

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXT OF STABLE STAFF EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

Introduction

In Chapter 2, it was shown that a preliminary study of the industry in 2000 (Phase A) gave insights into the context within which the labour process takes place at racing stables. The study revealed that at points in the past, stable staff had not only been members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) but had taken strike action in 1975. Separate data were gathered on employment issues in individual racing stables but the wider data on employment relations and employment in the industry did not form part of Phase A. Stable staff provided a focal point of the research because, as already discussed, the experience of workers in small firms has been relatively under-reported in the literature (Holliday 1995; Barrett and Rainnie 2002; Marlow and Patten 2002). For some commentators within the industry, the importance of the work by stable staff in the racing labour process is without doubt, but it is pointed out that this is not recognised through the wage structure (Gallier 1988; Cassidy 2002). Nor is the contribution of staff generally acknowledged in the annals of racing, which tend to concern themselves with famous racehorses, jockeys and trainers. Herbert (1974:13) acknowledged the position thus:

Very little has been written about the men and girls and boys who actually do the work...Stable workers are in action from the instant they open their horse's door (often before dawn), until they close it on his evening feed.

Nevertheless, stable staff were thrust to prominence in 1975 when their pay demands were rejected by Newmarket trainers and a twelve week strike threatened to disrupt the summer Flat racing season. Their actions were widely reported in the daily newspapers and in the *Sporting Life*, the racing industry's 'own' newspaper (succeeded by the *Racing Post*). Far from being a group of passive individuals working in a small and

harmonious workplace, they showed themselves capable of mobilising around their grievances, being members of the TGWU. Their actions contradicted the findings of the Bolton Committee (1971) that industrial harmony was the norm in the small firm. Stable staff also resisted their employers vigorously and collectively while drawing public attention to their wage demands. However, these actions have not been repeated in the years since 1975, despite the fact that low pay is still an unresolved grievance (Winters 2000; BHB 2004).

It is thus important to reach an understanding of the history of employment relations surrounding the labour process in racing stables. These are matters that are largely unreported, with the notable exception of the 1975 strike. However, the research shows that the strike was the first of three critical events that shaped the development of employment relations in the industry from the mid-1970s to the early 21st century. The second event was the creation of the Stable Lads' Association (SLA) and the derecognition of the TGWU, after some forty years' involvement in representing stable staff; this was a direct outcome of the strike. The third event was the creation of national collective bargaining machinery, the National Joint Council for Stable Staff (NJCSS), also as a direct outcome of the strike.

This chapter therefore engages with research objective two: to establish the history and development of the employment relations context of the racing labour process. The chapter is structured into eight sections, firstly dealing with the development of industrial relations between 1930 and 1975; then the 1975 strike; the Blackwell Report on Racing Manpower which was instrumental in the creation of the Stable Lads Association; the consequent propaganda war conducted during the 1975 over future union representation; the outcome of the strike; the Stable Lads' Association (SLA); the effect on the SLA of the Stable and Stud Commission of 2004; the National Joint Council for Stable Staff.

The chapter examines the state of industrial relations in the industry in the 1970s and identifies the wider ramifications of the strike for the future of industrial relations for the racehorse-training sector. The data is drawn primarily from secondary sources, augmented by recollections of the strike gathered by the author in interviews with stable lads and the SLA in Phases A and D (Winters 2002b, 2006). An attempt was made to interview the main protagonists in the creation of the SLA but all three declined to participate.

Industrial relations in horse racing 1930-1975

The history of industrial relations in horse racing was originally raised during Phase A of the research (Winters 2000) and was explicitly examined in Phase C. The mention of the words ‘industrial relations’ provoked the universal response from employer respondents that industrial relations equated to the 1975 stable lads’ strike and ‘the day when Lester Piggott was pulled from his horse’ which he was due to ride in the 1000 Guineas race at Newmarket. A small amount of research revealed a number of things about this statement. Firstly, it was Willie Carson who was unseated by striking stable lads, and he went on to incite race goers to take action against the strikers (Racing Post 1975). Lester Piggott and two other jockeys then led a mounted charge against the strikers (ibid), an action for which they narrowly avoided police prosecution. None of this is mentioned when the story is told; the narrator may not even know it. This leads to the second point - that events in history become distorted as they are retold in the intervening years. In any event, this brief anecdote shows that memories fade, raising questions over the validity of interviewing those who were involved at the time, supposing that they are willing to talk – for example, attempts by the author to interview leading protagonists in the creation of the SLA were either ignored or met with downright rejection. Nevertheless, an appreciation of industrial relations history is an important prerequisite for a fuller understanding of the present since events become part

of industrial folklore and have an important effect in the future – this is certainly the case for racing’s employment relations traditions and practices. As Edwards states (1990:126) ‘Workplace relations have histories’.

Hobsbawm (1997:24) poses the question ‘What can history tell us about contemporary society?’ and goes on to say (ibid) that ‘the relations between past, present and future are not only matters of vital interest to all: they are quite indispensable’. It was the opinion of Respondent E13¹, based on many years’ involvement in the industry, that racing was a last bastion of class relations, with stable staff forever cast in the role of servant or at the very least expected to adopt servile attitudes in their relations with their employer and racehorse owners. It will thus be apparent that the 1975 strike thrust an invisible workforce into unexpected prominence in an industry that is daily dominated by the recorded image, either in the sporting pages or in televised races. This touches on the important aspect of the way in which racing conducts its affairs, especially employment relations, with a degree of secrecy and a shunning of those who are viewed as unwelcome outsiders, with little or no knowledge of the mysteries of race horse training; for example, Fox (2002) has likened trainers to the tribal shaman and, as Bernard (1997:67) puts it, ‘Trainers move in mysterious ways’. During the 1975 strike the TGWU’s Regional Officer, Sam Horncastle, was vilified in the press for his background as a convenor of shop stewards in the Liverpool docks, supposedly rendering him incapable of distinguishing one end of a horse from another. As Respondent D4² recollected:

Horncastle knew nothing about the industry but was rightly horrified about the conditions he found. The Newmarket trainers were a pretty pig-headed bunch of bastards.

