

"We can't join a union, that would harm the horses": Worker resistance in the UK horseracing industry

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Introduction

To the extent that the UK horseracing industry, and those that work in it, get a mention in the media, it is usually to highlight the life styles of top jockeys, trainers and owners, or to delve into drug abuse and corruption. Moreover, the UK horseracing industry, and those that work in it, rarely get a mention in the kind of academic journals that scholars of employment relations, typically, read. And yet researching the working lives of UK stable staff, reveals interesting tensions in the ways in they are able/unable to resist the demands of capital in the small business sector. This article, drawn from a wider study, addresses a gap not only in the small firms' literature, but also in the wider employment relations literature.

The study was done against a background of small firms' literature, suggesting that the voice of workers, if not absent, is weakly reported. This literature also strongly suggests that the conduct of industrial relations in small firms is complex and subtle, particularly where there is no formalised collective bargaining relationship through which resistance can be channelled and employee voice can be asserted.

In a series of interviews conducted from October 2003 to May 2004, stable staff were found to have a very strong emotional and psychological bond with the horses in their care. While this affords their employers, racehorse trainers, considerable scope for manufacturing consent, resistance does happen. It is often individualised and isolated but it does exist and workers were able to articulate this. It was also found, unusually for the small firms' sector, that collective resistance across organisational boundaries also exists and is sometimes used.

Worker resistance

Worker resistance has traditionally been presented as a response to management control) but not as the starting point for analysis (Rosenthal 2004). Its absence from many accounts of the labour process has been remarked (Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997; Spencer 2000). While attention has been paid to managerial issues in small hotels, catering and manufacturing firms, far less is known from the workers' perspective in those and other sectors. Where worker resistance is discussed, it is characterised by small employers as a failing of moral character (Scott et al 1985). Indeed, the following comment by one worker (interviewed at Taunton racecourse) speaks volumes: 'Joining a union? You'd be regarded as a traitor'.

Racing employment is divided between 530 small firms, some 40 per cent of which employ 10 staff or less. The traditional, deferential relationship between stable staff, their employers and the racehorse owners on whose animals they work, is reinforced by hegemonic control throughout the industry, manifesting particularly at the level of 'racing towns' such as Newmarket where large concentrations of racing stables may be found. Ideological incorporation is possible via an extension of management authority into workers' lives outside the workplace; in racing mechanisms include housing provided on site by trainers, advances of salary for the purchase of riding apparel, the promise of riding in races if a worker shows sufficient promise.

Burawoy (1981:90) refers to the 'psychological and other processes through which subordination to capital is secured' and the evidence from racing is that workers do identify very closely with the object of their labours, the horse. All those who have daily dealings with horses will, almost of necessity, develop a very strong emotional and psychological bond with a large and potentially dangerous animal (Gallier 1988; Cassidy 2002). In order to ride and provide care safely, this animal requires complete attention. In the case of racing's employees, this emotional bond forms part of daily working life also and allows the employer to manufacture consent quite easily – workers accept, as natural and legitimate, their employer's assertion that it is 'your' horse to deal with because they are socialised to do so.

The presence of the trainer, not only on site but often working alongside stable staff, mucking out, feeding horses, grooming horses, the normal daily routine of horse care, reinforces the unitarist position of employer and workers all sharing the same boat. Some staff, while stating that the boss was a hard character with regard to equine matters, also related their experiences of being helped out with advances of wages or receiving a sympathetic hearing and support over housing problems. They found it more difficult to contemplate standing up to him over pay or hours, for example. One stable lad said that his boss allowed staff to use the swimming pool and tennis court, as well as paying better wages than many other employers in the Midlands. His trainer also provided staff accommodation and electricity at his own expense. This was a small enterprise with only 8 horses and four staff. With regard to resistance, he was frankly surprised, saying 'What's there to resist? He's a good boss, not a tyrant' though did admit that he had moved jobs before to get away from more domineering trainers. All this suggests a paternalistic relation between employer and employee. Moreover, it does not mean all bosses are 'good'.

