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Worker voice has been defined in a number of ways - the individual articulation of grievances, the collective expression of workers' power, making a contribution to management decisions and providing mutuality through partnership (Dundon *et al.*, 2004). In small firms, in particular, it has been found that workers may adopt one of two strategies – individual articulation of grievances and/or exit if employers fail to address grievances (Moore and Read, 2006). This article presents findings from a study of voice in the small firm aiming to identify those occasions when workers in small firms opt to use *union voice* to resolve individual problems through formal mechanisms; when they use *individual voice*, formally or informally, to resolve problems; what they see as *collective problems*; and what they see as *restraints* to resolving problems collectively. The study focuses on one class of small firm, namely racing stables.

Industrial relations in racing stables have gone through four phases (Miller, 2010). From 1919-1975, stable staff were organised by the TGWU and its predecessors; from 1975-1986 by the Stable Lads' Association (SLA) and the TGWU; from 1987-2006 by the SLA; and 2007 to the present by the National Association of Stable Staff (NASS). Both the SLA and TGWU were recognised for collective bargaining purposes (although the TGWU was effectively de-recognised in 1987) but both organisations have struggled to set up a shop steward network in the 600 or so small firms which comprise this part of the UK racing industry. The SLA was granted a Certificate of Independence by the Certification Officer in 1986 and NASS continues to be registered as an independent trade union; indeed NASS now affiliates to the TUC.

From 1976 to the present, minimum wages have been set through the National Joint Council for Stable Staff (NJCSS) formed (as was the SLA) in the wake of the 1975 strike of stable lads working in Newmarket. The NJCSS agreement forms one of the Rules of Racing (BHA, 2011) which means that trainers who breach the Agreement (theoretically at least) may render themselves liable to disciplinary action by the British Horseracing Authority (BHA).

Staff management in the stable yard

Racing yards range in size from micro (under 9 employees) to almost medium-sized (70 employees), with the numbers of staff dependent on numbers of horses in training, typically on a ratio of one human per three horses. The majority of stables employ in the region of 20 staff, in a simple structure of

trainer, possibly an assistant trainer, head lad/girl, and other stable staff. As trainers are often required to be away from the yard at race meetings, a great deal of management responsibility is vested in the first line supervisors, head lads/girls.

As a condition of their licence, trainers have to undergo mandatory training, including modules on Human Resource Management. There are also training courses for Head Lads/Girls, newly appointed or about to take up post, which include staff management training. Training is organised and run by the British Racing School and Northern Racing College.

The National Trainers' Federation produce and circulate an Employers' Guide to the 90 per cent of trainers who are members of the NTF. This covers staffing matters, from

employment contracts to anti-discrimination law and there is a formal dispute resolution procedure which sets out the steps available to staff and trainers to resolve workplace problems, either grievances or disciplinary allegations.

Workplace organisation

Throughout the period 1975-2006, the SLA lacked any infrastructure of workplace representation and individual cases were, by necessity, processed by the National Secretary and the SLA's legal advice service. This accords with the SMALL project, conducted in SMEs in eight European countries (Bouquin *et al.*, 2007:23) where it was found that even where there was centralised bargaining 'there may be no company level bargaining or union representation'.

Since the creation of NASS in 2007, strenuous efforts have been made by the union to improve this situation. Measures taken include the appointment of a Chief Executive and Regional Officer, both with a

background in TUC-affiliated unions; the election of a National Executive Council and regular meetings; an annual policy making meeting; and the election of four Regional Committees in racing centres such as Newmarket, Lambourn and Epsom. The union has also created a network of Mailbox Representatives and instituted a representatives' training scheme to support their work as local NASS representatives. As one representative said: *"Doing the training has made all the difference to me, I am now confident to speak up for members"*. He also found that he was being approached more to help, including by the trainer he worked for.

NASS has 2500 members out of a potential 5,593 stable staff (NASS, 2011a), giving a membership density of 45 per cent. It offers

individual and collective representation on employment rights, as well as negotiating an annual pay rise through the NJCSS. It has worked with

the National Trainers' Federation to tackle issues such as bullying at the workplace and with other national bodies to address the poor staff facilities at many of the UK's racecourses. It now publishes a regular newsletter, giving accounts of its work and of individual claims which have been successful. It is much better known around the industry and is starting to enjoy a better reputation amongst stable staff than its predecessor, the SLA.