However, it was Horncastle’s skills as a negotiator and his ability to pursue the interests of stable lads within the context of capitalist social relations that were important to his

¹ Jockey Club security officer interviewed at Chepstow racecourse, 23 January 2004

² NTF Council member interviewed at his stables October 2003

members. For some industry commentators, these counted for nothing against the fact that he was an outsider. This is an attitude which still prevails, reflected in subsequent studies of racing where the fact that each author could claim horse(wo)manship was a key to gaining access and trust (Filby 1983; Winters 2000b; Cassidy 2002; Fox 2002), not only with employers but with workers also.

By 1974, approximately 30 trainers were based in Newmarket and some 700 stable staff - out of a total of around 3600 (Joint Racing Board 1974) - were said to be working in Newmarket. The remainder were dispersed throughout the UK, including Scotland, with concentrations of employment in towns such as Lambourn in the Thames Valley and Middleham in Yorkshire.

At the time of the strike in 1975, 852 stable workers in Newmarket are recorded by Filby (1987), with numbers of horses in training in the town as 1364. At that stage, the trainer dominated the stables, and its staff. For example, Nicholson (1995: 179) observed:

The relationship in racing between a young stable lad and a racehorse trainer is still perceived by some observers as curiously Dickensian. The trainer is seen as an unforgiving, authoritarian father figure, demanding absolute obedience. The young lad, hoping fervently to become a jockey, is a foundling required to toe the line on pain of expulsion from the stable.

Dominance by the trainer is approached somewhat differently by Herbert (1974:178), one of whose stable lad respondents offered this opinion of his employer (Fred Winter) whose approach to staff was 'different to most trainers'. He went on to say that:

He's a human being. His approach is good. Other yards try to rule lads with rods of iron. Fred treats them like human beings

The whole notion of collective bargaining and collectivism had been anathema to the employers in the racehorse-training sector of the industry. Nicholson (1995:45), a leading trainer based at Lambourn, recalled his father's attitude to labour relations in the 1920s and 1930s, noting that when his father sent a young lad home for lack of ability at riding 'His parents tried to involve a trade union in his case but Father soon put them

straight'. However, the situation had not changed much in the next sixty years for Munting (1987:123), writing of the situation in stables in the early 1980s, observed

Within their own yards trainers remain boss. Although a small number of trainers have been notorious for ruling their stables with quasi military discipline...some moderation in labour relations has filtered down even to racing stables.

Filby's account of the 1975 strike (1987) shows that employers' attitudes to their staff and in particular to industrial relations and trade unions were still redolent of the 19th century factory boss – the worker was nothing more than a factor of production. Gallier (1988:111) writing of her experiences as a stable girl in the late 1970s/early 1980s, told us that

I'm sure that the trainers appreciate that they get tremendous value for money, but we are, nevertheless, a necessary evil and they never seek our company outside the yard, nor know anything about our lives save what we do for a living.

As related to the author by a Respondent A24³, during Phase A, 'we're treated like it's the 18th century, we should be grateful to even have a job'.

Nevertheless, the TGWU did gain recognition from employers in 1937, more by accident than by design as the union had in fact been campaigning for increased membership amongst agricultural workers, rather than stable staff. As Filby (1983:379) pointed out, recognition was granted on the intervention of Lord Derby (an influential owner of racehorses), heralding '...an essentially paternalistic style of trade union involvement in the industry...'; in this connection Filby also regarded the TGWU campaign itself as part of that paternalist approach, as did Hill (1988) in his study of politics and power in racing.

The TGWU was unable to attract 100% support, despite the initial patronage of Lord Derby. The main area of union support was Newmarket with around 350 members (according to the Joint Racing Board 1974) or 570 according to the Sporting Life

³ Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket stables in June 2000

(Jakobson 1975a) where the TGWU had struck a recognition and bargaining agreement with the Newmarket Trainers' Federation (Joint Racing Board 1974). There were weaker concentrations in Lambourn (Thames Valley) and Middleham (North Yorkshire) and Epsom (Home Counties); there was no national collective bargaining machinery. This pattern of representation coincided with the major centre for training Flat racing horses, the branch of racing most directly associated with the aristocracy and landed gentry.

Union support was hindered by the fragmented nature of work units – racing stables are of necessity located in rural areas; racehorse trainers are small employers – coupled with the ambivalent attitude of many workers to the presence of a union. This ambivalence emanated in part from the dependence of the racehorse on its primary care giver, the stable lad. It also linked firmly with a paternalistic ideology, which is said to be a hallmark of the small firms sector. Being a trade union member was regarded by many trainers as an act of disloyalty and this message was reinforced by the refusal on the part of some to countenance union organisation at their yard. This is entirely congruent with the research reported by Scott et al (1989), which showed that for many small employers, union affiliation on the part of workers was seen as an act of treachery. That lads experienced divided loyalties is recorded in the *Sporting Life* (Logan 1975a) saying

For many of the strikers, the dividing line between the union's principles and the good relationship they had with their guv'nors was a painful one.

From his research amongst stable lads in Newmarket, Filby (1987:207) also remarked on the same phenomenon thus:

They also show a good deal of personal respect for their present employer; having a 'good guv'nor' was the most favoured criterion (cited by 44%) in evaluating their current 'yard' as being as good as any.

Even where there was a great concentration of racing yards, Newmarket being the prime example with around 30 stables employing around 850 workers in 1975, this attitude

still tended to militate against strong union consciousness. The employers were not comfortable with a union presence but seemed to tolerate the arrangements with the TGWU at least until the 1975 strike. Records are incomplete but there was action in 1938 at Lambourn, just before the outbreak of WW2, over a pay claim that remained unresolved at the time of the declaration of war. One feature of that dispute was that the employers started to use female labour to circumvent the effects of the action. The other was the employers' refusal to grant recognition to the TGWU for collective bargaining purposes. In the event, the outbreak of the second world war overtook settlement of the strike. Filby (1987) also recorded further disputes in 1953 and 1960 with Wilson (1998:74) remarking on the latter thus

The previous year [in Newmarket] there had been a contentious stable lads' strike, with the local trainers blaming the press for fanning the flames of discontent.

