British Trade Unions and the Possibility of a Skill-Oriented Modernisation Strategy in a Low Skill Economy *

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1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary changes in production and restructuring processes, it has been suggested that trade unions face two strategic options; structural conservatism and the 'defence of Fordist achievements', on the one hand, and the development of an 'active modernisation' policy, on the other. (Mahnkopf, 1990) Within the latter, two further options are identified: a sectional strategy of protecting the jobs of core workers, whilst allowing firms to pursue a policy of numerical flexibility with so-called 'peripheral workers' and a skill-oriented approach, which emphasises the development of the functional flexibility of workers. (Mahnkopf, 1990:6-8) Whilst it is possible to identify skill-oriented modernisation policies in many British trade unions, it is not easy to distinguish these two types of union strategy as alternatives, but rather as different aspects of the same modernisation approach. This is partly due to the character of British trade unionism which is based on occupational affiliation and multi-unionism at plant level. However, it is also the outcome of the regulatory framework of the state governing the labour market in general and training policy in particular, which have been characterised by, on the one hand, deregulation, and on the other, the progressive exclusion of trade union interests from authoritative decision-making since the Conservative government came to power in 1979.¹

¹ This paper draws on two research projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The first of these examined training policy in nine major unions in the engineering, food processing, chemical and construction sectors. The findings have been published in 'Training Matters: Union Perspectives on Industrial Restructuring and Training', published by Basil Blackwell in 1990. The fieldwork for the second project, 'The Institutional determinants of Adult Retraining' has been jointly conducted with Malcolm Maguire, at the University of Leicester. It focusses on management and union perspectives on continuing training, as well as the influence of institutional structures on training decisions at establishment level. In addition to the four sectors covered in the earlier project it also includes the retail, hotel and catering, and local government sectors. The unions examined in the first project were the engineering union, AUEW, the clerical union, APEX, the scientific and managerial union ASTMS, the engineering technicians' union, AUEW/TASS, the electrical and plumbing union EETPU, the general unions GMBATU and TGWU, the construction union, UCATT and the shop workers' union USDAW. The AUEW changed its name to AEU in 1986, ASTMS and AUEW/TASS merged to form MSF in 1987 and APEX joined the white-collar section of GMBATU in 1987. In addition to monitoring developments in these unions, the local government union, NALGO has been included in the second project.
From the outset, it is important to point out that unlike some of its European counterparts, the British government has not actively pursued a policy of encouraging employers to invest in the skills of their workforces. Rather, the system of incentives and controls which existed under the system of the Industrial Training Boards (a system of tripartite bodies at sectoral level with powers to raise training levy on employers) has been dismantled since 1981. Labour market interventions have been aimed primarily at reducing labour costs, rather than increasing the productivity of labour. This has been achieved a series of measures aimed at reducing youth wage rates and forcing the unemployed to work for a low level allowance rather than a wage, and by legislation aimed at undermining effective trade union organisation and its ability to intervene in the operation of the labour market. At the same time, state intervention in the training decisions of firms has been removed, whilst the administration of schemes for the unemployed is in the process of being handed over to employers through the Training and Enterprise Councils at local level. (See Rainbird, 1990 for details)

This approach is consistent with the historical development both of the system of industrial relations and of training. The regulation of employment by craft unions has contributed both to the informality of collective bargaining and the existence of highly segmented internal labour markets. Sisson argues that 'the apparent success of employers and craft unions in coming to an accommodation reinforced the laissez-faire approach of the state in the sphere of employment. Responsibility for education was given to local authorities and the assumption was that vocational training was a matter for individual employers and employees. Crucially, too, there was little direct regulation by the state to pressurize employers into adopting a wide range of standards'. (Sisson. 1989:17) These conditions, along with the short-termism of companies induced by the relationship between the financial sector and manufacturing industry, has contributed to what he calls the 'pragmatism' and 'ad hocery' of personnel managers.

The problem, therefore, in attempting to analyse the possibilities for trade unions to develop skill-oriented modernisation policies is that they
are operating in an environment which does not promote training. Not only are British workers relatively untrained, compared to their European counterparts, but they have no statutory rights to training, nor to information and co-management at plant level. Despite this absence of formal rights, the strength of the informal system of workplace bargaining in manufacturing industry means that in practice there may be joint consultative committees and agreements which may encompass some of these rights. Therefore the objective of this paper is to examine the possibilities for unions to develop skill-oriented modernisation strategies in this context.

2. A Low Skill Economy: Implications for Initial and Continuing Training

Since the abolition of the majority of the Industrial Training Boards following the 1981 Employment and Training Act, companies have not been obliged to provide a record of their training activities and plans, and no systematic statistics have been collected on training at industry level. Surveys conducted in the early 1980s suggested that British employers spent between 0.15 and 0.5 per cent of turnover on training compared 3 per cent of turnover spent by leading employers in Japan, West Germany and the USA. (Keep, 1989:179) A more recent study commissioned by the Training Agency. ‘Training in Britain’ (Deloitte, Haskins and Sells, 1990) suggests employers collectively spend £18 billion each year on training. However, there are serious methodological problems with this study, in particular in its estimation of spending on on-the-job training. Ryan has suggested that a figure of £8 billion is a more realistic assessment of employers’ spending on training.(1991:72)

