XII. LABOR STUDIES/LABOR UNIONS, COLLECTIVE BARGAINING, DISPUTE RESOLUTION, AND LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT LAW REFEREED PAPERS

Bargaining through Cooperation: The Impact of Labor Management Teams on Steward Identity and Performance

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Abstract

Under conditions of the New Deal–formed industrial relations system, stewards were the foremost foot soldiers of a union power countervailing managerial control. But over the past two decades joint labor-management teams (LMT) have begun to challenge the role of the union steward. The following article empirically assesses how teams impact the performance of stewards. It suggests that while the workshop influence of teams is mixed for both labor and management, how the steward comes to define the role of workplace leader will have a great influence on what he or she considers to be a legitimate task or a conflicting responsibility.

Introduction

If the postwar workplace social contract that allegedly underscored collective bargaining has been abandoned (Kochan 1999), marginalized (Anderson 1997), or permanently transformed (Jaffe and Tobe 1994), then it is the

role of the union steward that has assumed the brunt of the transformation. Under the New Deal–formed industrial relations system, a union steward was the critical contract enforcement officer for rank-and-file workers. But with the transformation in work organizations and the adoption of labor-management teams (LMT) of the 1980s, within broader employee-involvement (EI) schemes the role of the union steward has at best grown decidedly more complex, and at worst incomprehensible.

Despite a long tradition of scholarship on workplace voice mechanisms and employee loyalty (Adler 1997; Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Lewin and Mitchell 1992; McNabb and Whitfield 1999), except for one British study (Marchington and Armstrong 1984) the effects of EI programs on worker representation have not been empirically measured. Although there is a line of literature that argues that LMTs ideologically undermine union representation (Parker and Slaughter 1995), other scholars have noted that teams do not necessarily lead to dichotomous role identities for union officers (Babson 1995; Banks and Metzgar 1989; Magenau and Martin 1999; Martin 1988). In addition, theoretical models of shop-floor dispute-resolution mechanisms (Kaminski 1999; Lewin 1999; Lewin and Mitchell 1992; Lewin and Peterson 1988; Voos 1989) have predicted that the labor-management relationship will influence the process and character of worker representation. Thus, this work presents a case study of the impact of LMTs on the representational roles and responsibilities of union stewards.

In the study presented below, teams were all "standing" (i.e., permanent for length of the contract), "off-line", included at least one steward, were headed by a union officer and company official, and, with only minor exceptions, were of three types. Participating locals had functioning safety, production-problem, and social-event teams. The safety committees were typically the smallest and met every other week. Stewards had the principal function of placing workplace safety concerns on the meeting agenda. Production-problem teams averaged from four to five members and met every day at the start of each shift. These sessions varied in length, depending on the existence and nature of problems reported over the previous workday. Stewards usually took the lead in identifying production problems or in responding to management's queries about such matters.

Social-event teams had the largest membership—they varied in size from 12 to 25, depending on the workforce—and usually met on a quarterly basis. The principal function of this committee was to plan joint labor-management affairs that would, in the words of a staff representative, promote a sense of good "corporate citizenship." In this case, stewards played a dual role: facilitating the solicitation of rank-and-file ideas and making sure that union employees benefited equally from any programs or events.

Although stewards were actively involved in all teams, in no case was a steward a team leader. In addition, it was not uncommon to find stewards serving on more than one team. It is also worth noting that none of the stewards in the survey had been formally trained either jointly or by their union to set up or serve on teams. The international union did, however, provide a written set of guidelines and principles for dealing with the formation of teams.

This paper is divided into three sections. Section one provides a brief description of the survey respondents and research approach. Section two addresses the survey's findings and is followed by a discussion of response causality.