Stable lads thus found themselves part of the T&G regional structure that embraced many different industrial sectors with varying degrees of industrial militancy. The Newmarket lads in particular were part of Region 1 which catered for occupational groupings ranging from Ford workers to the local caravan factory in Newmarket, an alternative source of employment to which lads regularly had recourse. It is apparent from reports in the local newspaper, the Newmarket Journal (1975), that lads working at the caravan factory would have encountered a strong TGWU presence and frequent disputes. In charting the course of the 1975 lads' strike, the author was struck by the extensive coverage of strikes in wider industry. Despite the fact that 1975 was relatively 'quiet' as far as the high levels of industrial disputes preceding that year was concerned (Department of National Statistics 2002), the strike did happen during an era of working class struggle that was prominent in the daily news and at a time when trade union membership was continuing to expand (Darlington and Lyddon 2001).

The 1975 strike

At the time of the strike, the average industrial wage was in the region of £50 per week but staff in Newmarket were earning only £30.83 per week for a 'compulsory seven day week' (The Record 1975:16). Hardly surprising then that Wilson (1998:358) observed

The partner of a lad working in racing is *obliged* to find a job, owing to the paucity of a stable lad's basic wage, and a Sunday is normally the only day they can spend together.

Not only was the partner of the lad obliged to find a job but often lads would supplement their wages by taking other employment or by betting on races, using their inside knowledge of racing form. Wages were also supplemented for those lads who lived in tied accommodation or lodged in hostels provided on site or in the town by the trainer.

Lads were entitled to a share of any prize money, which was won by their stables, 4% being deducted from winners' prizes for this purpose (Joint Racing Board 1974) and then being shared proportionately amongst the stable's staff, according to length of service. However, it will be recognised that this is highly variable pay and entirely reliant on the success or otherwise of the stables. As the Economist remarked (1989) a high number of successful horses were concentrated in a small number of stables. At the time of the strike, Newmarket's fortunes as a centre of training were also said to be in decline (Filby 1987).

The strike commenced on 30 April 1975, when 189 T&G members came out on strike in Newmarket and stayed out until 28 July 1975 (TGWU 1975a and 1975b). It was in support of a demand for an increase of £4.47 per week and coincided with the top races of the Flat racing season – a tactical advantage for the strikers. The majority of yards continued to work normally but a number of actions had a major impact on the employers – a sit in on Newmarket racecourse on 1 May and sabotage of the Rowley Mile course (also in Newmarket) on 3 May being two of the most prominent.

Sympathy action by the Association of Cinematograph Technicians (ACTT) and the Association of Broadcasting Staff (ABS) ensured TV racing coverage was blacked in May and brewery drivers refused to cross picket lines at Ascot for the June meeting.

The strike, though short in duration and small in terms of the numbers of workers, nevertheless assumed enormous significance in the industry narrative of industrial relations, even to the point that it is regularly revisited and kept alive by the industry newspaper, the *Racing Post*, (Ashforth 2000; *Racing Post* 2002). The Glasgow University Media Group observed at the time that the strike was ‘a novel form of action’ (1976:156) in an industry not known for its militancy but nevertheless in an industry that was - and remains - highly visible on television and in other media outlets. There is an intense folk memory of the strike, which was often raised with the author by trainers when labour relations issues were discussed. The strike has almost invariably been depicted as the work of ‘agitators’, with the TGWU roundly condemned as being out of touch with their members. This was to play in to the hands of the employers in the aftermath of the strike and contributed to the growing campaign to create a ‘union for stable workers’, which stemmed from the 1974 Blackwell report (discussed below). Wilson (1998:234), amongst others, comments that

The activists who caused chaos and divided racing at the Guineas meeting were flying pickets who had arrived in coaches from the docks and elsewhere. Their union spokesman, Sam Hardcastle [*sic*]⁴, was a passenger on a wave of cynical violence.

However, this was not the first piece of industrial action in Newmarket in 1975. In January action was taken against John Oxley, one of the Newmarket trainers, over a breach of the redundancy agreement, which had been concluded in 1974 to deal with the declining fortunes of Newmarket trainers. The dispute was ultimately referred to arbitration, with the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) finding in favour of the redundant workers who had been reinstated pending the outcome (Filby

⁴ This referred to Sam Horncastle, the District Organiser

1983) not least because events were largely overtaken by the action over pay. The union had been bargaining over the annual wage increase since March but talks ended in deadlock on 17 April when the Newmarket Trainers' Federation refused to go to arbitration over the TGWU claim of £4.47 per week, with a reduction to a 40 hour working week (Sporting Life 1975a). The Federation claimed that they could only afford £3, citing familiar arguments that any increase in advance of this would be won at the cost of jobs. They made these arguments against the backdrop of a decline of horses in training in Newmarket (Filby 1987; Thompson 2000) and the precarious economics of training racehorses overall (The Economist 1989).

What this argument ignores is the fact that wages for these workers were depressed mainly because the employer would not set a minimum training fee for racehorse owners, which reflected the true cost of training a racehorse. This was a perennial issue and had been tackled by the Racing Industry Committee of Inquiry (the Benson report) in 1968 and the Committee of Inquiry into Manpower (the Blackwell report) in 1974. Savings had to be found and they generally were found by cutting labour costs, in this case by perpetuating a system of low pay and long hours. As Jack Logan (1975b) commented:

The stark fact remains that militancy at Newmarket, for which some trainers and their patrons have sat up and begged, reflects the underpayment of lads in less successful yards all over the country.