The failure of British employers to train their workforces is a longstanding problem. Periodic calls for the state to intervene have been made since the nineteenth century. (Perry, 1976) This failure concerns both the initial training of the workforce and its continuing training as new technology and new methods of work organisation are introduced into production processes.
The history of training policy demonstrates a series of attempts to come to terms with this failure. In the 1960s, concern about the emergence of skill shortages and the growth in the school leaving population resulted in the passing of the 1964 Industrial Training Act which made provisions for Industrial Training Boards to be set up at sectoral level with powers to raise a levy and distribute grants for training. In the 1970s the levy-grant system was replaced by a weaker, more bureaucratic system of levy-exemption which was premised on the principle of firms training for their own needs, rather than the creation of a stock of skills for the industry as a whole. At the same time, the Manpower Services Commission, a tripartite body with responsibility for public employment and training services was set up. As the recession of the 1970s and 1980s deepened, the work of the ITBs became increasingly subordinated to the administration of public training programmes aimed at the unemployed. Since the Conservative party came to power in the 1979 election, the abolition of statutory intervention and an insistence on the supremacy of employers' decisions on training have not increased the volumes of training. Rather, concern has continued to be expressed at the country's lack of investment in skill training, particularly in new technology skills, compared with that of major competitors. (Prais and Wagner, 1983; NEDO/MSC, 1984; Coopers and Lybrand Associates, 1985) There is now widespread evidence of skill shortages (for example, House of Commons Select Committee on Employment, 1988; Campbell, 1990; Labour Market Quarterly Review, 1990) Although considerable resources have been devoted to the Youth Training Scheme, introduced in 1983 to alleviate youth unemployment, the emphasis of this was on making training in general skills universally available, rather than to increase training in key occupational skills. (Ryan, 1984) Apprenticeship training continued to decline and YTS funding is now being phased out as demographic shifts have reduced the significance of youth unemployment on the political agenda. The simplification of the qualification system through the National Council for Vocational Qualifications has resulted in an increase in the level of certification, in other words an increase in paper qualification, but provides no mechanism to improve the quantity or quality of training received. Furthermore, its
emphasis on work-place based assessment reinforces narrow, non-transferable training in firm-specific skills.

Given the failure of the market model to improve the supply of skills in the economy, education and training policy is becoming a major electoral issue. Partly in recognition of the Labour Party's success in placing education and training on this agenda, the Employment Department is spending £20 million on an advertising campaign to boost the image of the Government's policy in this area. Although the Conservative government is opposed to statutory intervention, there are increasing pressures for it to be reintroduced in the face of market failure. The House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities has argued that '(s)ome form of statutory underpinning is needed to act as a catalyst for change', given the gap between Britain and its main industrial competitors. (The Guardian, 13-9-90) Even the Conservative pressure group, the Bow Group has demanded that the Government tackle Britain's 'shabby' infrastructure and 'inadequately trained' workforce. (The Guardian, 8-10-90)

It has been argued that training policies pursued by companies have implications for the organisation of production processes. Whilst Wilkinson argues that employers have an element of choice in their strategies towards workers' skills (1983) there is also evidence that the institutional structures of society can be influential in structuring these decisions and in effecting patterns of work organisation. The relationship between the education and training system, the system of industrial relations and patterns of hierarchy within the company produce a characteristic 'qualification space' which is observable when plants making the same products using similar technologies in different countries are compared. (Maurice et al. 1986) However, even within the same country some variations will be observed, especially where companies compete in international markets and/or compete on quality. (Maguire and Rainbird, forthcoming)

On the basis of their comparative international studies Maurice et al argue that there is a 'capacity inherent in formal training to structure work organisation' (1986). Whilst socially negotiated and recognised training increases bargaining power and wages, the real technical skills acquired
and their recognition beyond the immediate workplace means that jobs can be structured around known skill dimensions and expectations. In contrast, informal learning on-the-job is by definition specific and is based on the assumption of a limited range of non-transferable tasks. British employers’ preference for informal learning on-the-job rather than formal training means that they effectively pursue what has been called the ‘low skill option’. (NEDO, 1986) Rather than expanding workers’ range of skills, this avoids training by compartmentalising tasks. In the short-term, this may result in the loss of potential gains in productivity from the introduction of new technologies, whilst in the long-term it may create inflexibilities because it may be harder for workers to acquire additional skills at a later stage.

3. Evidence of Increasing Skill Levels and the Replacement of Taylorist Work Organisation

The above observations have implications for the presumed direction of developments in work organisation. There is as yet little evidence in Britain of the superceding of Taylorist production methods by more skill-intensive and flexible forms of work organisation. (Ramsay, Pollert and Rainbird, 1990) Although there has been a growth in non-standard forms of employment contract, there is little evidence of a coherent employer strategy towards developing these employment forms. (Marginson and Sisson, 1989) Claims that functional flexibility has increased are substantiated by changes in working practices, though many of these concern peripheral areas of craft skills and rarely cross the divide between maintenance and production jobs. (Rainbird, 1990) Where full-scale multi-skilling has been achieved it is usually on greenfield sites. (IDS, 1986) A recent survey conducted for the Employment Department found only three out of 800 firms to show an approximation to the model of the ‘flexible firm’. Certainly, many of the phenomena claimed to represent new pro-

2 Contribution by John Maclnnes to an Industrial Relations Research Unit Workshop at the University of Warwick on ‘Thatcherism at Work’, 17th October, 1990.
duction forms constitute no more than tried and tested methods for achieving labour flexibility whilst shifts in the structure of employment towards the service sector account to a large extent for the increase in non-standard employment forms. (Pollert, 1987)

Although no broad movement towards more flexible forms of production organisation is observable, clearly there are exceptions to this. Indeed, management journals display considerable coverage of Japanese production methods, human resource management approaches and new patterns of work organisation in leading edge firms such as Nissan, Shell, and Pickfords. However, these are a minority. In many cases, agreements on flexibility are enabling agreements and full-scale flexibility is far from being achieved. (IDS, 1986)

