWN and LAWSON, *op. cit.*

and reports to a local union or joint board of local unions. While our sample roughly followed this classification we discovered that in practice the division of labour varies considerably from union to union and there is often a good deal of overlap in the functions assumed by any given officer.

Consider, for example, three types of full-time local union officer. The job of the business agents employed by the Toronto Musicians' Union is simply to visit night clubs, hotels, etc. to ensure that employed musicians are paid up union members. They also hear grievances which either management or members may have. These agents are appointed by the local union president. On the other hand, the business agent for the Plumbers' local in Brantford, Ontario is elected and has considerably more responsibility. He not only monitors the contract, but also is in charge of job placement, all of the paperwork for the local, benefit administration and preparing for and negotiating contracts. A still more responsible position is held by the elected business manager of the Toronto Labourer's local. He is in charge of an operation which is as extensive as that of some of the small international unions. He manages a large staff which provides a wide range of services to the membership.

An extreme example of overlapping functions is the case of one Canadian vice-president of an international union. In addition to his vice-presidential duties, he also functioned as a field officer for several local unions, research director for the union in Canada, president of one small local union, member of the education committee of the Ontario Federation of Labour, and as an active member of his local riding association.

While these observations should come as no surprise to practitioners or to those who are close to the labour movement, it is interesting to note that the available literature provides neither description nor analysis of this facet of union structure and administration.

Because of this variety the discussion which follows should be assessed with care. We can do no more than describe broad tendencies. Before more precise research can be undertaken a good deal of work at classification needs to be done.

PATTERN OF ACTIVITIES

The staff representative is an employee of the national or international union and, as such, he is expected to ensure that the locals

abide by overall union policy. The primary loyalty and responsibility of the business agent, on the contrary, is to the local rather than the national. Some unions have both staff reps and business agents and, in general, the staff rep position is considered a step up from that of business agent. The activities of the two types of field officer, however, are similar in many respects. The principal function of both is to assist local unions to carry out their day to day tasks.⁴ For most officers this includes preparing for collective bargaining and participating in negotiating sessions, becoming involved in grievance cases particularly at the higher levels of the grievance procedure, attending local union meetings and doing what can be done to ensure that the meetings run smoothly and accomplish their objectives, and providing advice and at times direction to local union lay officers. In addition, staff representatives may also be expected to recruit new members and set up new locals, to act as instructors in union education programs, to sit on grievance arbitration boards, to play an active part in the work of local labour council and provincial federations and to sit as labour representatives on various agencies and boards.

If a strike is necessary, it is the field officer's job to ensure that it is carried out efficiently and effectively. Business agents especially have the responsibility of selecting and supervising the work of shop stewards or their equivalent. In some of the younger industrial unions (CUPE, OPSEU) staff representatives also must spend a considerable amount of time on this function. However, most staff representatives stated that shop stewards were not their direct responsibility.

Job placement is a major duty of business agents in several of the craft unions but it is a function not engaged in by most of the industrial unions. Many of the officers considered political work (campaigning for the NDP primarily) to be an important part of their job although such work is only rarely made a formal requirement of the post. In the craft unions especially, but also to a not inconsiderable extent in the industrial unions, officers felt that a very important part of their work was providing personal advice and guidance to members on everything from financial to sexual problems.

Two necessary activities take up a good deal of the field officer's time: routine office work and travel. In fact, most officers listed routine

⁴ In some unions the jobs do differ significantly. For example, the «roadmen» in the building trades work primarily with business agents rather than local unions directly.

office work as the most time consuming of all their activities. The average official in our sample accumulated 23,600 miles per year on his car on union business. Assuming an average speed of 40 miles per hour, approximately 590 hours per year or more than 10 hours per week is spent on travel.⁵ In addition, several of the officers clock additional hours each month on air travel.

The average officer in our sample was responsible for eight locals but this figure is misleading. Craft union officers are usually responsible for only one local or in some large locals only a fraction of the membership. Thus, for those officials who had responsibility for more than one local (N = 11) the number of locals for which they were responsible varied from 6 to 14 with a mean of 11. The number of members for whom the officers had responsibility also varied a good deal, ranging from 140 in a small craft union local to 6000. The mean in our sample was 2800.