On 26 April the employers emphatically repeated their refusal to increase their pay offer (Sporting Life 1975b), warning that increased wages would accelerate the industry's decline in the town. The Federation Chairman, John Winter went a stage further declaring that a strike would be tragic and would price trainers out of the market (Jakobson 1975b).

The start of the strike was set to coincide with the first Classic races of the 1975 Flat racing season – the Guineas weekend in Newmarket at the beginning of May – which

would be well attended, with famous jockeys such as Lester Piggott likely to bring in the crowds. More than that, influential owners of racehorses would be in attendance to see their animals compete and finally there would be widespread media coverage. The lads were now making two demands – first that there should be an inquiry into the industry and second that their case for a pay increase be referred to arbitration, a proposal stoutly refused by the Newmarket employers. Filby (1983: 387) remarks that the employers' ideology was one of a 'fear and reluctance to use arbitration machinery' and it is possible that their attitude was hardened by what was seen as a defeat for John Oxley over the earlier issue of breaches of the redundancy procedure. All the indications were that other unions would support the lads, most notably horsebox drivers and broadcasting staff and catering staff. As a mark of solidarity, the left wing daily newspaper, the Morning Star, refused to publish racing selections or the Newmarket card on 1 May. Action was set to commence after evening stables on 30 April.

The 1 May, the first race day, witnessed pickets at every stable in Newmarket as well as at the racecourse itself. Nothing would be done to adversely affect the welfare of horses. Almost immediately, tempers flared when it was suggested that one trainer, Bruce Hobbs, had tried to evict striking lads from their hostel. The lads refused to move, with the TGWU denying that there was a sit in. Sam Horncastle, the District Officer, is reported (Jakobson 1975c) as saying that the lads were merely remaining in their accommodation and taking it in turns to go out in twos and threes for supplies – in other words a sit in.

The employers found various ways of circumventing the initial action during the morning exercise routine, with scab labour provided by non-union lads and by jockeys. The Newmarket Trainers' Federation met to decide how to transport horses to the race meeting without the need to run the gauntlet of picket lines. Catering services were not

disrupted as supplies were brought in over the July racecourse, thus avoiding an encounter with any picket; the use of non-union drivers obviously helped. However, race goers were likely to have a dry day as brewery drivers refused to cross the picket lines. They certainly had an unexpected walk to the turnstile as coach drivers who were members of the TGWU refused to drive the last half-mile to the Grandstand area.

Matters became more fraught on 2 May, and this is the incident that forms the mythology of the strike and is kept alive by the Racing Post (2002). The lads' actions - a sit-down protest of around 200 on the race course - were represented as the 'worst aspects' of trade unionism but the actions of all protagonists must be examined to find the truth of these assertions. There is ample contemporary evidence that race goers indulged in mob behaviour, incited by the actions of and exhortations of jockeys such as Willie Carson and Lester Piggott, Piggott in particular leading a jockeys' charge on horseback against the lads, an action for which he narrowly avoided police prosecution. Stewards, trainers and owners, according to the Sporting Life (1975c)

Led 300 angry punters into battle against the 100 pickets...One Jockey Club steward was seen waving his heavy binoculars in the air as he charged among the stable lads...Several stable lads were...thrown over the rails...while others were chased across the heath by spectators in a running battle lasting several minutes.

Lads were accused of violence and 20 were arrested and charged with breaching the peace, taken to court and fined £20 each (The Guardian 1975). No legal action was taken against those members of the racing public who had apparently acted spontaneously - because 'the lads were trespassing on private land' according to a former senior steward of the Jockey Club - and punters were thus justified in their actions (ibid).

The strike continued through May, June and July, with the Royal meeting at Ascot being picketed by lads and blacked by brewery drivers and by broadcasting staff but there was no repetition of the struggle on 2 May at Newmarket. Throughout that time the TGWU continued to try to press the Newmarket Trainers Federation to go to

arbitration to no avail. Questions were also raised in the House of Commons about ways to bring about an early end to the dispute and the cost of policing (Hansard 1975a-f) but bodies such as the Jockey Club seemed to be content to sit on the sidelines. They were condemned by Jack Logan in the *Sporting Life* (1975c) as were the Levy Board. Logan believed that the Club should use its regulatory powers to enforce a minimum wage as part of its licensing authority over trainers which is a significant power, since the Jockey Club has sole ability to grant or revoke a trainer's licence under the Rules of Racing, a fact which is treated seriously by all.

At the beginning of July, talks resumed between the TGWU and the Newmarket Federation, under the auspices of ACAS, but despite a six-hour meeting the two sides failed to reach a settlement. A further long meeting on 13 July resulted in a basis for agreement that the TGWU recommended to its members, not least because it came very close to meeting their original claim. The formula was to include a minimum consolidated wage; maintenance of differentials; reinstatement of sacked strikers; and a return to work on 18 July.

Throughout the strike, employers and their influential allies in the racing press, played hard for the hearts and minds of their employees. There is no doubt that the strike was not strongly supported numerically, even within Newmarket, where TGWU records show that 189 lads were out on strike (TGWU 1975b), although it did attract sympathy action from lorry drivers and broadcasting staff. Employers regularly claimed that the strike would be a disaster for Newmarket, effectively pricing trainers out of the market, thus conflating the immediate effects of the strike with a possible outcome of increased wages. John Oaksey (Baronet), a prominent journalist writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* and in the *Horse and Hound*, is recorded as denigrating strikers and praising unions members who remained at work during the January 1975 action (Jack Logan 1975d). Oaksey was shortly to become a founder of the SLA and remains a trustee of that

organisation to this day, together with Jimmy Hill⁵, also a prime mover in creating the Association⁶.