Flexible forms of production and increased skill investment are often associated with employee identification with company objectives and their incorporation into decision-making structures at plant level, through "microcorporatist alliances" (Mahnkopf, 1990:2). In Britain there are no statutory rights to information and workplace participation and both the government and employers have been resistant to the introduction of legislation guaranteeing them. Nevertheless, the second Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (WIRS2) found 26 per cent of private sector establishments reported the existence of joint committees, whilst the Industrial Relations Research Unit's large company survey found 48 per cent of the establishments in their sample had a joint consultative committee. From this, Marginson and Sisson conclude that joint consultative arrangements are more likely to be found in the manufacturing sector than in services, and in larger rather than in small companies. (1989:115) The large company survey demonstrated the same pattern of distribution with quality circles, which were strongly related to the presence of trade unions and appeared to be linked to wider strategies for winning hearts and minds in highly unionised workplaces. (Marginson and Sisson, 1989:111) In other words, the structures which might facilitate incorporation are most likely to be found where trade unionism is strongest.
By the same token there is no statutory requirement for unions to be consulted over management's training and labour force decisions. A recent survey of workplace representatives by the Labour Research Department found that in the 912 workplaces from which responses were received, it was uncommon for trade unionists to be involved in committees which deal exclusively with training. Training was agreed between the employer and unions in only 17 per cent of cases. Nevertheless, 30 per cent of workplaces had consultative arrangements, whilst in a further 31 per cent management provided some information to unions. The report notes that, in most cases, consultation over training occurred 'as an almost incidental feature of other agreements'. (LRD, 1990:7) Training arose as a marginal or peripheral issue, raised in joint committees or agreements dealing with new technology, working practices and redeployment. National agreements concerning training were most common in the public sector and in the recently privatised public service sector, and it was also here that provisions were to be found for the setting up of local training committees. (Labour Research Department, 1990)

In summary, training for most workers is conspicuous by its absence and tends to be concentrated in the first few years of employment. There has been no noticeable process of upskilling in recent years and very little evidence has emerged to date to indicate that Taylorist forms of work organisation have been superceded by patterns requiring a greater reliance on workers' skills and their ability to act autonomously. Lane argues that in Britain, 'where the strategy of "flexible specialisation" is adopted...(i)t is rarely conceived of as a comprehensive industrial strategy in which the use of complex new technological systems is integrated with the creation of greater skill resources and the broader deployment of skilled labour, on the one side, and a new "industrial relations approach", evoking greater worker commitment and cooperation, on the other ..Consequently, it is usually the case that the strategy is embraced only partially and is combined with elements of the old Taylorist model of labour deployment into

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3 The Labour Research Department survey should be viewed with some caution since it had only a 17 per cent response rate from workplaces which were biased towards those where training did take place. This would suggest that for most of the shop stewards contacted, the questions were irrelevant or of little interest.
a hybrid type,' (1989:181) In the same way, although some attempts have been made to introduce mechanisms for consultation and incorporation at plant level, these coexist alongside existing collective bargaining arrangements which are characterised by the traditional antagonistic relationships between unions and management.

4. Continuing Training; Its Form and Objectives

In this section, evidence of continuing training in employing organisations will be reviewed, drawing on recent field research and the Incomes Data Services Study on training strategies. (IDS Study 460, 1990) The focus will be on policies of internal reconversion rather than external reconversion (i.e. training to prepare workers for changes in technology and work organisation rather than to find jobs in the external labour market c.f. Mehaut and Villeval, 1990) since the latter is largely the responsibility of the state and has little effect on the internal decisions of firms. The IDS study identifies four major themes in training strategies. Firstly, training is being related more directly to long-term and short-term business objectives. Secondly, non-specialist staff such as line managers are being encouraged to take more responsibility for training. Thirdly, companies are adopting a greater variety of delivery methods, such as open learning, coaching and 'action learning'. Fourthly, increasing emphasis is being placed on the evaluating training, so that it will become possible to view training as a long-term investment rather than a short-term cost to the company. (IDS: 1990:1) A fifth theme could be added to this list: a temporary increase emphasis on training brought about by a concern with labour turnover in a tightening labour market, made financially viable by improvements in economic performance.
5. Training and Business Strategies

The adoption of ideologies of human resource management lies behind an increased emphasis on training and personnel strategies and their integration into corporate strategy. Whilst personnel management has been characterised as having a short-term perspective, human resource management involves a longer-term perspective as training and development are integrated into business planning. The focus of personnel management is on the management-union relationship, whereas human resource management focuses on management-employee relations, and on the encouragement of employee commitment to the organisation through the development of more devolved structures and a greater emphasis on responsibility and autonomy. However, Sisson questions the extent to which this has really involved the development of a more strategic and integrated approach to labour force planning or simply represents a relabelling and increase in status of the personnel function. (1989:31) The former would suggest a move towards increased skill levels in the labour force and changes in patterns of work organisation, alongside attempts to by-pass trade unions as intermediaries in the workplace. In contrast, the latter would indicate little real qualitative change, though perhaps some quantitative increase in volumes of training. In fact, our field research indicates that an improvement in trading conditions has produced a quantitative increase in training, which often makes up for cut backs in the years of the recession.

One finding that has been striking from our empirical research has been the rate of merger and takeover activity in recent years. In other instances, restructuring processes have required the reorientation of production strategies, which have brought with them the imposition of a new organisational culture. (Rainbird and Maguire, forthcoming) This indoctrination or socialisation of employees and management alike has been brought about by training programmes, starting at the highest level of management and cascaded down through the company structure, reinforced by improved communications methods such as team briefings and the issuing of company newspapers.
These developments are particularly in evidence in companies and other organisations (such as local authorities) which are attempting to improve the quality of their products or services. Under the influence of writers such as Peters and Waterman (1982) and the example of companies such as Marks and Spencer which have made quality their hallmark (Tse, 1985), policies of customer service orientation and total quality management have been adopted. These may or may not be combined with a devolution of responsibility for providing a high level of service to workers, as some examples will demonstrate.

