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### COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FOR FOREMEN?

ONE OF the products of modern mass-production methods in America was evolved without the usual processes of planning. It was not based on surveys, preliminary sketches, blueprints, estimates, pilot models, or field tests. Its character was something new and different and was not even recognized. It was given an old and significant name which actually did not fit. This product of mass production is the job to which the mass-production industries gave the name of Foreman.

In time the reactions and behavior of men on this job became troublesome. The trouble was attributed to a great many different causes. It was blamed on agitators from inside the plant or outside, usually from inside the rank-and-file union. It was blamed on the National Labor Relations Act or the Board which enforced it. It was blamed on a general deterioration in the quality of men available for such responsible positions.

The symptoms of the trouble received a great deal of attention. The organization of collective bargaining units composed entirely of foremen shocked most members of the higher management group. The absorption of foremen into the same unions which represented the wage earners or rank-and-file workers was even more shocking. The discovery that foremen were entitled to the privileges of representation and collective bargaining prescribed for employees under the Wagner Act seemed to establish the death sentence for effective management of the American industrial enterprise. When the Supreme Court confirmed this discovery, it seemed to a great many members of the management group that American industry had moved most of the way toward a Soviet type of organization in the plant and factory.

These moves and discoveries were purely symptoms. The Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947 provided a treatment for certain of the symptoms. The foremen's unions were excluded from the protections enforced by the National Labor Relations Board. Experience proved that prohibiting certain treatment for certain symptoms was not equivalent to curing the ailment. This legislative approach might be compared to a statute prohibiting the use of aluminum splints on fractures of the forearm. Such legislation would not prevent fractures of the forearm.

The unionization of foremen was a mild and superficial symptom of serious and basic trouble. The fact that the unionization was fostered, for a while, by the protective machinery of the National Labor Relations Act, was purely incidental. The removal of that protection has not even eliminated the unionization of foremen. Even if the unionization itself were eliminated, that would not prove or even indicate that the trouble had been cured.

Any constructive treatment of the trouble itself must begin with some laborious research. Perhaps a good start would be the minute examination of some two million jobs in the United States which are carelessly grouped into the one general class, and whose occupants are carelessly given the title of foreman or supervisor. To bring the inquiry within reasonable limits, it might be confined to the several hundred thousand jobs in manufacturing industry described as jobs of foremen. On the basis of this minute examination, it will be possible to make an early distinction between those jobs which have the traditional content and status of foremanship, and those jobs which represent the unrecognized product of mass-production industry. This latter group of jobs came to be known as jobs of foremen as a result of convenience and inertia, when in fact they had content and status quite different from those of the traditional jobs which bear that name. It is in this group of new and misnamed foreman jobs that

such symptoms as foremen's unions have been generally evident. It is in this group of jobs that the careful searcher will find deep-seated trouble underlying such symptoms.

To draw this distinction, it is necessary to examine the traditional job of the foreman. In its purest form, it is seen most frequently in the skilled crafts, perhaps most typically in the building trades, metal trades, and printing trades. In these occupations, the foreman is a highly skilled craftsman. His job as foreman actually includes many of the characteristics of the master workman's job in the days of the guilds. He is generally the selector of his journeyman workmen. He assigns the tasks among the journeymen. He has the ability and responsibility to instruct them on the immediate task, and at the same time to assist them in improving their general skills. He has specific responsibilities for the instruction and protection of apprentices, responsibilities which make him, in effect, a guardian of the apprentices.

He is almost invariably an active and honored member of the craft union whose members work under his foremanship. In many trades, the procedure for his selection for the job of foreman is partially prescribed by the contract between the union and the employers, or prescribed by a set of well-established rules and customs which are tacitly recognized by the employer. His right to be the sole channel of contact between the employer and the workers is firmly established, sometimes by printed rules or contracts, sometimes by strong but unwritten traditions of the craft. He has won the confidence of the employer who selects him, and of the workers whom he supervises, by his personal mastery of the skills. He automatically receives recognition of his superior status by a prescribed differential in rate of pay.

In general, the evolution of this kind of foremanship has included an effective concept of the responsibilities of a foreman. There are exceptions, of course, but as a general rule he discharges his responsibilities in the interest of the em-

ployer and the job, without undue interference by the union of which he is a member. A limited inquiry among typical employers in the building, metal, and printing trades produced no single instance where a foreman of this type had "pulled his punches" in the supervision and direction of his workers, for any cause traceable to his identical union affiliation.

