

## CHAPTER 7

### WORKERS IN THE RACING LABOUR PROCESS

#### Introduction

Resistance is often characterised by small employers as a failing of moral character (Scott et al 1989). It has traditionally been presented in the wider labour process literature as a response to management control (Braverman 1974; Friedman 1977; Edwards 1979; Callaghan and Thompson 2001) but not as the starting point for analysis (Rosenthal 2004). More recently its absence from accounts of the labour process has been remarked (Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997; Kelly 1998; Spencer 2000) and it must be noted that, in the main, research on control and resistance is reported from the world of the large firm. Far less attention has been paid to worker strategies of resistance in the small firms sector, and those studies that do consider workers issues such as Ram (1991) and Moule (1998) are clearly not very recent.

It was established in Chapter 4 that stable staff had shown themselves capable of resisting their employers through strike action in 1975. However, it was also shown that their recourse to an independent trade union had been removed once the TGWU was derecognised in favour of the SLA. Nevertheless, this group of workers in small firms had shown it was possible to mobilise and to use voice to influence pay bargaining. In Chapter 5 it was found that workers continue to have grievances about pay, hours, work intensification and status which suggests that they now find it very difficult to mobilise around these issues. Rosenthal (2004:602), from research on service sector work, argues that research is needed which:

Takes more account of *employee experience* of workplace dynamics.

He further contends that control may be a resource for employees in their attempts to display agency. From the analysis of the detailed racing labour process in Chapter 5, it can be seen that there are considerable opportunities for workers to resist their employers' demands. This chapter therefore examines and analyses a key feature of the labour process in small firms, namely worker agency. It discusses the ways in which stable staff experience the labour process, in what ways they are able to resist the demands of capital and in what ways they may (and sometimes do) have control at the point of production. The evidence from racing is that workers identify very closely with the object of their labours, the horse, and that they have a very strong emotional and psychological bond with the horse which affords the employers, racehorse trainers, considerable scope for control. While this inhibits industrial action, it does not prevent acts of resistance, as it will be shown. Evidence of that resistance was apparent from the research and in order to structure the current analysis, worker agency is further divided into the following sections: worker voice; worker exit; mobilisation of workers; informal collectivism; and worker resistance. The chapter reports on worker data gathered across the duration of the research from 2000 to 2004.

### Worker Voice

The small firms' literature is much less extensive, with regard to voice mechanisms, and this has been acknowledged by Ryan (2005). Nevertheless the research allowed workers opportunities to express their views on the use of voice and voice mechanisms. Data on the existing voice mechanism, the Stable Lads' Association (SLA), were gathered in Phases A, D and E and workers expressed their views on its efficacy and their support or otherwise. Data were also gathered on the National Joint Council for Stable Staff (NJCSS), to which the SLA is party and in which it is expected to represent worker interests. As it will be seen below, workers in racing stables are more likely to

have recourse to informal voice by direct contact with their trainer than turn to the SLA/NJCSS for assistance.

Stable staff have at periods expressed voice through a trade union – with industrial disputes in 1938, 1953, 1960 and 1975 (Filby 1973) and through collective bargaining in Newmarket until 1975. However, as Respondent A34<sup>1</sup> related:

In 1975 I went on strike for more pay and better hours. I went on strike but I was sacked.

And this outcome continued to reverberate amongst stable staff where there was still belief that unions did nothing other than go on strike. As Respondents E14<sup>2</sup> and E19<sup>3</sup> said:

I wouldn't join a union because I can't go out on strike, the horse is of paramount importance.

I wouldn't join a trade union, all they do is strike.

Nor do they seem to want to seek voice through an independent trade union as Respondents A25<sup>4</sup> and E5<sup>5</sup> revealed:

I would join a union – but it would have to prove itself first.

I would join a union if it would help with staffing issues but I'm not really very aware of what unions do.

These comments reflect the findings of Scott et al (1989) that worker attitudes in non-union firms often surround a belief that unions are not relevant to individuals or to that particular workplace.