Customer service orientation, or customer care policies have been adopted by a wide range of companies particularly in the service sector, such as retailers, travel operators, vehicle fleet hire firms, the railways, the post office and the public social services. An example is Lex Service plc, a company with businesses in the distribution and contract hire of passenger cars, commercial vehicles and forklift trucks, on the one hand, and the distribution of electronic components and computer systems, on the other. It has annual sales of £2,000 million and is ranked in the top 100 UK companies by sales. Like many of these organisations it has a mission statement emphasising its objective of providing customers with 'an outstanding level of service which they will describe as excellent', which would allow the company to differentiate its product from that of its competitors. (Burrell, 1990:1) This objective required employees to understand the objectives of corporate strategy and accept the organisation's culture, as well as having the required level of skills to conduct business in a responsible way with customers:

The company believes that it can only build the necessary high level of service by devolving authority and responsibility for service to those people who are actually in contact with the customer, and that to achieve this goal great attention needs to be paid to training and development. Quite simply, we realised a long time ago that unless the people who work for Lex actually understood the goals and were able to deliver them, we would not have a business...Lex has therefore developed extensive education and training programmes to help all employees absorb its culture, to enable them to perform effectively in their jobs, and to encourage those who wish to do so to develop their full potential. The overall philosophy is
that training should be manager-driven, and in addition that it should relate to the corporate plan so most of our training is "Lex-specific" rather than of a general nature.

(Burrell, 1990:1)

In the case of Lex, customer care strategies were introduced specifically as a competitive policy and as a means of expanding market share. In local government customer care policies have been introduced in the context of government legislation designed to reduce public spending through forcing public services which have been bureaucratically provided to compete with the private sector through compulsory competitive tendering. The 1989 Local Government Land and Planning Act requires local authorities to offer contracts for a range of services such as cleaning and catering, refuse collection, the maintenance of parks and highways, municipal housing repairs, the running of leisure facilities such as swimming pools out to tender. It provides for a shift in role for local authorities from that of service providers to 'service enablers'. Local government departments now have to compete with the private sector for work which was formerly provided in-house. A number of local authorities have therefore developed customer care policies with a view to improving the level of service and making the quality of provision a key to retaining services in-house, as well as a means of increasing accountability to the local community that they serve. Whilst part of this process involves improving technical skills and communications within the organisation, emphasis has also been placed on improving the training of staff dealing directly with the public and, in particular, their ability to deal with aggression and complaints.

Customer care policies aim to change organisational culture and, through the ideology of providing a quality service, improve staff morale. Potentially, they are most effective where customer relations form the main thrust of the business as in retail and the employer wishes to implement changes in the direction and quality of this service. However, the application of a superficial formula of cultural change in the absence of any real change in the quality of product can undermine morale if the contradictions between the claims of company culture and practice are too acute. An example of this might be British Rail, where staff dealing directly with
passengers have received training in customer care, but the investment required to improve the quality of service has not been made. Therefore although staff are better able to handle complaints, nothing has been done to address the source of complaint. The underlying assumptions of customer care policies reflect the rhetoric of the debate on flexible specialisation through their emphasis on adapting to the needs of the individual customer, increasing staff training and, in some cases, increasing the discretion exercised by staff. However, in order to establish that workers' autonomy has increased in practice, in contrast to the rhetoric and claims of the management literature, empirical studies are needed. In fact, policies decentralising decision-making are often accompanied by the imposition of stricter financial controls, which shift rather than fundamentally alter the line of management control. It is also worth emphasising that customer care policies are found primarily in the service sector or at the interface between the producer and the customer. Although some examples do demonstrate a more strategic approach to training and labour force planning, others appear to owe more to the superficial adoption of the latest management fad. In this respect they represent no more than an extension of 'ad hocery'.

In the manufacturing sector, attempts have been made to improve quality through total quality management. Again, this involves training in the philosophy and practices of quality management, starting at senior management level and cascading it down through the company structure. (IDS, 1990:2)

Nevertheless, fieldwork has demonstrated examples of the integration of new organisational cultures alongside investment in plant, higher levels of skills training, new patterns of working and systems of payment. One example was a vehicle components manufacturer, which had changed from being a peripheral part of a multi-divisional state-owned automotive conglomerate to a single establishment following a management buy-out. In this company, following many years of little or no investment, a programme of recapitalisation had taken place, involving the acquisition of computer-controlled equipment and a CAD system compatible with those of its customers, the major motor manufacturers, which it supplies on a 'parts-on-time' basis. Alongside this investment, the company has taken on
the engineering design function and now holds a product design authority. It estimates that it spends 8 per cent of payroll on training and has received funding from the European Social Fund for retraining in high technology skills. There is a formal productivity agreement with the unions on flexibility and team-working has been introduced, although there are sometimes problems in operating full flexibility in the maintenance area in practice. Operator skills are being built up through the ILUO training system operated by Japanese companies such as Nissan, whereby skills are systematically analysed and operators are graded according to their ability to perform tasks, and to teach them to other workers. (See Walker. 1991 for details of the ILUO system.)

