Local Union Leaders' Conception and Ideology of Stewards' Roles



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This study investigates the way local union leaders define shop stewards' roles and the ideology underlying those conceptions.

Considered the "backbone of the union," the shop steward is critical to the union's mission. A better understanding of how union leaders and shop stewards themselves define their roles may help revitalize the labor movement and make labor education more relevant.

Three Ideologies

The author proposes three roles tied to three ideologies:

- Conflict/activist, connected to social conflict theory, which argues that social relations are coercive, competitive and unstable. Originated by Karl Marx, this theory focuses on the imbalance of power between labor and capital in industrial relations.
- These stewards focus on grass-roots organizing, rank-and-file participation and a social-change agenda. When conflicts arise, they believe in shop-floor action to force management concessions. These stewards also see themselves as organizers, solidarity builders and political activists. In the U.S., the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) embodied this ideology.
- Functionalist/Cooperative, aligned with structuralfunctionalist theory, which characterizes social relations in terms of consensus, cooperation and stability.
 Functionalists promote labor and management working together toward shared goals, values and interests. This school of thought supports the status quo in society, and prefers social change to be gradual.
- These stewards encourage workers to support management's need for stability and productivity, resulting in diplomatic and peaceful relations between labor and management. In the 1970s, the business world began advocating "employee involvement" and "labormanagement cooperation," which were also promoted by the federal Department of Labor and several states through the 1980s and 1990s. However, while labor-

- management programs are intended to give workers more power, critics charge that employee participation programs were used to weaken unions.
- Rationalization/bureaucratic, based on the sociologist
 Max Weber's view that "rationality" is a dominating force
 in Western societies. Accordingly, the best way to achieve
 results is through a "bureaucracy" composed of rules,
 regulations and large social structures. Quantifiable tasks
 and detailed rules help individuals succeed. Bureaucracy
 also seeks to replace human labor with technology.

As unions have evolved into bureaucratic, hierarchical organizations with full-time professionals devoted to public relations, accounting, law and other issues, rationalization-oriented stewards have moved toward specializing in handling grievances. With the unions' centralization of power, rank-and-file activism has been discouraged. These stewards may be immersed in handling the paperwork and processing of grievance procedures.

Previous Studies

Since the 1960s, studies have defined union shop stewards' roles in line with various ideologies. In 1987, a study of 300 stewards in the Midwest found that they did not behave strictly in line with either functionalist or Marxist theory. While these stewards avoided politicizing workers and encouraging strikes, they did not always seek to settle disputes peacefully, and frequently played the role of "representative," advocating for union members and abiding by the labor contract.

A 1974 British study found one third of the sample were "militant stewards," more active than those who just

deal with grievances or act as union "policemen," and more aggressive in challenging management. In this study, 23% of respondents emphasized conciliation and reducing conflicts, and 28% described themselves as "representative" of their constituency.

The conclusions drawn from these previous studies face two limitations: they focused more on British than American stewards, and they did not reflect the progressive segment of the American labor movement, which has advocated an "organizing model" of unionism since the mid 1990s, with a focus on social justice. Responding to these limitations, this study has two goals: to investigate how union leaders define the shop steward's role, and to identify the dominant ideology behind that definition. To illustrate the consequences of poor treatment, the researchers point to equity theory, which predicts that when employees feel they have been treated unfairly, they become alienated and devote less effort to their work. The data would seem to support this theory, indicating that

employees with disabilities in non-supportive workplaces are more likely than their non-disabled peers to seek employment elsewhere, and are less likely to feel loyal to their company, take satisfaction in their work, or want to work hard. Employees with disabilities appear to flourish, however, in supportive workplaces where their attitudes are similar to those of non-disabled employees.

Research Methods

A self-administered survey was distributed to 285 local union officials and stewards between March and June 2000. The survey asked respondents to name three roles in response to the question, "What do stewards do in the union?" The open-ended format offers several advantages: participants can provide their own framework, make distinctions not possible with predetermined answers, and use their own language; and narrative answers provide a deeper understanding of what people think.

Role	Frequency	Role	Frequency
Grievance handler/ grievance mechanic	44%	Adviser	15%
Representative	29%	Peace keeper	9%
Problem Solver	23%	Mediator	7%
Contract enforcer	22%	Supporter	6%
Internal organizer	22%	Educator	3%
Communicator	15%	Leader	1%
Protector	15%	Negotiator	.7%
Union builder	15%		

Implications

These results show many union leaders do not have an exclusive role ideology, but more leaders indicated rationalization/bureaucratic and functionalist/cooperative ideologies than conflict/activist. Previous studies have also shown that American stewards usually do not see themselves as social activists and are less class conscious than their European peers.

Shop stewards' lack of political and social activism creates a challenge for current labor leaders in their legislative and electoral efforts. Labor academics and activists hold diverse views on how workers should deal with "employee involvement" programs, ranging from objecting outright to cooperating to participating in a co-management model.

The study's finding that the rationalization ideology is the most common makes sense from a historical context. With the rapid growth in union membership from 3 million in 1935 to 14 million in 1945, administrative demands also soared. The labor movement's focus shifted from organizing to service, and dispute resolution became dependent on strict rules that discourage shop-floor action.

The Taft-Hartley Act also contributed to the move away from political activism, as it limited worker's rights to organize and take action. The no-strike grievance arbitration process was institutionalized, adding to the bureaucratization of labor disputes.

In addition, university-based labor education programs for shop stewards now focus on technical skills and grievance handling. Labor researchers have begun to stress the need for cultivating local activists to revitalize the labor movement.

Limitations

While the sample in this study consists mainly of southern union members, it reflects the same results as a recent national study in which union leaders reported their organizations were more effective in bargaining and servicing than in political, legislative and organizing activities.

In addition, the open-ended answer format produced general responses that are difficult to classify as conflict, functionalist or rationalization ideology.

Conclusion

Union leaders exhibit rationalization and functionalist more often than conflict-based ideology when defining shop stewards' roles. Many describe the steward's role narrowly, specifically tied to the grievance process. Labor educators and the labor movement may need to reexamine their curricula and remind members of the importance of activist and member-driven methods in promoting labor's goals.



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