Respondents E2<sup>6</sup> and E15<sup>7</sup> said that they would only join a union if their trainer agreed while Respondent E35<sup>8</sup> said:

Joining a union – you'd be regarded as a traitor.

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<sup>1</sup> Stable lad interviewed in Newmarket in May 2000

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed at Taunton January 2004;

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>4</sup> Head Lass interviewed in Newmarket July 2000

<sup>5</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Cheltenham December 2003

<sup>6</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Warwick October 2003

<sup>7</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>8</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Goodwood May 2004

This reflects Scott et al's (1989:42) further finding that workers pressing for union recognition are regarded as 'troublemakers' by small proprietors.

A further specific aspect of stable staff employment was revealed in Chapter 5 (Figure 5.2) and this is the relatively youthful nature of the labour force in racing stables. It is only those in the 51+ years of age bracket who might have been employed at the time of the 1975 strike and also have some recollection of the TGWU's activities in representing stable staff working in Newmarket. The majority of staff are in the 20-49 age range, which means that many have grown up in the anti-union era post 1980 and, working in the conservative environment of racing with an ineffective staff association, will have experienced no challenge to the status quo. Waddington (2002) found that union density amongst workers between the ages of 20 and 24 had declined to 19% in 1999. His research refers to the 'Thatcher' effect of growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, which had impacted negatively on the propensity of young people to unionise and had encouraged more individualistic behaviours. He also points to problem of unionising small workplaces. However, he goes on to explore reasons such as lack of a union presence in the workplace, which is also the case in racing with a weak SLA having no shop steward structure, no newsletter or other written communications and no access to notice boards in the workplace.

There is another potential problem and that is the finding by Scott et al (1989), and also MacMahon (1996), that trade unions often find small firms a non-viable recruiting ground, preferring to put their efforts into sectors where their membership was already concentrated – generally in large organisations. While the Donoghue Commission (BHB 2004) firmly recommended that either the SLA 'modernised' or that it should be supplanted by an independent trade union, 'including the TGWU', it is not clear what the outcome would have been if the latter path had been followed.

### Voice mechanism

At the industry level, the Stable Lads' Association has been regarded as the formal mechanism through which workers may express their collective voice since 1975. The SLA was funded 'mainly from members subscriptions, with occasional donations from the Tote' (Certification Officer 2007:2) from 1975 to the mid-1990s. In Phase A, when the staff questionnaire was administered, there was a nominal membership fee of 50p per week but it was unclear whether and how this was collected.

It was then run with financial support from the industry from 1994, when 'the BHB agreed to make certain payments...for the purposes of assisting the Stable Lads Association in its welfare work' (ibid). In 2001, the BHB amended the Rules of Racing with regard to the distribution of prize money, to allow the SLA to receive 0.15% of prize money. The Certification Officer<sup>9</sup> has concluded that this does not compromise the SLA's independence from the employer. It is hard to see how this can be the case since the BHA withdrew funding for a time in 2007 (Racing Post March 2007) when it formed the view that the organisation was 'not fit for purpose'. On some levels, therefore, the SLA therefore meets Bryson et al's (2006) test of a formal voice mechanism but, as it will be seen from the discussion below, it is a voice mechanism which is more akin to the 'hollow shell' defined by Dundon et al (2005).

The SLA can also be tested against Blackburn's (1967:18) concept of 'unionateness'. Blackburn lists seven criteria against which a union's degree of 'unionateness' can be tested and these are:

- (i) Collective bargaining and protection of members as the main function.
- (ii) Independent of the employers.
- (iii) Prepared to be militant.
- (iv) Declares itself to be a trade union.

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<sup>9</sup> A statutory post responsible for the regulation of union affairs in the United Kingdom

- (v) Registered as a trade union.
- (vi) Affiliated to the TUC
- (vii) Affiliated to the Labour Party

It is clear that while the SLA might claim to meet criteria (i) and (v), it has serious problems with (ii), has never demonstrated (iii), does not claim to be (iv) and holds no affiliations to bodies such as the TUC or the Labour Party. While Bain et al (1973:79-107) take issue with Blackburn's concepts and declare that their application does not provide an accurate or unambiguous measure of class consciousness, it is clear here at least that the SLA could never claim to be a union.