In the same way, the Shell Carrington refinery has also undergone a major restructuring programme, involving the introduction of full-scale multi-skilling across the maintenance/process operator divide. (See Rainbird. 1990 for details) A massive training programme has facilitated the introduction of new working practices. Moreover, these have been accompanied by the development at industry level of a modular training system with externally validated skills. Training, in this instance, is a continuous process of maintaining and updating skills which builds on and reinforces a continual process of job rotation. Shell, in addition, provides non-vocational education opportunities for its staff. It is in these relatively unusual cases that moves towards a new production paradigm are most in evidence. Whether workers will start to identify with company objectives has yet to be observed. A regional TGWU official stated that although the high level of the salaries of these multi-skilled technicians isolated them from other workers, the chemical site had always constituted a training ground for union activists and officials in the area.

In both the service sector and in manufacturing, a new emphasis on the continuing training of employees can be observed. In the service sector, however, it tends to be associated with the introduction of new organisational cultures, and in particular ideologies of customer service. Some of the management systems which have been introduced to assure quality in manufacturing introduce systems for managing and checking quality, but not for devolving this responsibility to employees through increased skills
training and work autonomy. Continuing training appears as a management tool, providing little scope for the development of transferable skills. In addition, the replacement of personnel management by human resource management suggests a shift in locus of decision-making from lower to higher levels of management, thereby reducing the scope for trade union interventions on training in the workplace. However, in some instances, the emphasis on human resource management has been accompanied by an integration of training function into line management. As in the German case, this may open up trade union perceptions of the opportunities for influencing production decisions through their participation in training bodies, whilst increasing management's resistance to such an approach. (c.f. Mahnkopf, 1990:18)

6. Trade Union Strategies Towards Training

As a general principle trade unions are supportive of training for their members since it creates opportunities for making jobs more interesting, improving pay, and increasing job security and the bargaining power of labour. Training is therefore a policy area in which consensus can be reached between unions and employers, given appropriate structures. A consensus can be established on the development of curricula, courses and certification, in other words, on the constitution of specific skills, whilst the pay that a worker holding these skills receives is determined through the conflict between labour and capital in the wage bargaining process. Likewise, consensus can be reached on the design of programmes for the unemployed, which may stop short of agreement on rates of allowances for those undergoing training.
An analysis of trade union strategies towards training meets with two major impediments: firstly, unions have been progressively excluded from formal decision-making structures in the 1980s; and, secondly, responses to training have generally taken the form of their implications for wages and conditions rather than the content of training itself. However, given the low levels of occupational training in Britain, not all unions have coherent and clearly articulated policies on training simply because their members are not used to confronting it as a policy issue. This may be because qualifications are received through the general education system and are not subject to workplace or collective bargaining, as in the case of white-collar unions, or because historically little training has been provided in the grades in which they organise, as in the case of unions representing many unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers.

It is amongst craft unions that the most clearly articulated policies towards training are found. It is also where the linkages between access to training, skilled wage rates and job demarcations are most clearly observed. The stronger the linkages between qualifications, collective bargaining over pay and the claiming of skills by unions, the more likely it is that policies will be coherent across different arenas.

The structure and organisation of trade unions also has an impact on the coherence of policy towards training. For example, a craft union such as the electricians' union, the EETPU, which has a centralised decision-making structure and a relatively homogeneous membership has greater coherence in policy towards training than a general, multi-industrial union with a devolved decision-making structure such as the TGWU. Furthermore, the type of training received on entry into employment - formal or informal in transferable or firm-specific skills - affects the relevance of participation in different bodies and the extent to which accountability and the communication of decisions is significant to the membership at large.

During the 1980s union policy has often focussed on the relationship between initial training programmes such as apprenticeship and the gov-
ernment-funded, Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Whilst initial training is often validated and negotiated over at sectoral level, there has never been any real forum at national or sectoral level for discussing continuing training. It is perhaps in this area, inevitably linked to workplace politics and bargaining, that decentralised, multi-industrial unions are most likely to achieve success in raising general demands for education and training for members.

7. The Representative of Union Interests on Training Bodies

Of all trade unions, craft unions or craft sections of unions tend to have the most highly developed policies and structures towards initial training. This is due, primarily, to the significance of apprenticeship in determining access to skilled jobs. In recent years the main focus has been on the implications of the Conservative government's New Training Initiative for apprentice training. This concerns firstly, the threat to apprentice pay rates posed by the lower trainee allowances paid under the YTS scheme; secondly, the fact that trainees have not been employees and the scheme has not allowed the full apprenticeship training to be completed; and thirdly, the issue of the replacement of 'time-served' apprenticeship by practical tests. The introduction of practical tests on completion of apprenticeship has been incorrectly presented as an issue concerning the nature of training, but in fact the main issue at stake has been that of the transition to adult pay rates and whether it should come at the end of the customary period of time or on passing examinations on completion of

4 The Youth Training Scheme was introduced in 1983 to combat youth unemployment, although it was claimed that it was for all young people leaving school at 16, whether employed or unemployed. It provided 13 weeks off-the-job training and a training allowance, well below negotiated youth wage rates. In 1986 it was extended to a two year scheme, but by the end of the 1980s it was being phased out as a decline in the youth cohort, combined with improvements in the labour market, reduced levels of youth unemployment. See Rainbird, 1990, Chapter 2 for more details.
training. In other words, it concerns the rules fixing skilled wage rates rather than the content of training. Even though the evidence suggests that craft union interests were relatively well-represented on the Industrial Training Boards, a further factor needs to be taken into consideration. Although the ITBs had some powers to influence the numbers of apprentices in training through the distribution of grants, in practice, employers have always controlled the numbers of young workers undergoing training. This is because access to training is normally linked to employment and the employer alone makes decisions over the hiring of new workers.