Since there may be more than one contract for the members in a single local or a single contract for members from several locals, the number of agreements for which a field officer is responsible is not necessarily the same as the number of locals in his care. The officers surveyed here had responsibility for between one and twenty-three agreements with a mean of fourteen.

Although trade unions have pushed hard to reduce work time for their members and to win extra compensation for undesirable hours, they expect their own employees to put in long and irregular hours. On average those we interviewed reported working two or three nights per week and two or three weekends per month. For several of those interviewed the workweek varied with time of year. In a normal week, however, the average officer reported working 55-60 hours.

PREPARATION FOR THE JOB

There appears to be a fairly typical pattern of entrance into the field officer job. The individual begins work in his industry, joins the union, exhibits leadership skills and is elected or appointed shop

⁵ In general, business agents travel less than staff representatives but the relationship is far from exact. Some «local» unions have a very large geographic spread. For example, a single local of the Service Employees International Union covers all of Quebec. In such locals business agents may travel a good deal. Contrarily, one Steelworkers staff rep services Local 1005 which includes employees of a single plant in Hamilton.

steward. He becomes active in the local union, attends meetings and volunteers for local committees. At some point in time he runs for or is selected to be a member of the bargaining committee. Becoming known to other active members in the local union and winning their respect and confidence, he decides to stand for local office. It is from a pool of such people that unions usually appoint full-time officers. In those unions which elect officers, it is such people who are usually nominated.

The average age of those we interviewed was 32 years at the time when they first assumed a full-time union post. At that time 86% had been a shop steward and 67% had been an elected local union official above the level of steward. This traditional pattern may, however, be changing to some extent. Three of the younger officers in our sample first completed their college education. Two then began as research and education officers later switching over to field jobs. One had begun as a community organizer for the YMCA.

Our survey indicates that there may be a fair amount of mobility in the labour movement. Four of those we interviewed had come to their current posts from other unions. White-collar and public sector unions appear to be most likely to recruit from more established manual unions.⁶

Although a few of the larger unions make some effort to identify and develop likely candidates for full-time union jobs, these efforts are not widespread. As a result most of those in our sample were not prepared to assume the full range of field officer duties at the time of their appointment. The overwhelming majority had at least some experience in preparing for and negotiating agreements as members of local union bargaining committees but had not had full responsibility for initiating demands, developing strategy and following through to the final settlement. Most had a good deal of experience handling grievances but only at the lower levels of the grievance process. Only a handful had been involved in the preparation and presentation of cases for arbitration. The majority had some experience chairing meetings and organizing the unorganized. A substantial number of those interviewed, however, had no prior experience with several aspects of the job. For example, 38% had no membership recruitment experience, 68% had no experience with conducting training sessions, 35% had no experience

⁶ This topic might be fruitfully explored by labour economists. Mobility within the movement and between the movement and other sectors of the economy is a topic about which virtually nothing concrete is known.

with processing workmen's compensation or unemployment benefit claims, and 43% had no strike administration experience.⁷

Since the prior training of the new field officer is likely to be incomplete at best one might expect unions to pay considerable attention to the induction process. For the most part, however, this is not the case. A handful of North American unions do have officer training programs.⁸ A few other unions try to assign new officers to experienced men for the first several months. However, in the typical case induction consists of throwing the individual in «at the deep end.» The officers coped with their new jobs primarily by learning through trial and error and by depending on the availability of more experienced officers for advice. Many of the officials expressed the frustration which they felt during the first several months on the job. One business agent who had defeated the incumbent expressed his feelings this way: «During the first three months I felt like saying 'help, help, somebody come and save me.' »

There are at least three reasons for this situation. First, many full-time openings come up suddenly and someone is needed immediately. Since most unions are not very wealthy they operate with a minimum of full-time people. Thus, in a crisis situation no current staff officer can be spared to assist the locals during a transition period when a new man might be broken in. Second, North American unions have great faith in practical experience and a disdain for theoretical or «classroom» knowledge. Thus, there is a widespread belief that one can only learn by doing.⁹ Many of those interviewed, despite their frustration, expressed this opinion. Third, few unions have given any systematic thought to planning for their manpower needs.¹⁰ Daily pressures and immediate needs push long range planning into the background.