This type of foremanship is relatively common in the smaller manufacturing establishments, particularly in the metal trades. The jobs of foreman and overseer in the textile industry have inherited their content from a slightly different tradition. In these occupations, however, there has been a corresponding element of skill and knowledge, where the supervisors have been selected from among the skilled weavers and loom fixers. The presence of union organization among the wage earners in this industry is relatively newer and less extensive than in the crafts discussed above. The status of the foreman has been clearly established for generations by authority of the employer and the customs of the industry, rather than by craft regulations.

In merchandising establishments, warehouses, drayage companies, and a hundred other types of establishment, this traditional type of foremanship exists. The job usually requires a knowledge of the skills possessed by the wage earners. It usually carries a recognized status. In general, the question never arises as to whether or not the foreman is part of management. In most cases, the question would be largely one of words and theory. The foreman transmits the desires of management to the workers. The orders which the workers receive are the foreman's orders. To them, the foreman is the boss. Probably neither the workers, the foremen, nor the owners could give a ready answer to the question of whether the foreman is or is not a part of management.

In general, the problems of unionization of foremen have not appeared or have not been troublesome in these occupa-

tions. In the craft occupations, the membership of the foreman in his particular craft union has been accepted as a matter of course for at least two generations. In the noncraft occupations, there is evidence that the status of the foreman was so clear that he saw no need for the processes of collective bargaining on his behalf.

One notable exception helps to lead this study into the field where collective bargaining for foremen has been a critical issue, and a symptom of trouble. The exception selected for this purpose concerns the stevedoring activities on the West Coast. Other maritime occupations, notably those of masters, mates, and pilots, involve the same issues but the occupation of stevedoring furnishes the best example.

Stevedoring or longshoring has been undergoing a process of change for twenty years, from a highly casual occupation to one of reasonable regularity and continuity. It is an occupation in which the extreme type of left-wing philosophy and tactics has had full play. Under the guise of seeking equitable distribution of work while the work was still largely casual, the dominant rank-and-file union in the industry has obviously adopted the objective of abolishing the relation of employer and employees. The assignment of work from day to day has been effectively seized by the union itself, in a frank disregard of the provisions of the written agreement. The longshoreman does not work regularly for a certain steamship company or a certain stevedoring company. He has been taught to look to the union as the source of employment. It can be demonstrated that this procedure results in a reasonably equitable distribution of all available work among the members of the union. It can be equally demonstrated that the same equitable distribution had been accomplished in one or more of the West Coast ports, before the advent of the union.

Regardless of its interference with the efficiency which comes from continuous experience on special types of work, this method of assignment of working longshoremen is toler-

able. In effect, the union has become a labor contractor similar to the "padrone" of railroad building days, furnishing men as requested by an employer, not the same men from day to day or from shift to shift, and not necessarily competent men. To repeat, the system has been tolerable; at least, it has been tolerated.

Employers obviously believe that the same system is intolerable when it is applied to foremen and supervisors, the so-called "walking bosses." The average employer feels that he cannot conduct his business unless he knows from day to day and from month to month who will be the direct supervisors of the work. The union leaders attach equal importance to the control of the supervisory jobs and frankly forced the issue on the primary demand for the right to assign or "dispatch" walking bosses from the union hall in rotation. The walking bosses were members of the same rank-and-file union. Most of them had been schooled in the philosophy of looking upon the union as their actual employer. It is easy to recognize the predicament of an employer depending upon a foreman or supervisor who has been conditioned in this way and who does not actually work for any employer, or in the activities of the same employer from day to day. A supervisor assigned in rotation from the union hall cannot be expected to be, or to want to be, a part of management. He has none of the powers or attitudes to enable him to be the Boss.

The picture of the issues in this occupation emphasizes the importance of the occupation of the so-called foremen in the mass-production industries. It was in these industries that most of the issues involving collective bargaining for foremen arose during the years 1945-47. The automobile industry is usually selected as the classic example of mass production and mass organization. It furnishes an appropriate and convenient example for this discussion.