In contrast to the craft unions, general unions have a more diverse membership. In addition, members are less likely to have received formal training on entry into employment; informal, on-the-job training is more likely although there are examples, such as process operators in the chemical industry where training may have been more formal. Variations in organisational structure between unions may condition the coherence and formality of policy inputs, as well as the extent to which it is centrally coordinated. The existence of institutions on which training interests are represented does not in itself force the development of coherent policy.

In practice, for the general unions, much of their concern about training in the 1980s was channelled into defending the terms and conditions under which young trainees were employed and in negotiating ‘top-ups’ to the YTS training allowance. This was conducted primarily at workplace or company level. Inputs into the content of training were minimal, usually consisting in the union’s right to talk to trainees about the benefits of union membership. While the ITBs were in existence, policy inputs were uneven and depended on the enthusiasm of individual officials, but with the closure of the majority of the ITBs in the early 1980s this forum for interest representation and information ceased to exist. With the fragmentation of the industry level institutions into numerous non-statutory, employer-dominated bodies this focus for expertise disintegrated.

Union participation in the Area Manpower Boards (AMBs) at local level allowed representatives of a wide range of unions to exercise some control over the conditions under which trainees on government training
schemes were employed, but not over the content of training. The abolition of the AMBs in 1988, along with the Manpower Services Commission at national level, represented a loss of union influence in this area and union representatives who were involved in this process now often perceive themselves as having lost their training responsibilities. However, it must be emphasised that this influence only concerned the use of government funds for training schemes, and the fact that there were repeated calls for the AMBs to have executive powers (Centre for a Working World, 1987) suggests their powers were limited. In addition, major companies negotiated directly with the Large Companies Unit of the MSC, effectively bypassing the tripartite structure of the AMBs. In this context, the normal collective bargaining machinery was probably more important in determining the conditions of trainees in larger unionised workplaces than these tripartite structures, although the AMBs were probably significant in preventing the worst abuses of trainees in small, ununionised workplaces.

In contrast to the craft and general unions, the members of white-collar unions were least directly affected by schemes such as YTS, although their members were represented on the AMBs, and indeed on the ITBs before abolition. ASTMS, for example, had members who were trainers and were therefore well placed to make specialist policy inputs on training matters. However, policy tended to be formulated on an ad hoc, informal basis. (Rainbird, 1990:122) The technician's union, AUEW/TASS in many respects had the most coherent policy on training arising undoubtedly from its base in the skill-intensive engineering industry which allowed it to distinguish clearly between training schemes for the unemployed and the skill requirements of industry. TASS has had a history of supplying technical notes to its membership clearly recognised that a skilled membership increases its bargaining power by virtue of the skills it controls as well as improving the individual's career prospects and job security. It is no coincidence that on the merger of ASTMS and AUEW/TASS to form Manufacturing, Science and Finance, the new union embarked on a major campaign on training.

This section has demonstrated the extent to which trade unions have
been marginalised from formal policy-making on training since the Con-
servative government came to power in 1979. The abolition of the ITBs at
sectoral level clearly has been a loss, although in many instances trade
union influence was formal rather than real. In addition, the preoccupa-
tion of the ITBs with apprenticeship training, and to a lesser extent, man-
agement and supervisory training, meant that the training concerns of
non-craft manual unions and their memberships were not adequately ad-
dressed. The loss of representation on the Area Manpower Boards at local
level and the Manpower Services Commission at national level, was
viewed negatively by most unions. However, the way in which these bodies
were used to implement policies, which many in the trade union movement
did not support, placed union representatives on them in an ambivalent
position. Through their incorporation, unpopular government schemes ob-
tained a certain legitimacy. In contrast, the main concern for many unions,
continued to be with the implications of training (and training schemes)
for pay and these continued to be resolved through collective bargaining.

However, it is clear that the removal of the statutory regulation of
training is of significance to wider economic strategies. Historical experi-
ence shows that the market mechanism is not capable of providing suffi-
cient skills to meet the needs of the economy and there is ample evidence
of poaching and skill shortages. (Campbell, 1990; Labour Market Quarterly
Report, August, 1990) Excluded from formal policy-making and, in the
absence of effective regulatory mechanisms, the Trades Union Congress is
now calling for statutory rights to training and workplace training commit-
tees. In November 1990, in response to fears of major job losses arising
from entry into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, the TUC pre-
sented an initiative on wages, training and economic management (which
was immediately rebuffed) to the government and employers' representa-
tives at the meeting of the National Economic Development Council. Ne-
evertheless, a number of unions now perceive that they must take the initia-
tive themselves at the level of the firm, both in the interests of their own
members and of the economy as a whole. This concern has been demon-
strated in the statements of senior union officials
as well as in the emergence of workplace campaigns on training. In its
document 'Campaigning for Training', MSF argues 'as long as access to
training is not a statutory entitlement, employees depend to a large extent on trade unions to secure this right for them as part of their contract of employment' (Manufacturing, Science and Finance, 1988:20) It is to union policies towards continuing training that we now turn.