⁷ It should be noted that these skills are not of critical importance to several of those in our sample. For example, officers in some of the craft unions have no significant recruiting or training responsibilities.

⁸ See Lois S. GRAY, «Training of Labor Union Officials,» *Labor Law Journal*, August, 1975, pp. 472-477. Some of the unions in our sample encourage promising lay officials to attend Labour College but none of those we interviewed were graduates.

⁹ See WILENSKY, *op. cit.*, and Russel ALLEN, «The Professional in Unions and His Educational Preparation,» *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, October, 1962, p. 20.

¹⁰ Bok and Dunlop have made the same observation. See D. C. BOK and J. T. DUNLOP, *Labor and the American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970, pp. 160-161.

CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT

The demands placed on field officers by members and local union officials for advice and guidance are great. They may be expected to understand and interpret labour and welfare legislation, recent economic and social developments; government policy initiatives and the position of the union relative to these initiatives; grievance arbitration decisions and the way different arbitrators are likely to proceed and decide; new developments in collective bargaining relating to impasse resolution; employee benefits; patterns of worktime; developments abroad concerning such issues as industrial democracy, tripartism and income policies; the operation of the political system and the role of political parties in the system; employer techniques of human resource management and employer bargaining strategies. They may also be asked from time to time to teach a course for their own union or the CLC or a local labour council. They may be expected to give talks to unions members, students and other groups. They may be expected to initiate, organize and supervise the work of various committees. Often they need to acquire information quickly and effectively and thus require a facility with information retrieval techniques.

One way such skills may be acquired and kept up to date is through formal training. Thus, we asked the officers if they had received any training during their trade union career, provided either by their union or through other means, in several relevant subjects.

The majority of staff representatives in the industrial unions reported having received some training in labour law, the techniques of collective bargaining, wage and benefit administration, grievance handling and communication techniques. Only a minority of staff reps had attended courses concerning such subjects as public speaking, teaching methods, work study, research techniques, supervisory skills, membership recruitment, personnel administration, or company finance, costs and profits. The officers in the craft and occupational unions were considerably worse off. Less than one-third had received training in any of the subjects mentioned above during their trade union career.

Formal training is, however, only one method whereby the field officer may acquire necessary skills. The typical educational experience of the trade union officer unfolds when an issue or problem arises which has not be confronted previously. At such times the official may contact his research or education department for assistance. In the larger unions such departments are often quite good. However, many North American unions are too small to afford many specialized staffers. As a result the

field officers depend heavily on colleagues who are known to have expertise in particular subjects. During our interviews it became apparent that throughout the labour movement there are persons who have acquired substantial expertise in various aspects of the employment relationship. Those interviewed, for example, could name specific individuals who, for one reason or another, had become well informed about minority group problems, pension plans, alcoholism, party politics, labour education, impasse resolution techniques, flextime, workers' participation schemes, and industrial health and safety. Field officers spend a good deal of time at conventions, conferences and meetings of all sorts. Whatever their stated purpose a major function of these meetings is education. It is at these times that the officers get an opportunity to meet and discuss common problems with colleagues who are more well informed about specific subjects than they are. Once the contact is made the officer can always get back to the colleague should an issue arise.

In short, there is a strong tradition of oral education in the labour movement which may be easily overlooked by those of us who are more familiar and comfortable with formal and structured education programs. The problem with the oral tradition is that it is inefficient. The process is most effective for those who participate fully in labour council and federation work. However, those who are most in need of access to the oral education process — officers in the media, maritime and construction unions — are the one's least likely to be involved in inter-union meetings and affairs outside of their own small orbits.¹¹

Another educational vehicle is the written word and most officers make use of this medium but only to a limited extent. The majority of those interviewed were avid readers of newspapers and specialized publications such as *Canadian Labour Views* and *Labour Arbitration Reports*. Most also read *Canadian Labour* and *The Labour Gazette*. However, with very few exceptions, trade union officers do not read the academic press. None of those in our sample read *The Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, *Industrial Relations* or *Canadian Personnel and Industrial Relations Journal*. Only one read *Relations Industrielles*.

¹¹ There is a good deal of interaction between media unions, between maritime unions, and between construction unions. However, if our sample is indicative, there is little interaction between maritime and media unions or between media and manufacturing unions or between construction and public service unions. The media, maritime and construction union officers which we interviewed had little to do with local labour councils or the provincial federation.