The strike ended after the intervention of a number of industry bodies, most notably the Horserace Betting Levy Board (Filby 1987; Hansard 1975a-f) which offered the substantial inducement of £1 million of new investment in the industry if the employers would take action to reach agreement and end the strike. The final agreement, which met the original wage claim, included the establishment of the National Joint Council for Stable Staff (NJCSS) which now forms part of the Rules of Racing (Filby 1983; NTF 2000; Jockey Club 2002) with the force of disciplinary sanctions if breached. It also included a no victimisation clause to prevent the sacking of strikers and to ensure their future employment in the industry.

A small-scale strike, by a workforce normally invisible to the race going public, assumed immense proportions for the industry and had a major, unintended and lasting impact on the future conduct of employment relations. It prompted questions in Parliament, a spirited debate in the racing press on the exploitation of workers and was represented by some as the work of political agitators. It was a Webbsian ‘trial of strength’ (1897) which resulted in a 19% pay increase. However, the employers went on to win the war for the hearts and minds of their labour force, at least as far as continuing support for the TGWU was concerned.

The impact of the Blackwell report on racing manpower: A backlash?

The 1975 strike was judged by Eaton (1976) as a classic example of relative deprivation. There is no doubt that the lads’ claim involved comparability and the ‘going rate’. However, a primary discovery from contemporary newspaper records is that arguments against an independent trade union to represent stable workers were

⁵ By 1975 Jimmy Hill was a sports journalist but had been a professional footballer. He was also a former President of the Professional Footballers Association

⁶ An attempt was made to interview the main protagonists in the creation of the SLA, including Jimmy Hill, but all declined to participate

already gaining strength, even before the strike was mooted. In 1974 the publication of the Blackwell report on manpower (*sic*) in the horse racing industry (Joint Racing Board 1974) laid the foundations on which the settlement of a local pay dispute was able to put an end to 40 years of union recognition and collective bargaining. The report in particular recommended (1974:48, paragraph 169) that:

The long-term interests of stable employees will be best served by the formation of a well organised Association which is able to negotiate nationally with the National Trainers' Federation on pay and conditions.

In the body of the report, the Committee recorded a lack of enthusiasm and support for the TGWU amongst stable staff across the UK, and cast doubt on the degree to which the TGWU was interested in recruiting new members. They went on to say (*ibid*:9) that 'every effort should be made and financial help given to get [the new association] underway as soon as possible'. They further recommended that a committee should be set up to work out how national bargaining machinery should be achieved.

The Blackwell report thus formed an important backdrop to the events that unfolded as the strike drew to a close, most notably the establishment of a staff association in direct challenge to the TGWU. The report was prepared under the leadership of Tom Blackwell, then Senior Steward of the Jockey Club, the highest office it is possible to hold in the Club. It did not only examine the employment of stable lads but considered the wide variety of occupations that exist throughout the industry. The *Sporting Life* reports in February (1975d:3) that 'The Blackwell Committee's recommendations on a body to represent stable staff did not go down well with the Transport and General Workers Union'. It goes on to report the TGWU National Organiser, Moss Evans⁷, rebuke (*ibid*) that:

To do the job correctly you must have a bona fide trade union organisation with all the facilities to provide an adequate service to stable staff.

⁷ TGWU General Secretary 1978-1985

However, Blackwell does make a telling point, which was never taken up in subsequent developments, namely, that such an organisation must be well organised and well resourced.⁸

The employers' response in 1975 was that it was for the lads to decide who should represent them but their representative did go on to remark that the TGWU was possibly too large and remote from stable lads who were more akin to agricultural workers, arguments which were to be used against the TGWU as the 1975 strike unfolded. A revealing statement from a related group of workers, stud workers, over their own association was that 'We are not a union. In my opinion stud workers do not need one; animals and unions do not mix' (Sporting Life 1975d:3). Again, sentiments which were adroitly used once the employers decided that the TGWU was no longer welcome.

Jack Logan, a champion of the stable lads' cause in the Sporting Life (Logan 1975e:5), commented in January that Jockey Club officials (providing racecourse stewarding and security) might be contemplating their own union and that:

The Blackwell wing would have been happier if this 'union' had been formed out of the Head Lads' Association on the lines thought fit for stablemen, in preference to the TGWU.

The evidence suggests that there were already moves afoot to destabilise existing industrial relations arrangements. The significance of this report is borne out by the fact that there was the first ever conference of all interest groups, including the T&G, in February 1975 to discuss the Blackwell report, including the management of labour (Sporting Life 1975e).

The influence of industry commentators cannot be accurately measured at this distance in time but the role of a number of influential figures cannot be discounted. For example, John Oaksey was one of the leading figures promoting the SLA; he was a

⁸ The SLA was only put on a firm financial footing in 2001 and then once more to head off the possibility of union intrusion (interview with SLA National Secretary, Phase D)

former amateur National Hunt jockey and owner and breeder of racehorses, thus well known at many levels in the industry (Oaksey 2003). On the one hand, he is recorded as supporting the need for more prize money to reach the pockets of stable lads – not, it must be noted higher wages but variable pay dependent on the number of winners at any given stables (Logan 1975f). On the other hand, writing in the pages of the Horse and Hound, he roundly condemns the notion of industrial democracy represented by a suggestion that the lads’ union should have an equal voice to that of the Jockey Club at industry meetings.

The propaganda war and its impact on the outcome of the strike

As Beynon states (1975:243) ‘The modern epics are written in newsprint’. This is no less true for stable lads than for Ford workers. While it is difficult to estimate at a distance of nearly thirty years the exact impact of media reporting, it is fair to say, based on the author’s more recent research in Phase A (Winters 2000) that stable workers are avid readers of the industry paper, now the Racing Post since the demise of the Sporting Life, and of the racing press more generally. In 1975 the Sporting Life was still running a weekly commentary on racing issues, authored by Jack Logan who demonstrated his support for the lads throughout the strike. Logan was deeply critical of the employers’ stance on the TGWU wage claim and on their failure to modernise their attitudes to the reality of 1970s labour relations. He also called (Logan 1975g) the Jockey Club to account for failing to shoulder their responsibility for the poor state of industrial relations in the industry, pointing out that the strike was not just about wages but:

The unfairness of a situation in which the rulers of the Turf [the Jockey Club] pass the main buck of welfare and wages to individual trainers....It is about the Turf’s failure to treat labour as an estate of its realm.