8. Policies Towards Continuing Training: Considerations of Equality and Efficiency

Although some training issues relating to the introduction to new technology can be formulated on an industry or occupational basis e.g. word processing skills in office work, the application of electronics to electrical work, in most cases the applications of new technology and new patterns of work organisation are specific to particular production processes. Therefore they, and trade union responses to them, are best examined at plant level. In practice, it is often difficult to distinguish union responses to training issues linked to new technology from those concerning labour flexibility. Whilst a formal training programme may be used to legitimise and recognise new skills in the wages structure, the acquisition of new skills may equally occur in the absence of formal training programmes or through techniques such as open learning. These methods may present an opportunity to avoid industrial conflict over job demarcations or, by simplifying and compartmentalising work processes, result in deskilling. Surveys of union members show that workers often receive no training at all or very basic instruction on the job when new technology is introduced. (See GMBATU, 1984; and Engineering Training Today, January, 1988:2)

Union policies have generally been to accept the introduction of technological change, seeking agreements on new technology, disclosure of information and job security. However, many unions have come to recognise the weakness of agreements which do not also give consideration to training and job redesign. The clerical union APEX, in particular, has argued that the Taylorisation of office work has occurred through the introduction of new technology. However, despite publishing documents on job design arising from the recommendations of their Office Working Party
(APEX, 1980 and 1983), relatively few new technology agreements negotiated by the union have included clauses on job design. APEX has also explicitly recognised the need to retrain the maximum number of staff in new equipment and has argued for general appreciation courses in transferable skills, rather than short courses provided by the manufacturers' of specific items of machinery. A number of union publications have pointed out that without union initiatives on training and retraining, deskilling is a real threat. (TGWU, 1979; APEX, 1980; USDAW, n.d.)

The unwillingness of employers to provide training in new technology skills has prompted a number of trade unions to develop their own training courses, particularly in electronics skills. The electricians' union, the EETPU, was the first to open its own training centre in 1980 at Cudham Hall, Esher, providing short courses in electronics, electronic logic systems programming and microprocessor interfacing. It also has mobile instruction units and extended its training facilities to regional offices in 1985. Although places are made available for unemployed members to do these training courses, the strategy behind the provision of training is linked to EETPU's identity as a trade union committed to the philosophy of 'new realism' in industrial relations, and as a means of expanding its sphere of influence through claiming new technology skills. The EETPU has also shown its willingness to engage in 'micro corporatist alliances' with employers though its acceptance of 'no-strike' and single union agreements particularly with Japanese Companies, which have earned it expulsion from the Trades Union Congress; Although single union agreements clearly can overcome some of the problems associated with the introduction of multi-skilling in multi-union sites, demarcation disputes are not unknown in ununionised workplaces. In this respect, the EETPU combines an efficiency rationale is combined with sectionalism and pragmatism.

The EETPU is not alone in providing technical training for its members, although many unions continue to see training as the responsibility of the employer, both in workplace decision-making and in its provision. The engineering union, the AEU, has also provided courses in electronics
for its members and more recently has set itself up as a broker for continuing training through a joint initiative with the engineering department of Newham Community College. The objective of this initiative is to coordinate links between the identification of training needs in companies and college provision. (AEU, 1990:17) The rationale underpinning it is one of efficiency and an attempt to promote union cooperation with company objectives. Insofar as as it is aimed primarily at existing members, it is also represents a sectional strategy.

Workplace-based training campaigns are inevitably sectional since their concern is with existing employees rather than workers as a whole, and usually concern the members of one union rather than the entire workforce. However, two recent workplace campaigns do also try to incorporate equality issues. Manufacturing, Science and Finance’s ‘Campaign for Training’ states that the main features of a workplace staff and development agreement should include the right of all employees to training and that equal opportunities should be given priority at all levels of staff planning. (MSF, 1987:14) In the same way, the Transport and General Workers’ Union’s ‘Link-up’ campaign also includes equal opportunities clauses in its model agreement. This is because ‘(t)he can operate as a big barrier to equal opportunities, but also as an important way of redressing discrimination’. (TGWU, 1989:21)

However, it is more difficult to judge the effectiveness of such campaigns. A survey by the Labour Research Department of shop stewards found that many companies consider training to be a management prerogative. This has been confirmed by MSF’s experience with its training campaign, which was relaunched in 1990, following a poor response, both from union members and from management to the 1987 campaign. Officials in the TGWU appear to be optimistic about the potential outcome of the Link-up Campaign due to the union’s strong tradition of branch autonomy, although it is still early to assess its success. Both MSF and TGWU have broader equality objectives; both are on the Left of the labour movement, and the Link-up Campaign is also directed towards the unionisation of ‘peripheral’ workers.
However, campaigns for training agreements are not the only approach to involvement in workplace training policy. The white-collar union, the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) has a history of involvement in consultative committees in the local government sector and in the public service industries, as well as in providing some vocational training for its own members. Because the union views education and training as a means of improving members’ performance in their existing jobs as well as in preparing them for promotion, it has developed a more holistic approach to education and training. It therefore stresses training as a matter for consultation, rather than for negotiation in the workplace. It has also prioritised policy inputs into a wide range of training bodies.

9. Further Training and Education: A Vehicle for Cultural Change in Industrial Relations?

There is a large body of literature which emphasises the collective and negotiated nature of skill. (see Rainbird, 1990:17) It is therefore important to examine training as a process of creating collectivities of workers, which is contested both within the workplace and outside it. In this section, two major developments in training in the workplace will be examined, and in particular, their consequences for trade union organisation.

In Britain trade union organisation is based on occupational categories and multi-unionism is the norm in most manufacturing establishments. It is therefore obvious that developments which increase flexibility between occupations will raise issues of spheres of union influence and can place a strain on inter-union relations. Some of the developments under the general rubric of ‘flexibility’ largely involve changes in the peripheral areas of craft skills and are already widespread. As such, they do not pose any major problems for union organisation. In contrast, the changes involved in the concept of multi-skilling are more far-reaching and have greater consequences for trade union organisation. At surface level, multi-skilling appears to be about training and acquiring new skills, but at a
practical level it is about the changing organisation of work and shifts in
the balance of power between unions and employers, on the one hand, and
between unions, on the other.