It may seem that the modern automobile plant is the product of evolution from the job machine shop of forty years

ago. Most Americans are familiar with the story of Henry Ford and his production of the first Ford cars in his own typical machine shop. The development of the modern automobile plant was not, in fact, the result of evolution, but of revolution. The subdivision of work, the specialization and simplification of tasks, did not result in transforming the old machine shop into the modern assembly plant. They resulted rather in by-passing the old machine shop, and to a large measure, in by-passing the skilled machinist. Patternmakers, toolmakers, die-sinkers, and skilled machinists, all have their places in the modern automobile industry. Most of them can perform their tasks a thousand miles from the automobile assembly plant. They and their shops are found in large and small cities, with a high concentration in southern Indiana. The picture of the great assembly plant in Michigan bears little resemblance to the machine shop with its skilled machinists.

The essence of the mass-production technique is the separation of a complex skilled operation into a series of distinct operations. Each step in the series is simplified, and if possible, further subdivided and further simplified, so as to demand the minimum of skill. To an increasing degree, the simplified operations are mechanized, performed by a complex machine whose operation is so nearly automatic that the job of the operator is not complex but routine. The creation of the automatic machine naturally demands the exercise of the highest skills, but by a relatively small number of craftsmen, who are not necessarily located at the production plant. The operation of the battery of automatic machines requires little skill. The easy tendency to curse the machine age for this development of so-called robots, should be tempered by the realization that this development has actually created an incredible number of highly paid jobs which can be performed by millions of men who do not possess the skills or the abilities of the craftsman.

The picture of the job of the foreman in this mass-production industry is now on the screen. Because the individual jobs require relatively little skill, the supervision of the jobs correspondingly requires little skill. Because the plant employs ten thousand workers instead of ten, the hiring cannot be done by the so-called foremen. Because there are ten thousand workers with essentially the same status, the administration of discipline must be systematized and put on a mass-production basis. Not only the hiring, but the assignment, transfer, and promotion of individuals must be geared into a plant-wide plan. Because of the nature of the jobs of the wage earners, the responsibility of the supervisors for the training of individuals is infinitely less than in the skilled crafts. There is no such thing as a four-year apprenticeship for the occupation of tightening bolts or spray-painting bodies. The supervisor in such an establishment has very little of the status of teacher, trainer, and guardian, which is still essential in the craft occupations.

The very size of the mass-production plant requires a complex organization for the contacts between the employer and the worker. The foreman in such a plant is no longer the sole channel of contact between the employer and the wage earner. He is the channel for a very few contacts. He finds himself "supplemented" or apparently handicapped or bypassed by a growing number of other channels. The personnel officer, the safety supervisor, the timekeeper, the attendance supervisor, the welfare worker, the training supervisor, the company grievance adjuster, the recreation supervisor, and many other functionaries are dealing with specialized phases of employee relations. Where the foreman in the construction or printing trades is actually the Boss, the foreman in the mass-production plant is likely to find himself in a very dubious position, about which one fact is outstandingly clear: He is not the Boss.

The personnel man selects his workers, and frequently



denies him the right to get rid of an undesirable worker. The safety supervisor frequently bosses and belabors the so-called foreman. The training supervisor delivers to him ten boys who have just graduated from the three-weeks course in the vestibule school. He also sends a formal note to the foreman designating four men who are to report next week for another course in the training department. The foreman even receives orders to report personally for a course in which some trainer will teach him the elements of "How to Get Along with Workers," or "How to Maintain Discipline in the Upholstery Shop."

This kind of supervisory job is one product of the mass-production industries which was never planned. It bears little resemblance to the traditional job of foreman. If an establishment is large enough, the number of these so-called foreman jobs creates a "mass" of its own. There was a dramatic lesson in the 1947 strike of foremen in one automobile plant. The number of foremen who joined the strike in that one plant was reported at more than 3750!

Perhaps top management in the mass-production industries will be able to convince the so-called foremen, by the force of logic or of something else, that they are part of management, that they are not employees, that they do not need and cannot have the facilities of collective bargaining. Perhaps top management will be able to enrich the content of the job and improve the status of these so-called foremen so that each of them will, in the eyes of fellow workers, become the Boss. If this result is accomplished, it will be through a long and expensive process. Perhaps it can never be accomplished. Perhaps it is inevitable that a group of hundreds or thousands of supervisors in one plant, enjoying essentially equal status and facing essentially the same problems, are going to resort to organization and collective bargaining.

So what? The critical question for American industry is not whether foremen are going to bargain collectively or not.

Their status has been fixed by collective bargaining in tens of thousands of establishments since before the beginning of this century. Whether it is or is not fixed by collective bargaining in the mass-production industries hereafter, the critical question will still be unanswered.