This finding indicates to me that there is a serious communications gap between the academic community and the practicing union professional. When we in Academe publish our theory and research we talk only to ourselves and perhaps to some business and government people. We do not talk to the trade union movement. Although there are several publications in North America which interpret industrial and human relations research for management and government practitioners, there are none which perform the same service for the professional trade unionist.¹²

Given this situation it is perhaps little wonder that unionists generally have a dim view about academic research.¹³ When asked if they could name any books or research studies which had been of practical value to them only a few of those interviewed could respond in the positive.

MOTIVATION AND CONTROL

Field reps must be «self-starters.» They have a large degree of discretion in what they do on a day-to-day basis. Control over their activities by directors, vice-presidents or executive boards is generally quite loose. The primary technique of control is what has been called «management by exception.» Sixty-two percent of the sample stated that the primary way their superiors know that they are doing an adequate job is via informal membership feedback. If there are few complaints from the members then it is generally assumed that their superiors were well aware of their activities because they worked out of the same office and saw each other daily.

There are also two formal vehicles which unions use to ensure that the job is being done properly. Eleven of the officers were required to file regular expense accounts and another eight had to file regular written reports concerning the state of their locals. Four of the officers

¹² There are several publications in North America such as *Harvard Business Review*, *Business Horizons*, *Business Quarterly* and *Canadian Business Review* which make possible direct communication between the academic and business community. Although publications such as *Canadian Labour* and *The American Federationist* do occasionally report the results of research, these journals are political vehicles controlled by top leaders and thus certainly do not fulfill the same function.

¹³ See the interesting survey made by Frances HENSON, «The Value of University-Sponsored Research to Labour Leaders,» *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association*, 1958, pp. 90-101.

in the craft unions made regular oral reports to their executive committees.

For the most part, those interviewed found a good deal of satisfaction in the amount of freedom which their job permitted. Most of those who had to write regular reports of their activities resented having to do so. They felt it wasted valuable time and they believed that the reports were not used in any constructive way. A few unions had previously required the filing of such reports but decided to do away with the requirement.

Although we did not ask for hard data on salaries, and the officers were not systematically questioned about their satisfaction with their salary level, the issue did come up in several of the interviews. For the most part those who volunteered information said that they were reasonably satisfied with their income. A few, however, believed that officers in certain unions get paid far too much. Others believed that their management counterparts were often overpaid.

There is a good deal of variety in methods of remuneration. In six unions salaries are negotiable between an officers' staff association and union leaders. In three unions salary is tied to collective agreements covering the members. High level officers or executive boards determine salaries unilaterally in three of the unions. Other reported methods were:

- salary negotiated on an individual basis
- regular progression determined by top union officers
- salary keyed to the agreement for office employees of the union
- salary determined by a vote of local union members.

Formal performance appraisal and the adjustment of salaries based upon judgement of merit, which is a common system in the ranks of management, is completely absent from our sample. For the most part unions are philosophically opposed to such systems believing that they are arbitrary and have a high potential for favoritism and other forms of injustice. Because of the informal way in which tasks are assigned one might expect a priori the emergence of an uneven workload problem. In short, some officers might be given substantially more to do than others.¹⁴ For the most part, however, those interviewed felt that the distribution of work in their union was equitable. In a few cases, officers did note a procedure which they felt to be unfair and dysfunctional.

¹⁴ Note, for example, the wide variation in the number of collective agreements for which those in our sample are responsible.

If a staff representative is successful in organizing a new local it is not uncommon for him to be assigned the local to service. Thus the official who exerts himself keenly might find himself with a very heavy load compared to his colleagues. In one of the unions where uneven workload was considered to be a problem, the officer's staff association was seeking a system of job description and job evaluation in negotiations.