Research Methodology

Data for this work were collected from a 20–question survey of 62 union stewards belonging to a Midwest industrial union representing workers in multiple metal foundries. The survey was designed to address six hypotheses about the effects of teams on the role of the steward. Each hypothesis was constructed from the author's interpretation of the positive scholarly claims made for LMTs and is presented in the results section. Frequency tables and cross-tabulations are utilized to reveal differences between LMT and non-LMT steward responses. Stewards were drawn from six locals representing workers at 12 business establishments. All of the work sites operated multiple shifts and consequently more than one steward represented each work place. Although no two employment conditions were identical, at the point LMTs were adopted (average years of partnership was 7) in select workplaces, district and local union officials described the employment relations as "workable."[1]

Except where specific demographic data or dichotomous information (e.g., yes or no) was requested, most answers were recorded on a standard Likert scale. The author developed the survey and administered it directly to participants selected by their union local from LMTs and conventional workplaces. At no time did the union involved have access to the questionnaire or the data. Stewards received the survey as part of an educational program designed by the author and delivered at the request of the union district office. Participants were enrolled as part of an initial wave of stewards, expected to be trained or retrained by the union. Local officers were directed by the district to identify a set number of stewards to attend the training. Every enrolled steward complied with the request to completely fill out the survey, thus producing a 100 percent response rate.

Nearly three-quarters ($n = 46$) of the stewards were working with functioning LMTs and were drawn from eight of the work sites. The remaining stewards ($n =16$) worked within the four shops without standing teams. The majority of the respondents were new to the steward position. Although four years was the median period of stewardship, 67.2 percent of respondents had

between one and five years of experience and slightly more than a third (34.4 percent) had represented workers for just 12 months. The remaining respondents had logged between 6 and 22 years of service time. The average steward had been a union member for 17.34 years, and one-third had been paying union dues for more than 25 years. In addition, stewards were drawn from locals ranging in size from 19 ($n = 1$) to 1,000 ($n = 1$), with a median membership of 290.

Results

H1: In a Team Setting, Fewer Contractual Grievances Will Be Filed Than in a Non-LMT Workplace

Survey findings appeared to support this claim (Table 1 and 2). Whereas overall grievances averaged between one and three per month, 75.6 percent of LMT respondents filed between zero and three cases. This compares favorably to only 42 percent of stewards who processed the same amount in conventional workshops. Further supporting the hypothesis is the fact that only 13.4 percent of LMT respondents processed more than eight monthly grievances, whereas approximately a third of non-LMT stewards juggled as many. In addition to processing fewer monthly grievances, stewards in LMT settings also resolved a higher percentage of them earlier (and subsequently lower) in the grievance procedure.[2]

TABLE 1
Number of Grievances Processed

LMT	0	1–3	4–7	8–11	12 or more	Total
Yes	15.6% (7)	60.0% (27)	11.1% (5)	6.7% (3)	6.7% (3)	100% (45)
No	31.3% (5)	18.8% (3)	18.8 (3)	25.0% (4)	6.3% (1)	100% (16)
Total	19.7% (12)	49.2% (30)	13.1% (8)	11.5% (7)	6.6% (4)	100% (61)

Number of Grievances Processed per Month

TABLE 2
Number of Grievances at Different Stages

LMT	Informal	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Total
Yes	24.2% (26)	28.9% (31)	22.4% (24)	16.8% (18)	7.4% (8)	(107)
No	25.5% (12)	21.2% (10)	21.2% (10)	23.4% (11)	8.5% (4)	(47)

H2: In a Team Setting the Steward is More Likely to Define His or Her Role as a Bipartisan Agent of the Contract Than in a Non-LMT Workplace

To measure how the stewards came to understand their primary purpose, the respondents were asked to indicate from a select number of statements the one that best "expresses your role as a steward" (Table 3). The overwhelming preferred role response (63.0 percent) for LMT stewards was to enforce contractual terms equally on management and the rank and file, but, significantly, only a third of non-LMT stewards defined their role this way. A second revealing finding is that a robust 43.8 percent of non-LMT stewards defined their role as being the "workers' advocate." In contrast, only 21.7 percent of LMT stewards signed on to this more adversarial characterization. It is noteworthy, however, that regardless of the form of voice available to stewards there was no support for the belief that worker representation was best defined in managerial terms as promoting "efficiency and productivity."