That question involves considerations which are far beyond the scope or reach of collective bargaining. It involves an understanding of the enterprise by the so-called foreman. It involves his ability to identify the stake of the average worker in that enterprise, and in the enterprise system. It involves his equipment to be a leader of his fellow workers. It involves responsibility for fair treatment, guidance, friendliness, and sincere personal interest in men, which cannot be written into collective bargaining agreements.

The unionization of foremen is an arena in which management has probably expended too much of its energies dealing with symptoms and symbols, and too little of its energies in dealing with the factors which are beyond collective bargaining.

One of the trends in the thinking of top management in relation to its supervisory personnel may be the source of a new problem and a new trouble. Over the past twenty years, students and experts have been emphasizing the new character of the supervisory job. They have pointed out that manual skill and technical knowledge can no longer be accepted as evidence that the senior craftsman is qualified to be the junior foreman. They have highlighted the function of "leadership," and shown us that the factors of leadership are not usually acquired through the long use of tools or through mastering a knowledge of physical facts. We have been forced to realize that understanding a micrometer or a gauge to measure tensile strength does not qualify one to understand men and women.

A long and growing list presents the new qualifications required for the "new content" of the supervisory job. Most

of these qualifications are unrelated to the content of the jobs being supervised; most of them relate in some way to the newly discovered responsibility for "leadership." That there is new content in the average supervisory job cannot be denied, but it can be overemphasized. It is a mistake to overlook the fact that the good foreman of 1910 had to be a leader, had to have some ability to understand and judge and select people, had to have a lot of ability to get along with people.

It is possible, and in some cases apparent, that management has been oversold on this "new content" of supervisory jobs, that it has assumed that new responsibilities were necessarily new in character. Many of the demands on the abilities of present-day supervisors are old in character but new in relative importance, new in the methods through which they must be met. There are some illustrations of confusion in the thinking of management, in drawing a sharp distinction between the old qualifications and the new. It has been assumed that the old requirements of skill, technical knowledge, common sense, and natural leadership ability are entirely unrelated to such new requirements as technical and economic knowledge, emotional stability, applied psychology, and mastery of procedures for induction, training, discipline, personality adjustment, and the rest of the list.

The assumption that the new content of supervisory jobs calls for a new type of supervisor was one major influence in creating the trend which we are discussing. Another influence was the fact that natural prospects for supervisory jobs, if selected in the traditional way, would have to be drawn from the membership of the rank-and-file union.

Whether the new qualifications required of supervisors were discovered or merely recognized, management had two courses open to it. One was the cautious and intelligent selection of prospective foremen within the working force, the provision of advanced training for the responsibilities of

supervision, and the continued development of present and future supervisors through conference and participation in studies of their own problems. The other was the selection, outside the employee group, of supervisors who had been academically prepared in the new qualifications and techniques required of a supervisor.

The new trend which is creating a new problem is marked by the tendency of a considerable section of management to build the new supervisory force for the new supervisory jobs out of men who have been trained in college for what seems to be the new pattern, instead of those trained in the shop for what seems to have been the old pattern. Perhaps no one has gone the full length of requiring the Ph.D. degree for the job of foreman of the casting shop, or a Master of Business Administration to be foreman of the shipping room. Thousands of employers have approached the position of requiring a college degree for any supervisory job, sometimes a technical degree related to the job, such as electrical engineering for the job of chief electrician, sometimes a degree in an abstract field as evidence of fitness to "handle men" in any department.

If this trend continues, it may have serious results. It obviously increases the gap between rank-and-file employees and management. It obviously limits the scope of the ambitions of men who work for wages, and who see the ultimate opportunity for promotion closed to them. It introduces into the management chain a group of people who are unfamiliar with the attitudes and problems of workers, and practically unfamiliar with the policies and attitudes of management, even though the group may be familiar with the whole theoretical field of organization, administration, and industrial psychology.

While the selection of supervisors may be emphatically beyond the scope of collective bargaining, this trend toward the selection of supervisors from outside the establishment

may easily bring the problem into the scope of collective bargaining. Almost none of the unions in the manufacturing industries have attempted to negotiate on the employer's method of selecting supervisors. But many of these unions will not willingly accept a new order in industry which sentences the wage earner to remain a wage earner forever. Management may do an injury to our economic system by moving too far along in this new trend. By the same reasoning, it may strengthen the structure of good industrial relations, and reconcile that structure to the traditional story of the Land of Opportunity, by finding its new supervisors among its present employees.