Once the strike got under way, it became front-page news in the Sporting Life and also received prominent coverage in the national press but the commentary here was less than supportive of the workers’ case, most notably in the Times and the Telegraph. As

the dispute continued, John Oaksey writing a weekly column in the Sunday Telegraph lost no opportunity to denigrate the strikers and to praise those ‘loyal workers’ who did not strike or who returned to work. He then turned his attention to the labour relations proposals in the Blackwell report, particularly the theme of a union for stable lads which would truly represent ‘the interests of all British stable employees and give them an audible voice in the difficult years ahead’ (Oaksey 1975:25).

Logan (1975h) continued to oppose the formation of such an association, pointing out that an association of stable lads:

Would have little or no experience in negotiating stablemen’s wages and none of the back up services which negotiators need.

It will be shown in the next section that the propaganda war was a success, although it will subsequently become apparent that Logan’s predictions have turned out to be correct. The SLA has not shown itself to be an effective alternative to an independent trade union.

The outcome of the strike

The strike had a number of important outcomes, some at an individual level and others affecting the future of collective representation and collective bargaining. In the immediate aftermath the employers were in the ascendancy – the ‘no victimisation’ clause was ignored; striking workers were sacked; unfair dismissal actions were largely unsuccessful and strikers were blacked (Filby 1983). No apparent action was taken by the TGWU in support of these workers. However, the National Joint Council for Stable Staffs (NJCSS) was established in 1975 as a direct result of the 1975 strike. As Bain has observed (1999:22), ‘Industrial relations in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s was characterised by the collective power of the trade unions’ providing the context explaining the employers’ willingness to accept the NJCSS and SLA in face of the express power of the TGWU. As Respondent D4 recalled:

The NTF refused to deal with the TGWU and they ignored the pay claim they put in under the NJCSS. But they said they would deal with the SLA.

There were therefore important external influences on the creation of and immediate maintenance of the bargaining machinery. However, there is a gap in our understanding of the development of the national bargaining machinery and the reasons why the NTF retained the machinery, despite showing some recent⁹ inclination to scrap the collective agreement and return to the pre-1975 situation. After all, the national agreement serves as a minimum agreement and research conducted in Phase B (LPC 2001) revealed that many trainers pay above the minimum, some significantly so, in order to respond to labour market pressures. Moreover, there is an equivalent gap in our understanding of the development and operation of the Stable Lads' Association, although the Racing Post has recently turned its attention to the SLA in the light of dissension amongst Newmarket members about the seeming lack of activity on the part of its then National Secretary (Racing Post 2006). The next section considers the development of the SLA and how it operates in the current day.

The Stable Lads' Association

In the immediate aftermath of the dispute, Eaton (1976) predicted (correctly) that the TGWU could have difficulties in maintaining its organisation of this group of workers. He also observed that one immediate outcome of the strike was the establishment of the Stable Lads Association (SLA) in September 1975, but he could not be in a position to give a detailed account of events thereafter, the nature of the SLA or its ability to represent its members. The Blackwell report was undoubtedly influential in the creation of the SLA but other events along the way, including the strike, made their contribution. On 14 March (Sporting Life 1975g) the Sporting Life reported that a Stable Lads' Action group had been established, whose aim was to act as a pressure group to bring more investment into racing, holding an inaugural meeting in March 1975, attended by

⁹ Interview with Chief Executive of NTF September 2000

100 lads and three trainers' representatives, which agreed to send 50 strong delegation to Doncaster to demonstrate on the first day of the Flat racing season.

The factors which fed into the creation of the SLA were in some ways parallel to those discussed in the literature on breakaway unions. This area of academic debate was found to be the most sparsely covered, with Lerner (1961) leading the field. Lerner examined the reasons why breakaway unions are formed and pointed to a number of factors that are relevant to examination of a small specialist union. In her view, breakaways generally occur because skilled workers '... believe that their interests had been subverted by the majority of unskilled workers' (ibid:198). In the case of creating a move away from the TGWU, the 'special' nature of the work done by stable lads was first mooted in the Blackwell report and then played on in newspaper reports during the strike. A particular argument was that a large general union like the TGWU was not in a position to understand the work undertaken by stable staff (Oaksey 1975). An apparent issue of principle surrounded the fact that it was in some way inappropriate for stable staff to take strike action, potentially 'harming' the horses in their care. The SLA was created by a consortium of employer agents and could not be regarded as a true breakaway since it has remained under the control of the employers ever since. Thus it was more like the 'yellow unions' which Royle and Ortiz (2009) found had been set up by various employers in Spain to combat the influence of independent trade unions.

The Association was originally funded by a small deduction from staff wages, plus the provision of a car and office equipment by the BHB, very much reflecting Clegg's (1979:386) questioning of the independence of some staff associations, writing:

The Certification Officer issued certificates to a number of 'staff associations' and other bodies which are in competition with affiliated unions.

The SLA was created in response to the 1975 strike by influential figures in racing as already set out above. Its proponents argued that the TGWU 'did not understand' the unique needs of workers in horseracing and that an industry association would be a

more appropriate body to fulfil this role. As already stated above, this view was not unique to the employers and, combined with the sacking of a number of striking lads and their blacking for future employment in the industry, it is hardly surprising that the prospect of such an institution proved persuasive to many workers.

Sam Horncastle, the lads District Officer, stated in August 1975 (The Record:16) that:

Our main objective in the future is to organise other racing areas into the trade union movement and to resist any attempt of the setting up of an association which is not independent but financed by wealthy trainers and race horse owners.

However, the records of the TGWU do not reveal what, if any, organising attempts were. In any event, by 1976 the employers had taken matters into their own hands and surveyed staff attitudes to the union, claiming that the evidence they gathered indicated no support on the part of stable workers, entitling them to effectively derecognise the union in favour of the SLA.