Another development worth noting has been the development of non-
vocational educational programmes by companies for their workers. The
prime example of this is the Ford Motor Company's Employee Develop-
ment and Assistance Programme (EDAP) which is widely being held up as
an example to the rest of the trade union movement. (see TUC, 1990) Any
Ford employee is entitled to a grant of up to £200 a year for courses lead-
ing to personal and career development. This is being run at national and
local level by joint committees of management, staff and manual unions.
Agreed in 1987, the programme has far-exceeded the expected levels of
take-up, indicating the extent to which the appetites of manual workers for
education have normally remained unsatisfied.

However, whilst EDAP provides opportunities for individual workers
and will undoubtedly motivate them to improve their educational level,
there are other more fundamental questions which need to be raised. Both
management and unions claim the credit for placing EDAP on the bar-
gaining table and both sides will benefit from it. It is in fact modelled on
the EDTP scheme introduced in the US to ease redundancies although the
British unions have enhanced it. It follows a series of management initia-
tives to motivate employees and to encourage them to identify with com-
pany objectives, most of which have been rejected by the manual unions.
(For example, employee involvement, quality circles and the 'After Japan'
programme). In addition, the tripartite, cooperative structure set up to
administer the scheme has brought together manual and staff unions,
which normally negotiate separately. It has already created a forum in
which other issues can be discussed, away from the confrontational politics
of the bargaining table. (McCarthy, 1990) Although the scheme is con-
cerned with non-vocational education, learning acquired in this way has
the potential to spill over into work-related skills and, more importantly,
create a receptivity in employees to learning vocational skills. Moreover,
Ford has made it clear that it is not attempting to recruit a more highly
educated workforce, but to increase workers' education under its own auspices. This is not to downgrade the significance of the EDAP programme as a means of improving the educational attainments and possibly also the job satisfaction of the Ford workforce, but rather to point out some of the broader cultural and organisational issues, as well as the individual and collective dimensions of company-sponsored education programmes.

10. Policy Towards Training: A Contested Terrain?

In every country the system of industrial training is embedded in broader societal institutions, of which the system of industrial relations is particularly significant. Whereas these interrelationships may create a system which is conducive to the establishment of a consensus on training matters in some countries, this is clearly not the case in Britain. Rather, the conflicts which are endemic to the wage relationship are carried over into training, particularly into its ramifications for wages and conditions of employment. In addition, the exclusion of trade union interests from authoritative decision-making on training policy at national and sectoral level is complemented, by and large, by the absence of a forum for involvement in decisions on training in the workplace. The effect of this has been to emphasise the conflictual rather than the consensual aspects of training.

The system of industrial relations creates a further dynamic, which arises from the nature of British trade unionism. Occupational unionism, even though this is rapidly changing as a result of a series of mergers between major unions in the 1980s, creates a concern with spheres of influence which are based on access to occupational training. This creates a built-in conservatism to change in occupational boundaries, which is particularly noticeable when attempts are made to increase flexibility between trades. However, it is also the case that moves towards increasing flexibility, whether of a functional or numerical type, become almost inevitably a threat to trade union organisation itself. This can not simply be
ascribed to union paranoia after the experience of a decade of Thatcherism, since training reforms have been explicitly aimed at attacking trade union 'inflexibilities' and control over the operation of the labour market.

Paradoxically, the experience of Thatcherism and in particular, the Youth Training Scheme, have produced significant developments in training policy in the trade unions. It has put training on the policy agenda for all unions, however meager the gains in terms of training provision itself. There are nevertheless problems with a training strategy dependent on collective bargaining: it is based on the already unionised sectors of the labour force, and is unable to exert influence over the ununionised sectors, which in practice are those, such as services, which are experiencing the fastest rates of growth.

Traditionally, continuing training in the workplace has not been high on the policy agenda of trade unions. The development of awareness of its significance can be put down to a growing concern with the lack of competitiveness of the the British economy, on the one hand, and the speed of technological change, on the other. These factors have been behind the series of initiatives on continuing training outlined above, which are linked to more pragmatic concerns with claiming new skills and expanding membership in new technology sectors.

However, the completion of the European market has also contributed to this growing awareness of the need for continuing training. This is not just a reflection of the real and/or imagined results of increased European competition, but because Europe and in particular, the Social Charter with its emphasis on workers' rights to training, provides a reference point for a union movement which has been under siege for more than a decade. This has coincided with an improvement in bargaining power and a growing confidence in pursuing and obtaining wage demands. Europe has also constituted the Achilles' heel of what once seemed an invincible government, to which current divisions in the Conservative party testify.

The market model of training and the neglect of public spending on education by the Conservative government has itself had the effect of politicising education and training as electoral issues. Although the Labour Party and the TUC have taken the major policy initiatives on this issue, it
is also one of the points difference with Margaret Thatcher raised in Michael Heseltine's challenge to the Conservative leadership in 1990. As indicated earlier, there are now growing demands for statutory intervention and there can be little doubt that there will be further institutional changes in this area in the near future.

Certainly, the evidence presented here suggests that limited progress will be made on continuing training by unions attempting to raise it through collective bargaining, unless this is accompanied by a statutory right to training and to the setting up of workplace training committees. The same is true for any broader 'societal' ambitions that unions might hold on education and training, since without a legitimate role in national policy-making processes, these can only be frustrated. Over the years, trade unions have had insights over how a policy towards continuing training could or ought to be developed. Despite this, there is little evidence of a coherent policy towards it, although the development of campaigns at the point of production may be a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, it is clear that the granting of representational rights in the workplace, as with representational rights on the Industrial Training Boards in an earlier period, will only increase trade union influence over workplace training if members are able to participate effectively. Their education in the benefits of training, alongside the acquisition of the skills required to make an effective input into decision-making processes in the workplace, will therefore be a prerequisite for the active pursuit of a skill-oriented modernisation policy.
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