The National Secretary ran the Association 'from my spare room'<sup>10</sup> between 1983 and 2002. Since being in receipt of a percentage of winnings, SLA has been able to establish an office in Derbyshire and employ some additional staff. The National Secretary's activities mainly involved giving telephone advice not only to members but also to employers. Respondent D4<sup>11</sup> commented:

The National Secretary is very good at giving employment law advice, including to trainers.

This respondent had also been a key figure in negotiations with the SLA through the National Joint Council, and he commented thus:

The NTF has taken advantage of the SLA over the years. They could have done better for their members but if they don't push, the NTF won't move.

SLA activities also include the annual pay 'negotiation', and sometimes assisting members with Employment Tribunal cases. However, it was said by Respondent D3<sup>12</sup> that pay negotiations often took place 'in a Little Chef on the A1'.

The SLA had no workplace representatives and there is no evidence of formal industrial relations operating in the stables. Respondents displayed an aversion to being

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<sup>10</sup> Respondent D2 interviewed at the SLA offices in March 2003

<sup>11</sup> NTF Council member interviewed in October 2003

<sup>12</sup> Former Chief Executive of the NTF interviewed in September 2003

associated with SLA activity at the workplace level, seeing that this would do nothing for their employability. Respondent E34<sup>13</sup> said that:

People who have been active in the SLA have found their career chances blighted.

Although the SLA had a national council, in practice this never met, there was no annual general meeting and the National Secretary<sup>14</sup> rarely ventured into training stables:

As I wouldn't be welcome in many places, been refused entry before now by the trainer.

This was borne out by Respondent A13<sup>15</sup>:

Jack Berry [trainer] chased the union rep off his yard. He should have been reported to the Jockey Club by the union. (Interview 1M)

According to its National Secretary, all stable staff are deemed to be members but Respondents A15<sup>16</sup>, A16<sup>17</sup>, A31<sup>18</sup>, A41<sup>19</sup> and A64<sup>20</sup>, five younger respondents, said that they were not SLA members. Respondents A19<sup>21</sup>, A23<sup>22</sup> and A29<sup>23</sup> said that they had never heard of the SLA or from the SLA, while Respondent A24<sup>24</sup> said that she thought 'everyone is in the SLA – it goes through the NTF'.

However, Table 7.1 shows that the majority of respondents to the questionnaire in 2000 were equally clear that they were not members.

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<sup>13</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Goodwood May 2004

<sup>14</sup> Interviewed in March 2003

<sup>15</sup> Trainer interviewed in Tamworth June 2000

<sup>16</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>17</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>18</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>19</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Arundel May 2000

<sup>20</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Rugeley May 2000

<sup>21</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>22</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>23</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>24</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Newmarket July 2000

Table 7.1  
SLA membership

	Yes	No	Used to be	Don't know	Total
Male	4	8	3	2	17
Female	3	7	0	0	10
Total	7	15	3	2	27

Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

Respondent A18<sup>25</sup>, a longer-serving stable lad said:

The SLA is a union which belongs to the racing industry, ie not independent. I've never seen a rep. There's never been a lads meeting in Newmarket. We've never met Bill Adams, Secretary of the SLA.

Respondent A20<sup>26</sup> held the opinion that:

The SLA is "crap". I would join a union but it would have to prove itself first.

Respondent A24<sup>27</sup> (another long-serving head lad) also in Newmarket said that:

The older guys are in but the SLA has never made contact with the girls.

Respondent A44<sup>28</sup> (an older and longer serving head lad) made the following comment:

I've been a member in the past and I'm trying to rejoin but I cannot get an answer out of the SLA.

Respondents also perceived the need for the SLA to be a more visible presence.

