

A REVIEW OF THE TRADE UNION INDUSTRIAL STUDIES SERIES. (SOCIETY OF INDUSTRIAL TUTORS, ARROW BOOKS, LONDON 1975).

by Timothy and Martin Plaut

The Trade Union Industrial Studies series, published for the Society of Industrial Tutors, is innovatory in at least two respects. Firstly, in being "specifically directed to the needs of active trade unionists who want to equip themselves to be more effective" (1), the series consciously breaks away from academic treatises and attempts to provide a more penetrating view of those aspects of social reality which immediately present themselves to the active trade unionist. Secondly in planning at least 15 volumes, the series hopes to provide a rounded totality rather than a number of jabs at disparate problem areas.

The series is divided into 3 sets: 1. The key skills. 2. The bargaining context. 3. Understanding industrial society. One volume in each set is termed a resource book and attempts to clarify matters raised in the 4 companion volumes providing an entrée into additional reading and questions. We shall discuss here the first set to be published: "The key skills", with special reference to the reference book which bear the name of the set, the "Organised Worker" and "The Activists Handbook".

THE "KEY SKILLS" HANDBOOK AND "ORGANISED WORKER"

Tony Topham's "The Organised Worker" (Arrow Books, 1975, London) is aimed specifically at shop stewards. It moves through a succession of issues: the definition and role of the shop steward, the initiation of a union organisation and its subsequent recognition on a particular site. This is followed by an outline of the difficulties of maintaining the organisation, with special reference to intra-union relations and the delicate balance between discipline and democracy at all levels. The next chapter discusses formal and informal workers regulations of a non-wage nature, whilst chapters five to seven analyse and explain different negotiating procedures at all levels and weigh up such techniques as productivity bargaining, alternate wage systems and procedures for settling disputes. Finally, the last two chapters outline

wider issues of trade unionism. Chapter eight delineates the extension of the role of unions into non-wage concerns, such as environmental protection of workers representation on management boards, as well as the extension of the facilities offered by the trade union movement. The last chapter attempts to situate industrial relations within the social totality simply by sketching three views of industry: as a harmonious partnership, a resolution of conflicts and an authoritarian employer-dominated system.

It is appropriate to pose two critical questions in reviewing this work. To begin with we might enquire as to the theoretical stance adopted by the authors. "The Key Skills" resource book emphasises the value of pertinent information, a basic grasp of arithmetic reasoning and the on-going education of all union activists. Bacon's "For knowledge itself is power" is approvingly quoted. (2) Tony Topham in a chapter of this volume does attempt to extend the concerns of these shop-floor manuals by including an exposition of orthodox economic and industrial relations views of trade unionism as a whole. Whilst expressing an antipathy towards the institutions and processes of capitalism, Topham is critical of the radical rejection of trade unionism in toto and concludes that: "This author regards himself as belonging to that tradition which stresses the positive values revealed in trade unionism: its democracy, its sense of brotherhood and its social and political aspirations." (3) Topham fails to understand that the critique of unionism is not antagonistic to trade unions as such, but to its limited and limiting role within the totality.

We turn our attention now to a second query, namely the pertinence of these books to the South African labour movement. There is much of value in this regard, as these volumes bring together a wealth of material geared to equipping the trade unionist with those skills that are essential in a world attuned to competition and technical instrumentality. Hence workers are informed how to study, the basics of statistics and their application and the use of a library. At every stage exercises are provided

to ensure an active participation by the worker in his education. Whilst these volumes are written for workers in one of the most mature trade union movements, South African unionists will benefit from the close attention to practical problems of a universal type. For example, the chapter on Organisation and Recognition in "The Organised Worker" outlining ways of avoiding victimisation and management. Similarly the emphasis upon the dangers of redundancy resulting from wage agreements, the necessity of worker participation in regulations regarding their immediate work environment, and other points are clearly important as the labour movement gains strength. Many of the topics are, however, inappropriate to South African conditions as they assume a liberal state and a far deeper organisation of the working class.

THE ACTIVISTS HANDBOOK

As the thought of an "Activists Handbook" brought out in a series of "Trade Union Industrial Studies" may send shivers down the spine of the average South African Manager and cause the Censor Board to break out in a cold sweat, it may be opportune to inform the pillars of society that the most radical aspect of the book is its title. This manual aims to provide 'activists' with skills and techniques so as to make 'more than futile gestures', as the subtitle puts it. The 'activists' the author has in mind range from shop stewards and trade union personnel to the broad category of men and women running voluntary organisations.

The book has a number of drawbacks when considered for a South African market. It is written in a working class vernacular, which although perfect for a British audience, may prove difficult locally. The imagery, language and examples would certainly be foreign to most South African readers. While this is a drawback as far as the present book is concerned, it provides a most valuable example of the kind of publication that can be expected to appeal to a working class readership. The reader is carefully nurtured by being made to feel at ease by the author's relating of incidents from his own life and pre-empting questions that are likely to arise. The chapters are

short, so as not to provide too formidable a challenge to the worker attempting to digest its contents after a days work.

The first section is an introduction, and it is in the second section that the book really gets going. Here the author discusses roles, relationships, social power and social groups, and it is here that the conservative nature of the book is clarified. The argument is couched in the inherently regressive categories of Structural Functionalism, such as goals, roles and institutions. These allow the author to concentrate on the functional and disfunctional nature of particular actions within an organisation. At no point is the linkage between organisations, activists and the society in which they exist discussed. The critic from outside the formal organisation is considered little better than a peeping Tom. Nor is the role of the activist ever spelled out, except as being '... to keep the action going.' He maintains that: 'The activist's *role* is quite distinct from his *job*, which makes him an amateur in the true sense of the word: he does it for love.' (p. 20, emphasis in the original). It is clear that the notion that a job might not be simply a means to an end, but is an integral part of life: a life that can not be reduced to the technical fulfillment of certain functions, has not been considered. In short, this book presents the activist from the perspective of a shop-floor consciousness. The worker is simply seen as an employee, without the inherent possibility that he might become a producer.

The third section is called 'Working the System' and is aimed at providing the 'activist' with the ability to do just that. It teaches him or her to undertake such tasks as writing reports, making speeches and running committees. It is witty and informative and could be of use to anyone having to act within the framework of an organisation.

The fourth section deals with techniques designed to facilitate contact with the media. The mechanisms by means of which the news operates are carefully spelled out. Ways of contacting reporters, methods of making the most out of a television interview and

how to get coverage for campaigns are systematically dealt with. The author is clearly aware of the problems faced by the working class in dealing with situations which, for the most part, their situation does not equip them. While many of these instructions may be useful for personnel officers in South Africa, the climate in this country is not, at present, conducive to providing the working class with the coverage it has enjoyed in the First World. We are yet to see the first sympathetic interview with a black trade unionist on Television.

Despite its weaknesses this series is well worthwhile reading and digesting. It is carefully constructed and could provide a useful model for writing aimed at local conditions, of which there have been a disturbing shortage. These books are also of interest to those students of both British current events and industrial relations as it provides an insight into the tone of debate among people active within the trade union movement. As sections of the South African public are only too ready to pontificate on the role of the trade union movement in the current British crisis, this series may well play a didactic role.

REFERENCES:

1. From the frontispiece to all the studies in this series.
2. *The Key Skills* Cobert, and Stuttard G. (eds.) (Arrow Books, London, 1975), page 13.
3. *ibid.* page 95.