In addition to the nature of the work, the job of the field officer is attractive because it may be a step in a career. If they had not become full-time field officers most of those in our sample would most likely have quickly reached the top classification they could have hoped to attain in their previous occupation. Becoming a full-time officer opens up many new opportunities for them to use skills and acquire greater prestige, power and income than in the previous job. Thirty-eight percent of those interviewed stated that they definitely hope for a higher level position in future. Another 29% said they would consider opportunities as they arose but that they were not actively seeking higher positions at present. A third of the sample, however, stated that they definitely had no aspirations for higher positions and were content with their present job. This last response may be due to the fact that in some unions personal ambition is suspect for at least two reasons. First, elected leaders who appoint staff representatives may question the loyalty of one who has designs on an elected post. Thus, a rep who openly admits his ambitions may jeopardize his position in the union. Second, there is a strong service tradition in some unions. Full-time officers are expected to unselfishly dedicate themselves to the betterment of the working man much like missionaries. Thus, personal ambition may be considered an indication of warped values.

Most of the officers in our sample plan to spend their entire career in the labour movement. When asked this question, 67% responded «definitely yes,» 9% said «probably» and 24% were undecided. None answered «definitely no.»

To acquire a more general picture of the satisfactions and dissatisfactions in the job we asked each officer two open-ended questions: «What aspect of the job do you like (dislike) the most?»

The most liked characteristic of the job was some variant of «helping people.» This response was made by 57% of the sample. Twenty-nine percent mentioned «negotiating» and nineteen percent «solving problems.» Other responses were: doing the job well, re-

sponsibility, variety, dealing with management, arbitration, and using abilities.

The two least liked aspects of the job were «paperwork» mentioned by 38% of the sample and «long hours» noted by 24%.¹⁵ Other disliked aspects were: attending local union meetings, bureaucracy, incompetence, unappreciative members, lack of leadership imagination, grievance handling, looking after local union finances, and interviewing new members. Not too surprisingly, a Seafarers' rep responded, «being hounded by police.»¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS

We cannot say for certain the extent to which the observations reported here reflect normal practice among the entire population of field officers in Canada. Our impression, based upon discussions with several knowledgeable people, is that most are more or less representative. More extensive research is obviously required in order to confirm this impression.

In recent years some academics have noted the deficiencies of union administrative process. After reviewing the practice of American unions Bok and Dunlop, for example, conclude that: «Judged by contemporary standards of administration, the typical international union leaves much to be desired.» Concerning human resources specifically they state that, «The methods for selecting, training, and motivating officials are often hap-hazard and not well designed to elevate the ablest, best-trained men to office.»¹⁷ Our findings here certainly indicate that union administration could be improved on several dimensions but a few points need to be made.

First, while the academic community has engaged in a good deal of research from the perspective of business, government and other service

¹⁵ It is perhaps surprising that long and irregular hours were not of undue concern to a majority of the sample. Our impression was that the variety, freedom and inherently challenging and humanitarian nature of the job led many of the officers to willingly put in long hours. A comparison between the job behaviour of union officers and those they service seems to support the job enrichment and job enlargement school of organizational behaviour.

¹⁶ At the time this study was being carried out (1975/76) the Seafarers' union was under investigation by the RCMP. As a result charges were laid in 1976 against 11 members of the union but they were eventually dismissed due to insufficient evidence.

¹⁷ See DUNLOP and BOK, *op. cit.*, p. 186 and also ROBERTSON and SAMS, *op. cit.*

organizations, it has almost totally ignored the trade union. Thus the union leader who recognizes the limitations of current practice has essentially no body of literature to which he or his staff might turn for guidance on how the requisite functions might be performed in a more effective manner.¹⁸

Bill Glueck, in his recent textbook on personnel management, has noted four steps through which research and thought on human resource issues generally develop:¹⁹

1. New, New in which «experts» prescribe panaceas
2. Early development in which articles describe successful approaches by specific organizations
3. The conflict stage in which articles warn that «it did not work for us»
4. Maturity in which theories and explanations for the conflicts in stage 3 emerge from an extensive body of systematic empirical research.