Respondent A27<sup>29</sup> said that:

The SLA need to send out more information. Never see them, never hear from them. Need to have recruitment drive. With 80-90% membership SLA would negotiate from a position of strength.

The need for the SLA to grow in size and become visible in that was also commented on by Respondents A30<sup>30</sup> who said that 'The SLA needs to recruit' and A31<sup>31</sup> who remarked that he had 'never seen them recruiting, an advert would help'.

<sup>25</sup> Travelling Head interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>26</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>27</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>28</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Didcot June 2000

<sup>29</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

Some respondents also saw that the SLA needed to be better resourced to do its job properly, as Table 7.2 shows.

Table 7.2  
SLA resources

	The SLA needs more resources to help us			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	15	2	0	17
Female	8	1	1	10
Total	23	3	1	27

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

However, there was a reluctance to make a financial contribution to achieve this, as Table 7.3 shows:

Table 7.3  
Making a financial contribution to the SLA

	I would pay more money to support the SLA			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	3	8	4	15
Female	3	4	3	10
Total	6	12	7	25

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

A clue to this was given by Respondent A27<sup>32</sup> who asked:

Could they not get help from the Jockey Club to get off the ground by eg a recruitment drive or money for full time organisers?

<sup>30</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>31</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>32</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

This is an interesting comment, reflecting an acceptance that the SLA had been supported by the industry in the past and that this should remain the case, rather than greater resources coming from the existing membership.

Respondents in Phase E were equally lacking in positive experiences with the SLA.

Respondent E5<sup>33</sup> said she knew nothing of them:

I was completely unaware of the SLA. I never hear from them but there are clearly issues which could and should be raised through the SLA. Are circulars from the SLA simply binned by the boss? Why don't the SLA write direct to me? I didn't know that I am now automatically a member of the SLA or how to get in touch with them.

She had worked in two stables, in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, while the following comment came from Respondent E16<sup>34</sup> who had worked in stables in Lambourn and Dorset:

The SLA's an unknown quantity, I never have contact with/from them. There's never been an SLA members' meeting in Lambourn in 10 years at least. Racecourses are an information exchange. We get more knowledge here than through the SLA.

Finally, Respondent E28<sup>35</sup> said:

The SLA – not heard of them. Staff tend to look after themselves.

The foregoing reflect Moore and Read's (2006) findings that workers in small firms often do not see the need for trade unions because they have no belief that collective organisation can help. Certainly racing's workers have not become attached to the SLA nor have they sought a viable alternative.

Stable staff interviewed at a number of racecourses were critical at the lack of visible SLA activity:

Lads haven't got time to go looking for the SLA. I've never been approached by the Association. (Respondent E15<sup>36</sup>)

The SLA? A newsletter is needed. (Respondent E21<sup>37</sup>)

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<sup>33</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Cheltenham racecourse December 2003

<sup>34</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>35</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Yarmouth May 2004

<sup>36</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

Particular criticism was directed at the National Secretary:

The SLA? There's no confidence in Bill Adams on the part of staff.  
(Respondent E26<sup>38</sup>)

He's quite good in unfair dismissal cases but useless at anything else.  
(Respondent E31<sup>39</sup>)

Bill Adams is like the cuckoo in Spring, you can hear him but you never see him.  
(Respondent E34<sup>40</sup>)

It must be borne in mind that these comments came at a time when some Head Lads had made a formal complaint about the SLA to the Certification Officer, asserting that it was not being run in conformity with the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, specifically with regard to internal democracy (Racing Post 2004). The complaint was subsequently withdrawn. Nevertheless, the capabilities of the SLA were not an issue confined to a small group of disaffected Head Lads. Table 7.4 reveals the view that workers did not believe that the SLA represented worker interests in the workplace.