Workers treat resistance mainly as an individual act and one that may necessitate exit, rather using voice to seek resolution at the immediate workplace level. One young woman who had been summarily, and apparently unfairly, dismissed offered a particular example. She did not feel inclined to pursue her case, either through the staff association, then the Stable Lads Association (SLA), or an Employment Tribunal because 'my name would be blackened', rendering her unemployable in a tightly-knit industry. Her personal resistance had been centred on finding fresh employment and restoring her reputation as a good worker.

Stable staff do, of course, find an opportunities to create small oases away from management control. The boss cannot be in every stable at each point of the worker's day, nor can the head lass/lad. Trainers frequently do not accompany horses to the racecourse, so this activity is a distinct opportunity to catch up on sleep (a much needed commodity), to avoid the rigours of mucking out and of grappling with the cold of a morning exercise regime in winter. Additionally, stable staff find opportunities to play games while on horseback - teasing about personal appearance or riding ability or the performance of individual horses. When off duty they may indulge in heavy and competitive drinking.

All workers use the racecourse canteen to exchange information aimed at avoiding bad bosses wherever possible. Several respondents remarked on the importance of meeting staff from other stables across the country and how much support they derived from the opportunity to share and compare workplace experiences. It is at this level that we found most expressions of solidarity between workers, being told by one stable girl that 'we look out for each other, even when we don't work at the same

yard' or by a travelling head lad 'the *craic* is good but we need it because of the bloody boss'.

Our research finds the presence of latent collectivism in the racing sector, in tune with the work of McBride (2006) and Stephenson and Stewart (2001) who also find evidence of worker collectivism, irrespective of trade union presence. Affiliations between stable staff span the boundaries between individual firms because staff are required to be highly mobile. Nor is there a lack of opportunity for workers to combine together to vent issues away from the racecourse, since racing employment is concentrated in several locations, such as Newmarket or Lambourn.

Though interviewees offered little evidence of concerted resistance, there was the exception of one head lad who organised a lorry blockade of the stable yard at Kempton Park racecourse when staff discovered they could not get served in the staff canteen during the autumn of 2004. Members of the public, availing themselves of cheaper food than in the main restaurants, filled the canteen. He said 'it's amazing though how one 'broken down' lorry can change things. Soon there was a queue right back down the drive. We weren't going to move till the management made sure we could get fed'. He estimated that the queue of lorries contained 30 staff (and at least as many horses), all of whom were expecting to be able to get their horses off-loaded for the start of racing. Their demands that the staff canteen be made available only to staff were met within about half an hour of the dispute commencing.

While 'bad' bosses are identified through discussion at race meetings, and avoided if possible, the possibility of mobilisation breaks down at the level of the individual enterprise, especially where stables are isolated and remote as pointed out by Metcalf (2004) in his study of pay issues in the racing industry. However, our evidence points to the fact that the long running issues of low pay and unsocial hours are grievances around which workers could organise and display their collective voice. Stable staff were represented by the TGWU until 1975 and successfully struck for better pay the same year. Thirty years of passive 'representation' by the Stable Lads' Association has done nothing to improve their position subsequently.

Conclusion

Our findings support the widespread view that workers in small firms often resort to individual methods of resistance. However, it was very clear that working at the race course was a very important opportunity for staff to form alliances with their fellow workers across the country, to gossip about horses and races but, most importantly from an industrial relations perspective, to informally pool knowledge about good and bad workplaces and workplace issues.

When going racing there is considerable scope for individual acts of resistance, possibly through sabotage (Hodson 1999) by failing to ensure the horse is calm enough to race, as thoroughbred horses are notoriously susceptible to upsetting experiences. Our research suggests this form of resistance is highly unlikely, given the protective approach taken by stable staff towards the horse. Yet the racing element of the labour process offers even more scope for collective agency and worker voice for 'if staff threatened to refuse to transport and look after horses [scheduled to race] such a threat would need to be taken very seriously' (Metcalf 2004:32).

Stable staff are unusual amongst small firms workers in that they belong to an identifiable industrial culture, which is formed from the bond between worker and horse, the co-location of many stables in racing towns and the social bond between workers at race meetings. However, this industrial culture has not translated into enduring workplace collectivism. Stable staff are nominally represented by a staff association, the SLA (now the National Association of Stable Staff), but this is a weak organisation that has not commanded support from staff. There is so far no evidence to suggest that stable staff are inclined to take industrial action to support wage or other demands.

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