Concerning union administration we have hardly progressed to a stage one. Nor is it sufficient to simply apply general principles to the union case because the constraints faced by unions are different from those of other organizations. Unions are democratic organizations and are thus more explicitly political than business firms or government bureaucracies.²⁰ Unions also have humanistic and egalitarian traditions which need to be taken into account. Thus, one may not assume, as is done in regards the business organization, that efficiency has priority over all other needs. Solutions in the union case may have to be found which recognize that a higher priority need be given to democracy and

¹⁸ A few practitioner's as well as labour education units in the U.S. have produced some useful publications which survey and relate experience. See, for example, Chris TROWER, *Arbitration at a Glance*, Toronto: Labour Research Institute, 1974, and Alice H. COOK, *Labor's Role in Community Affairs*, Ithaca: New York State School of Industrial and Labour Relations, Cornell University, Bulletin no. 32, August, 1955. In Canada there has been some applied research in support of labour education at such institutions as Capilano College in B.C., McMaster University and Niagara College in Ontario and IRAT in Quebec. However, few generally available publications have emerged from this research.

¹⁹ W. F. GLUECK, *Personnel: A Diagnostic Approach*, Georgetown, Ontario: Irwin-Dorsey Ltd., 1974, p. 99.

²⁰ This observation has been reiterated many times. For recent discussions see J. CHILD, M. WARNER and R. LOVERIDGE, «Towards an Organizational Study of Trade Unions,» *Sociology*, Jan., 1973 and N. F. DUFTY, «Trade Unions and Their Operations,» *Journal of Industrial Relations*, September, 1976.

solidarity. But to conclude that efficiency is of little importance to the union would be absurd. The problem to the union is how to achieve the highest degree of efficiency that is consistent with the maintenance of democracy and solidarity. To date the academic community has demonstrated an extraordinary myopia relative to this union imperative.

Secondly, administrative practice in private industry is probably not so sophisticated as Bok and Dunlop presume. Surveys in the U.S. of business practice in regards to human resources management indicates that only a handful of large organizations utilize the most advanced techniques.²¹ Despite the availability to business of an extensive literature on recruitment, selection, training, motivation and compensation most companies continue to utilize primitive and inefficient techniques. Few business firms engage in systematic manpower planning and career development. Most continue to rely on non-validated, open-ended interviews as their primary selection instrument. Only a small elite of firms engage in internal personnel research. Available studies, as well as my own personal experience, indicate that Canadian practice is certainly no better and probably considerably worse than in the U.S.²² Moreover, one must realize that in terms of the size of their labour force unions are analogous to small or medium-size business firms and it is highly doubtful that personnel practice in such small firms is superior to that in the unions. Indeed the opposite is more likely.

In recent years a substantial amount of attention has been focused on labour education. For such education to be of optimal value, it should be grounded in solid research. We believe that the time for the initiation of such research is long overdue.

La tâche des permanents syndicaux

Le succès d'un syndicat dépend de l'activité des permanents syndicaux. Aussi, l'auteur s'est-il proposé d'en faire l'étude à partir d'entrevues faites auprès de vingt-et-un d'entre eux appartenant à dix-huit syndicats différents; il a de plus interrogé une douzaine de personnes qui sont familières avec leur travail.

²¹ J. D. CAMPBELL, M. D. DUNNETT, E. E. LAWLER III and K. E. WEICK, Jr., *Managerial Behaviour, Performance and Effectiveness*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970, pp. 17-70.

²² See, for example, Jacob P. SIEGEL, «Human Resource Management in Local and Multi-National Firms in Canada: Some empirical Observations,» in H. C. Jain (ed.) *Contemporary Issues in Canadian Personnel Administration*, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1974.

L'étude porte sur la nature de leur activité, la préparation antérieure qu'ils ont reçue pour l'accomplissement de leur fonction, la façon dont ils acquièrent leur compétence, la manière dont leur travail est contrôlé, la satisfaction ou le mécontentement qu'ils ressentent dans l'exercice de leurs tâches.

Il est difficile de résumer en quelques paragraphes les constatations de l'auteur. Il suffira pour avoir une bonne idée de l'article de cueillir ici et là dans son texte certains faits significatifs.