In an industry which involves working with a large, live and potentially dangerous animal, it also assists members with personal injury claims through the union's solicitors and with making claims to the Riding Industry Accident Benefit Scheme. From the latest NASS report on individual cases (NASS, 2011b), it is clear that stable staff will use the union voice route to resolve individual issues. Cases ranged from single issues, such as pay, holiday entitlement and maternity

leave, to some complex situations where there was a transfer of an undertaking or a member was seeking to uphold a number of different employment rights in the one claim. Here issues were raised through the union's head office in the first instance. A number of members said that they had turned to NASS Head Office direct because they had heard of the work being done by the Chief Executive and did not know anyone who could help at the local level. There was, therefore, firm evidence that NASS members were using union voice to resolve their individual grievances.

However, a discussion with NASS regional representatives pointed to a continued lack of a structured dispute or grievance procedure at the workplace level. While these representatives were confident in their ability to raise issues on behalf of members, with or without such a mechanism, they also saw a real problem in the lack of staff management training amongst first line supervisors (head lads/girls). This was reinforced by one NASS member respondent who said:

"Head Girls should be sent on staff management courses before being given the role"; while another said that: *"my problem was caused by a head lad which left me no-one to turn to"* in the very truncated management structure discussed above.

This is highly suggestive of an employment relationship characterized not only by truncation, but also by informality (Marlow and Patten, 2002). This kind of relationship, common in small workplaces, may sometimes be positive but on other occasions may actually be the cause of the problem. In this case, it certainly seemed that the nature of the employment relationship meant that individual staff members were less inclined to employ individual voice and raise issues for themselves.

This has implications for HRM – or its lack. One NASS representative said: *"There's no HRM in yards"* and all agreed that staff could be intimidated by their managers. They did not see where stable staff could go to resolve problems through individual voice and while a stable lad might turn to a trusted colleague, the effective resolution of problems was very inconsistent across racing yards; too much rested on a supervisory layer which the industry did not support properly by encouraging or coaching them in the management skills to deal with such matters.

This latter finding struck a chord with the work of the Stable and Stud Staff Commission, instituted by the British Horseracing Board in 2003, under the chairmanship of Lord Donoughue. The report of the Commission (the Donoughue Report) found a culture of bullying amongst first line supervisors (BHB, 2004) and concluded that the industry must find ways to put a stop to this, including obligatory staff management training.

As is well known, the alternative to voice is exit (Hirschman, 1970). This study found evidence to suggest that stable staff would often bottle problems up, using exit as the only means of expressing their dissatisfaction with that particular yard. One long-serving member of racing staff said: *"there's always been a transient element, particularly young men who move around a lot"*; while another respondent said that while NASS had been extremely proactive in helping her resolve an enforced reduction in working hours, the problem itself had given her the *'push'* she needed to take her career in a different direction, still within racing but no longer as a member of stable staff.

Collective issues

It is clear from reports in the union magazine, *Stable Talk*, that NASS is acting as the collective voice of members over issues such as the annual pay negotiation, occupational pensions, and staff facilities at racecourses. It has taken a policy stance on particular aspects of health and safety, such as the continued use of muck sacks to move soiled bedding from stables to the communal muck heap. It is also clear that workers in these small firms do appreciate the need for representation for as one said: "*I have called the office a couple of times over little things, they're great at offering advice and I know they will step in if I need them*".

However, other active members also pointed to the fact that it is very difficult to recruit new members, despite the work that NASS does around the industry. As one respondent said: "*They all want the pay rise, but they don't want to join*".

Without a doubt the biggest barrier to issues being raised collectively at the workplace is amongst stable staff themselves, not because they are anti-union but because they are pro-horse. Time and again stable staff said that they would not take collective action because the welfare of racehorses must come in front of any other concerns.

Conclusion

From the work undertaken by NASS, it is clear that conflict in the workplace is on-going and individualised in racing and that the basic antagonism between capital and labour exists here, just as much as it does in large organisations. However, it does also seem that at least some of these small employers have been able to move beyond the view that union membership/activism is 'not only unreasonable but also as being in some way treacherous' (Scott *et al.*, 1989).

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