The SLA has continued to exist despite a very low membership and resultant low income but it has received financial support from the industry for a number of years (Winters 2000a). In 2001 it was decided by the British Horseracing Board that the Association should in future be funded by a deduction of 0.01% from total race prize money, releasing an annual income in the region of £100,000 and allowing the SLA to rent office space, employ administrative staff and modernise office systems¹⁰. Membership of the SLA would be automatic for all stable staff, with an opt-out for those who did not want to be members. This improvement in the Association's fortunes has, however, proved to be a poisoned chalice for its National Secretary as it has emerged in the sporting press that his pay has been increased from £15,000 per annum in 2001 to £35,000 in 2003, prompting head lads in a number of yards to call for his resignation on the grounds that they have not seen a commensurate improvement in the SLA's performance (Green 2003b). While this dispute was resolved by withdrawal of

¹⁰ interview with SLA National Secretary, 14 March 2003

the head lads' complaints, it was to prove the first in a series of events which prompted the long-standing National Secretary to resign in 2006.

However, despite the recent improvement in its financial position, research has revealed that the SLA still lacks any kind of Branch structure or network of workplace representatives, a position that has pertained since 1975. Indeed, stable staff interviewed in 2003 showed little inclination to be directly associated with this type of activity, as discussed further in Chapter 7.

Stable and Stud Staff Commission (the Donoughue Commission)

As the National Secretary did not feel able to share information about the Association's detailed work since 1975, there remains a gap in our knowledge for the period 1975-2003. However a further industry-commissioned study has provided some insights and a reflection on Jack Logan's prediction referred to above. In July 2003, in response to a continuing labour shortage, the British Horseracing Board set up a commission of inquiry into staffing issues for stable and stud staff (the Stable and Stud Staff Commission), under the chairmanship of Lord Donoughue, Minister for Farming and Food from 1997-99 and a long-standing participant in racing at a number of levels¹¹. Its terms of reference (BHB 2004:6) were:

To investigate the recruitment, training, employment and career development of stable and stud staff and to make recommendations for the future.

It was the intention that the Commission would maintain an independent stance by drawing its membership from the racing and non-racing worlds and inviting evidence from any interested party. The Commission also conducted a questionnaire survey of stable staff. The Commission did recognise that some employment and management practices lagged behind what would be expected in the modern workplace. Part of the Commission's remit was to examine the effectiveness of bodies such as the SLA and its conclusion (BHB 2004) was that the Association needed to modernise, plan the

¹¹ subsequently referred to as either the Donoughue Commission or the Commission

succession to its then National Secretary and possibly affiliate to the Trades Union Congress. The Commission went on to say (BHB 2004:69) that:

The union, whether a reformed SLA or one linked to another affiliated union, should insist on being offered an appropriate voice within the industry.

It found that the SLA was incapable of doing a proper job, as it was then constituted, being ‘woefully underfunded for too long’ (BHB 2004:68) and having ‘no voice in Race Planning’ (ibid). It needed workplace representatives, a higher profile and adequate staffing. It was ‘insufficiently visible or accessible to its members’ (ibid) and could not ‘be expected to provide the comprehensive service of a proper modern union’ (ibid). With regard to employment relations, therefore, the Commission came to a clear conclusion that the SLA has not proved the effective alternative to the TGWU that it was claimed it would be in 1975. It is not able to determine bargaining policy or provide independent representation in individual employment disputes.

The SLA since Donoghue

The Commission did recommend that the industry should provide financial assistance to help the SLA modernise and in 2005 the services of a former National Secretary of the TGWU, Tim Lyle, were secured to assist the National Secretary with the modernisation process. However, this did not prove to be a happy era in the SLA’s history and ultimately has led to the resignation of the former National Secretary in 2006 and an investigation by the Certification Officer (Certification Officer 2007) into the Association’s finances. This investigation found evidence to suggest financial irregularities that were referred to the police by the SLA in 2007 (ibid). The former National Secretary is being prosecuted (Racing Post 2009) but the court proceedings have not yet been concluded.

Despite these problems, since 2007 the Association has had a new incumbent in the National Secretary post, a former Unison regional organiser, Jim Cornelius. Since starting his job, he has started to modernise the Association as recommended by the

Donoughue Commission (BHB 2004). It has now been renamed the National Association for Stable Staff (NASS), has held an annual delegate conference, has elected a National Committee and Officers, has created a membership website, appointed two regional organisers and started to campaign on a range of issues, such as improving staff facilities at racecourses. It remains to be seen what influence the NASS will have in the future. However, the indications are that NASS are prepared to open their archives for future research.¹²

Employment relations 1975-2000

The National Joint Council for Stable Staff was also set up in 1975. The national agreement between the NTF and the SLA forms part of the Rules of Racing originally enforced by the Jockey Club but now transferred to the British Horseracing Authority¹³ and breaches of the agreement between trainers and their staff can technically lead to disciplinary action by the authorities, although no such incidents appear to have ever been recorded. The interview with the Legal Officer of the NTF¹⁴ revealed that there is no archived material that records meetings of the NJC. In fact she suggested that a better source of information would be the Stable Lads Association. Despite an initial interview with the National Secretary of the SLA¹⁵, access to the Association's records did not prove forthcoming.

The NJC current agreement forms the basis for determining the national minimum rates of pay for stable staff and covers other terms, conditions and procedures. It grants sole recognition and negotiating rights to the SLA, stating that this is because the Association carries 'the greatest confidence of stable staff (measured in membership terms)' (NTF 1997:85). The Agreement also states that 'The NTF recognises that it is to *its* benefit for stable staff to be represented by the SLA' (1997:85 – emphasis added).