Selon l'étude, il y a dans les syndicats américains deux types de permanents syndicaux : le représentant syndical, salarié qui relève d'un vice-président ou d'un directeur régional de l'association, et l'agent d'affaires qui est généralement élu par une section locale ou par un conseil de district. L'enquête a révélé, d'autre part, que le travail varie considérablement d'un syndicat à l'autre et qu'il y a souvent chevauchement des fonctions. Certains ont beaucoup plus de responsabilités que d'autres. D'une façon générale, on peut dire que le représentant est un employé du syndicat national ou international et qu'il doit s'assurer que les sections locales en suivent les directives, tandis que l'agent d'affaires rend compte exclusivement à la section locale. Dans la hiérarchie des fonctions, le représentant tient un rang plus élevé que l'agent d'affaires, mais leur travail se ressemble sous bien des rapports, leur principale activité étant de veiller à ce que la section fonctionne le mieux possible, ce qui inclut la préparation et la négociation des conventions collectives, le règlement des griefs, l'assistance aux assemblées, le recrutement de nouveaux membres, la fondation de nouvelles unités, la participation aux programmes d'éducation, aux conseils d'arbitrage, la direction des grèves, l'administration etc... Souvent aussi, le représentant syndical est engagé dans l'activité des fédérations provinciales et divers autres conseils ou comités généraux ou spécialisés. Le représentant syndical consacre aussi un temps considérable au travail de bureau et il doit se déplacer constamment de telle sorte que, en moyenne, les représentants syndicaux interviewés roulent 23,600 milles par année sans tenir compte de certains voyages effectués par avion. Chaque représentant syndical est responsable de huit sections locales, mais ces chiffres peuvent être trompeurs, puisque l'agent d'affaires d'un syndicat de métier ne veille qu'aux intérêts d'une seule section. De même, le nombre de salariés dont celui-ci a à s'occuper s'établit en moyenne à 2,800 et les représentants syndicaux doivent voir à l'application d'une à vingt-trois conventions collectives.

Les heures de travail sont longues et irrégulières, soit de 55 à 60 heures par semaine dont deux ou trois soirées par semaine et deux à trois fins de semaine par mois.

L'auteur, dans une autre partie de son étude, s'interroge sur la préparation du permanent syndical pour son travail. En règle général, celui-ci a commencé à travailler dans son entreprise, a adhéré au syndicat, a démontré des qualités naturelles de « leader » et est devenu agent de griefs. Actif dans son association, il devient membre du comité de négociation, se fait connaître et postule un poste de dirigeant syndical, puis devient finalement agent d'affaires ou représentant, poste auquel il accède généralement au début de la trentaine. En effet, 86 p.c. avait préalablement agi comme délégués d'atelier et 67 p.c. comme dirigeants syndicaux. On en retrouve aussi quelques-uns qui possèdent une formation scolaire plus avancée et qui s'occupent surtout de recherches et d'éducation syndicale.

Il y a beaucoup de mobilité parmi les permanents. Les syndicats les plus nombreux font certains efforts pour choisir de bons candidats, mais ce n'est pas la règle générale. Un certain nombre d'entre eux possèdent une certaine expérience dans la

négociation des conventions collectives, le traitement des griefs, la conduite des assemblées et le recrutement des nouveaux membres. Très peu d'entre eux ont eu à défendre des litiges devant les conseils d'arbitrage, 38 p.c. des permanents interrogés n'avaient jamais fait de recrutement, 68 p.c. n'avaient jamais dirigé de séances d'étude, 35 p.c. n'avaient jamais été appelés à traiter de cas d'accidents de travail ou de cas d'assurance-chômage et 43 p.c. n'avaient jamais dirigé de grève.

Même si telle est la situation, rares sont les syndicats qui possèdent des critères d'engagement ou de système de formation. Les permanents sont lancés dans la mêlée et procèdent par tâtonnements en s'aidant des conseils de leurs camarades plus expérimentés. L'auteur explique cet état de choses par trois raisons principales: les postes se présentent à l'improviste et doivent être remplis sur-le-champ; la plupart des syndicats nord-américains accordent beaucoup de confiance à l'expérience pratique et dédaignent les connaissances théoriques; peu de syndicats planifient d'avance leurs besoins en personnel.

Et pourtant les exigences des membres et des dirigeants des sections locales sont fort nombreuses; interprétation de la législation du travail et de la sécurité sociale, évaluation de la conjoncture économique, appréciation par les syndicats des mesures gouvernementales, analyse des décisions arbitrales, règlement des impasses dans les négociations collectives, analyse des avantages sociaux et des horaires de travail, étude des stratégies patronales, évaluation de l'évolution des partis politiques et de l'effet de leurs programmes sur l'action syndicale, etc...