TABLE 3

Best Expression of a Steward's Role

	Do You Have an LMT?	
Steward's Role	Yes	No
Promote harmony between employees and management	13.0% (6)	18.8% (3)
Keep members satisfied and happy		6.3% (1)
To be the workers' advocate	21.7% (10)	43.8% (7)
To enforce the contract equally	63.0% (29)	31.3% (5)
To promote efficiency and productivity	2.2% (1)	
Total	74.2% (46)	25.8% (16)

H3: In a Team Setting the Steward Will Give Increased Importance to Achieving Managerial Performance Goals

Respondents were asked to assess the importance (1 being "most important" and 5 "least important") of 16 items to "successfully doing your job as a steward." The items included a mix of conventional worker-defense objectives and managerial-linked outcomes. The results indicated that survey participants were most committed to old-fashioned forms of worker protection and union promotion (Table 4). More important, there was no significant statistical effect of LMTs. For example, 81 and 57.6 percent of respondents, respectively, said that "enforcing the contract" and "processing grievances" were "very important." This compared to only 17.2 and 3.4 percent of the stewards, respectively, who admitted that "increasing work efficiency" and "protecting the company's market share" respectively were very important.

TABLE 4

Goals Identified as Very Important to the Steward

	Do You Have an LMT?	
Goal	Yes	No
Increasing production	11.6% (5)	13.3% (2)
Enforcing the contract	79.1% (34)	86.7% (13)
Increasing work efficiency	18.6% (8)	13.3% (2)
Processing grievances	50.0% (22)	80.0% (12)
Improving product quality	14.0% (6)	13.3% (2)
Promoting unionism	70.5% (31)	80.0% (12)
Encouraging cooperation with management	27.3% (12)	20.0% (3)
Educating the membership on political matters	43.2% (19)	40.0% (6)
Protecting the company's market share	2.3% (1)	6.7% (1)
Mobilizing the membership during contract talks	68.2% (30)	73.3% (11)
Assisting management in preparing workers for organizational change	14.0% (6)	13.3% (2)
Organizing new members	61.4% (27)	68.6% (11)
Preserving company profitability	9.1% (4)	6.3% (1)
Strengthening the union	90.9% (40)	87.5% (14)
Gaining greater decision-making control over production	25.0% (11)	18.8% (3)
Insuring members job security	81.8% (36)	93.8% (15)

H4: In a Team Setting the Steward Will Be Less Likely to Identify Managerial Behavior As an Actual Problem in Effectively Performing His or Her Duties Than in Non-LMT Settings

Contrary to the author's expectations, a robust 83.9 percent of respondents agreed that the "attitude and opposition of management was a problem," and, most importantly there was no significant difference between LMT and non-LMT stewards (Table 5). In addition, when directed to identify the "most important" items to performing their duties as a steward, LMT and non-LMT

TABLE 5

Opposition of Management Was Problem

	Do You Have an LMT?	
Level of Agreement	Yes	No
Strongly Agree	64.4% (29)	50.0% (8)
Agree	20.1% (9)	37.5% (6)
Neutral	(0)	(0)
Disagree	13.3% (6)	6.3% (1)
Strongly Disagree	2.2% (1)	6.3% (1)
Total	100.0% (45)	100.0% (16)

stewards overwhelmingly cited their own "personal training and education" (i.e., contract enforcement), the "labor education" (i.e., union orientation) of their members, and the "union support" (i.e., willingness to go to arbitration) shown for their efforts (Table 6).

TABLE 6
Items Most Important to Doing the Steward's Job

Item	Do You Have an LMT?	
	Yes	No
Level of personal training	73.2% (30)	54.5% (6)
Management attitudes and actions	31.6% (12)	42.9% (6)
Balancing family and union responsibilities	57.15% (20)	41.7% (5)
Attitudes of union membership	60.0% (18)	75.0% (9)
Union support and resources	69.0% (20)	71.4% (10)

H5: In a Team Setting the Steward Will Experience a Higher Level of Role Conflict Than Stewards Acting in Non-LMT Settings

To measure role compatibility, respondents were asked, "How often do the actual demands of the workplace conflict with what you consider to be your primary role as a steward?" Whereas a robust 65.2 percent of LMT stewards admitted that conflict occurred "very often" or "often," a slightly higher proportion of non-LMT respondents admitted to similar role conflict (Table 7).