¹² Interview with Jim Cornelius, September 2008

¹³ (<http://www.britishhorseracing.com> accessed 16 December 2008)

¹⁴ Interviewed in November 2003

¹⁵ The incumbent who was in office from 1986-2006

While formal procedures are in place in the Memorandum of Agreement between the NTF and the SLA on dispute resolution (NTF 2004), these do not seem to be valued by employers or workers at the local level. If an individual dispute could not be resolved, workers were inclined to vote with their feet and employers were inclined to let them. Again, this is evidence of old habits dying hard reflecting a similar situation recorded by Filby (1983) during his fieldwork in Newmarket racing stables in the late 1970s. The NJCSS symbolises a successful outcome for employers but not for staff. This is not a new situation for racing's workforce – in 1975 it was pointed out that the voice of workers was not heard at national levels, nor was there any mechanism whereby this could be achieved (Logan 1975). While the Bloodstock and Racehorse Industries Confederation (BRIC) was established in October 1974 to be a political pressure group within racing, representatives of the TGWU 'were not appointed as they had not paid their £1 membership fees' (Hill 1988:227).

Few studies of strikes concentrate on their aftermath for employers and workers. In a study of four strikes by teachers in Ontario, Beatty and Gandz (1989) looked at the trajectory between conflict, through accommodation to cooperative employment relations post strike, exploring Kochan's (1980) five propositions regarding change in industrial relations practices. Two Kochan's propositions were confirmed by the thesis. It is clear from this thesis that the 1975 strike had a profound influence on industrial relations and that the first proposition that unions and employers are less likely to change 'unless there are strong external and internal pressures to do so' (Beatty and Gandz 1989:574). The whole Blackwell campaign for a union for stable staff from within the industry combined with the external pressure of the Levy Board to set up national collective bargaining machinery were very effective agents for change.

It is not clear whether both parties believed that it would be in their interest to change (Kochan's second proposition) but the employers certainly did and a weak employee

group was not able to challenge the proposed change. The TGWU did not show any inclination to fight back either, despite saying that they would continue to campaign for stable staff.

It is difficult to reflect on the remaining three propositions as the thesis did not address these. It may be conjectured that without the destabilising effect of the strike on industrial relations in stables and the impact on race meetings, the Blackwell recommendations on the future of industrial relations might never have been implemented. The outcome of the 1975 strike does confirm the need for 'the influence of key individuals in the right place at the right time' (Beatty and Gandz 1989:585), since it was the influence of key industry figures arguing for implementation of the Blackwell recommendations, coupled with the intervention of the Levy Board, which had a marked effect on the longer term outcome of the strike.

It would enlarge our knowledge still further if there was an account of the effect of the strike on employment relations in individual racing stables. Only one worker was interviewed who had taken strike action in 1975 and he hinted that he was one of the 30 or so workers who lost their job, despite a no victimisation clause in the return to work agreement. A second respondent held that employment relations should have been 'sorted out' in 1975 and commented that the racing industry was effectively still located in the nineteenth century as far as these matters were concerned. Richardson and Wood (1989) discuss the impact of the 1984 miners' strike on productivity and find that colliery managers used the strike to effect changes to industrial relations policy and practice, taking the opportunity to reassert management prerogative. They further report (ibid:51) that NUM members found that custom and practice, especially timekeeping and absenteeism, was solidly under attack. However, they also found that there was 'no frontal assault on the formal institutions of collective bargaining and representation at the workplace level'. The NUM was still recognised, still had 100%

membership, although some facilities had been withdrawn from local officials. In racing, weak union support and the strike were used to fight off the TGWU and to completely withdraw into an employer-dominated staff association.

This chapter has considered the development of employment relations in racing stables but the subject would benefit from further research since the development, or otherwise, of collective bargaining from 1975 to the present day. It is a further gap in our knowledge about the history of employment relations from the end of the strike in 1975.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the development of employee voice through trade union representation in the years from 1930-1975 and found that part of this group of small firms workers proved capable of mobilising around workplace grievances to the point of taking industrial action in Newmarket in 1975. Stable staff, despite being employed by a large number of small organisations, have shown solidarity and taken collective industrial action over wage demands. Unfortunately for the workers, the result has been national collective bargaining machinery, and a staff representative body, which do not appear to deliver successful pay bargaining outcomes for stable staff.

Newmarket was (and still is) a 'racing town' where the main concentration of union members was to be found, although there were weaker concentrations in other racing centres such as Lambourn. However, union membership was small across the whole population of stable staff and the strike came at a time when the future of union representation was under discussion at industry level where an industry-specific staff association was first mooted in the Blackwell report. Prominent industry figures seized this opportunity to campaign vigorously in the racing press for the abandonment of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), although the Racing Post coverage was generally on the side of the strikers and against a weak staff association.

The strike was a pivotal moment in the development of industrial relations and allowed considerable doubt to creep into the minds of stable staff with regard to continuing support for the TGWU, not least because the strike resulted in the sacking and victimisation of striking workers. It did not prove difficult, therefore, for an outcome of the strike to be the creation of an industry-based staff association, the Stable Lads' Association, which workers had been convinced was a 'better' alternative to a general and militant trade union. A subsequent and more recent industry report on staffing issues, the Donoughue Commission, has concluded that the SLA is inadequate and must be modernised and some work has already been done to achieve this. At the time of the current research the outcome of this modernisation process was not clear. Nor did it prove possible for the National Secretary of the SLA to share information about the work of the Association in the intervening years since the strike. This remains a gap which needs to be addressed by future research.

A further outcome of the strike, indeed one which was insisted on by the State as part of the settlement, was the creation of national collective machinery, the National Joint Council for Stable Staff. However, because of a lack of available data it has not proved possible to follow the development and work of this body; again there is a gap which could usefully be returned to in future research.

This chapter has formed the historical background the labour process in modern racing stables, and has started to give some insight into worker voice and mobilisation which will be returned to subsequently. However, it is now important to examine the features of the labour process in the current day and Chapter 5 now turns to discuss the detailed labour process in racing stables, taking forward the issues raised by staff during the fieldwork in Phases A and E.