Dans la pratique, la majorité des représentants syndicaux reconnaissent avoir reçu un peu de formation en matière de législation du travail, de techniques de négociations collectives, d'administration des salaires, de traitement de griefs et d'utilisation des moyens de communications. Très peu d'entre eux ont suivi des cours d'initiation en art oratoire, en pédagogie, en étude du travail, en technique de recherches, en administration du personnel et en études économique et administrative. Les agents d'affaires des syndicats de métier sont les moins bien formés. Très peu ont reçu une formation quelconque en ces matières.

Aussi, lorsqu'un problème nouveau se présente, doivent-ils se rabattre sur les services d'éducation et de recherches du syndicat lesquels sont très valables dans les groupements importants. Cependant, la plupart des syndicats n'ont pas les moyens de se doter de tels services.

En bref, il y a une longue tradition de formation orale au sein du mouvement syndical dont il faut dire qu'elle est inefficace. Peu de permanents lisent la littérature écrite en ce domaine d'où il faut bien tirer la conclusion qu'il y a un vacuum entre le monde académique des relations du travail et la pratique professionnelle du syndicalisme.

L'auteur passe ensuite à la motivation des permanents syndicaux dans l'exercice de leur tâche. La discipline et le contrôle de leur travail est passablement lâche. 66 p.c. d'entre eux estiment que les dirigeants apprennent ce qu'ils font par les réactions des membres, mais 29 p.c., par ailleurs, croient que les dirigeants sont au courant de leur activité. On juge souvent l'étendue de leur activité par l'ampleur de leurs comptes de dépenses quoiqu'un certain nombre soient obligés de présenter un rapport écrit ou verbal de leur travail.

Cette liberté dans l'exercice de leur activité leur apparaît comme une source de satisfaction et ils sont aussi satisfaits de leur traitement, même si certains estiment que

les dirigeants sont surpayés. Les méthodes de fixation des salaires varient beaucoup d'un cas à l'autre: traitement fixé par négociation individuelle, par année d'expérience, par détermination des taux de salaire dans le secteur d'activité dans lequel ils sont engagés, par décision de l'assemblée de la section locale, par négociation collective quelquefois. Les augmentations de salaire au mérite répugnent aux syndicats qui y voient une source de favoritisme et d'injustice. La plupart trouvent que le travail est partagé équitablement. Lorsqu'un représentant réussit à organiser une nouvelle section, il n'est pas rare qu'elle lui soit assignée. Les permanents sont également attirés par le poste, parce que, pour eux, cela peut être le début d'une carrière qui leur permettra d'acquérir plus de prestige et un meilleur salaire que par un emploi dans l'industrie. D'ailleurs, 38 p.c. déclarent que c'est là leur espérance. On en compte toutefois le tiers qui n'aspirent pas à un sommet plus élevé. Ils considèrent leur activité comme une espèce de «missionnariat». Aussi, la plupart des permanents envisagent-ils de passer leur vie dans le mouvement ouvrier et lorsqu'on leur demande quel aspect de leur fonction ils préfèrent, ils répondent en majorité que la raison en est qu'ils peuvent «aider les gens», qu'ils aiment à négocier et à résoudre des problèmes. Ce dont ils ont à se plaindre, c'est du travail de bureau, de la «paperasserie» ainsi que des longues heures de travail.

De ce tour d'horizon, l'auteur tire finalement quelques conclusions. Par exemple, il trouve que, règle générale, les milieux académiques ont ignoré le syndicalisme et il estime qu'on ne peut pas appliquer aux syndicats les mêmes règles qu'aux entreprises et aux gouvernements, parce qu'il s'agit d'organisations démocratiques politisées bien différentes des sociétés d'affaires et des bureaucraties gouvernementales. D'autre part, il croit qu'il y a moyen d'accroître l'efficacité des syndicats à condition que le secteur académique cesse d'être myope face à ce besoin impérieux du syndicalisme. Il ne faudrait pas oublier, ajoute-t-il, qu'assez peu de compagnies se soucient des problèmes humains de l'entreprise. Enfin, dit-il, on accorde de plus en plus d'attention à l'éducation ouvrière, mais, pour lui donner sa pleine valeur, il faudrait la fonder sur un solide travail de recherches.

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