TABLE 7
Experience Role Conflict in Job

Frequency	Do You Have an LMT?	
	Yes	No
Very Often	14.0% (6)	33.3% (5)
Often	51.2% (22)	33.3% (5)
Rarely	30.1% (13)	26.7% (4)
Never	4.7% (2)	6.7% (1)
Total	100.0% (43)	100.0% (15)

H6: In Team Settings Stewards Will Be More Effective in Providing Workers a Voice on the Job Than Stewards Acting in Non-LMT Settings

Respondents were asked to indicate approximately the times ("all the time" to "never") they were "effective in doing their job as a steward." While a hefty 70 percent of respondents claimed to be effective "most of the time," success

rates appeared unaffected by the absence or presence of LMTs (Table 8). There was, however, a cautionary note that an LMT could operate as an agent for hindering effectiveness (Table 9). When LMT participants were asked whether teams "blurred the steward's role" one out every two union representatives either "strongly agree" (20.9 percent) or "agree" (30.2 percent) with the statement.

TABLE 8
How Often Steward Has Been Effective

	Do You Have an LMT?	
Frequency	Yes	No
All of the time	6.5% (3)	12.5% (2)
Most of the time	67.4% (31)	68.8% (11)
Half the time	10.9% (5)	6.3% (1)
Less than half the time	4.3% (2)	6.3% (1)
Seldom	6.5% (3)	6.3% (1)
Never		
Total	100.0% (44)	100.0% (16)

TABLE 9
Relationship between Blurred Roles and Level of LMT Steward's Effectiveness

LMT	Times Steward Has Been Effective						
Blurred Roles	All	Most	Half	Less than half	Seldom	Never	Total
Strongly Agree		55.6% (5)	11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)	22.2% (2)		100.0% (9)
Agree	15.4% (2)	69.2% (9)	7.7% (1)		7.7% (1)		100.0% (13)
Disagree		84.6% (11)	15.4% (2)				100.0% (13)
Strongly Disagree	12.5% (1)	75.0% (6)	12.5% (1)				100.0% (8)
Total	7.0% (3)	72.1% (31)	11.6% (5)	2.3% (1)	7.0% (3)		100.0% (43)

Conclusion

An analysis of the results casts doubt on any significant impact of LMTs on the role perceptions and job performance of union stewards. Although there was a noticeable effect of teams on how the steward defined his/her role and an acknowledgement that teams did create some job performance difficulties,

the overall influence appears benign. This limited case study suggests mixed implications for the adoption of LMTs in order to improve worker voice.

On the one hand, the presence of teams was related to a reduced number of grievances and a shorter time frame in which they were processed (hypothesis 1). On the other hand, fewer LMT stewards than non-LMT representatives defined their role as the workers' advocate (hypothesis 2). A key finding was that stewards were not co-opted by serving on teams. Managerial performance objectives, for instance, did not supplant grievance processing and union organizing as steward responsibilities (hypothesis 3). In addition, a large majority of all stewards viewed managerial behavior as the principle barrier to doing their job and rank-and-file union awareness as the most important item in successfully protecting workers' interests (hypothesis 4). Stewards also experienced a high level of role conflict in LMT shops as well as in conventional ones (hypothesis 5). More important, respondents' job performance was high in team settings (hypothesis 6).

Regardless of the findings here, how the steward comes to define the role of workplace leader will have a great impact on what he or she considers to be a legitimate task, or a conflicting responsibility. Thus, as organizations change their structure and introduce new participatory managerial methods, it is necessary that the union and the employer appreciate the critical linkages that the steward provides.

Notes

1. The author conducted extensive interviews with local and district-wide union officials to assess the attitudes of each of the participating locals toward joint programs. Union officials were asked to describe the organizing and bargaining history of the participating shops and under what circumstances teams were introduced or attempted and rejected. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and took place over three consecutive days. During the interviews, each union official was presented with a scale of responses ("harmonious," "workable," "difficult," and "warlike") to describe each work site.

2. The survey did not distinguish between types of grievances. Differences may have existed in the way cooperative and reactive approaches to contract enforcement treated more serious disputes as opposed to more mild infractions.

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