Table 7.4  
Does the SLA represent staff

	The SLA represents my interests at work			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	4	5	8	17
Female	1	5	4	10
Total	5	10	12	27

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

Staff comments responses revealed that irrespective of the fact that stable staff were 'deemed' to be members, they did not feel that they were part of the organisation or that

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<sup>37</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Uttoxeter March 2004

<sup>38</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Market Rasen May 2004

<sup>39</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Goodwood May 2004

<sup>40</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Goodwood May 2004

they had a part to play. Moreover, stable staff also seemed to regard the SLA as having the appearance of a representative organisation but the reality of the hollow shell observed by Dundon et al 2005.

The report on stable and stud staff commissioned by the British Horseracing Board in 2003 (BHB 2004:68)<sup>41</sup> sheds some more light on the situation when it says ‘A database of members has recently been established’ (this some 28 years after the SLA was first set up). It acknowledges the contribution which lack of funding has made to the SLA’s poor ability to represent members. In particular, the report records that staff repeatedly referred to the need for effective representation of stable staff and goes on to say ‘it appears that many of the basic functions and services of a modern trade union are not – and within its present structure cannot be – performed by the present SLA’ (ibid). Respondent E14<sup>42</sup> believed that stables representatives were crucial:

A union representative at the yard would sort things out, rather than individuals going to the trainer.

The Donoughue Report does point to the lack of support from staff and the difficulty for unions of organising in small businesses and in rural locations. However, it also points out that the organisation, Racing Welfare<sup>43</sup>, has more prominence than the SLA and is more often turned to by staff in difficulty.

However, some workers were not hostile to better representation, but did not see the SLA as the appropriate organisation:

Better IR machinery is needed but not the SLA. (Respondent A24<sup>44</sup>)

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<sup>41</sup> The Donoughue Report/Commission

<sup>42</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>43</sup> Racing Welfare is a charity, based in Newmarket, and run by a Board of Trustees drawn from the racing industry. Its aims are to support to individuals suffering injury, illness, distress, isolation, financial hardship or other disadvantage. It has a team of regional Welfare Officers based in and around the main racing centres and maintains close links with the British Racing School and Northern Racing College. It also has a number of retirement homes for retired stable staff and offers a small amount of housing to working stable staff

<sup>44</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

Better dialogue between staff and employers – yes but I would not join the SLA because Bill Adams is in trainers’ pocket. An organisation outside of racing needs to fulfil this need. (Respondent A25<sup>45</sup>)

I have had little dealing with the SLA but from what little I know of the representatives, there isn’t one who will stand his ground for us on any aspect which rocks the boat. If you ask them for help on any matter slightly against the system, they will always try to encourage you not to take it any further. I’m afraid they are in league with the trainers, not for us. (Respondent A71)<sup>46</sup>

This is clearly important with regard to the issues of mobilisation discussed below; here at least some respondents were alive to the possibility of collective organisation but were perhaps unclear what commitment it would require from them as members. They were certainly not clear how a better voice mechanism might be achieved.

The Donoghue Commission concluded that stable staff needed to be properly represented, either by a modernized SLA or by an independent trade union (BHB 2004).

They said (ibid:15):

The Stable Lads’ Association is not currently constituted to assist sufficiently in making progress on the staff issues before us. In order to become a modern trade union, capable of adequately representing staff, it should reform its structure and activities.

This in turn led to the engagement of a retired national trade union officer, in 2005, to assist the SLA in modernizing. However, the Commission’s conclusions ultimately led to the resignation of the National Secretary in December 2006. In January 2007, the Certification Officer commenced investigations into the Association’s financial affairs which concluded that there had been financial irregularities which might amount to a criminal offence (Certification Officer 2007) committed by the former National Secretary. The issue is at present sub judice.

Metcalf (2004:31) has argued that ‘The SLA has difficulty in organising effectively in the context of employer hostility, small scattered workplaces and staff who care very much for the welfare of horses’. His comments shed some light on Murray’s (1983)

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<sup>45</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>46</sup> Staff questionnaire respondent

view that small, often rural, firms are too diffuse for meaningful trade union organisation. Yet Tim Lyle, the former TGWU national officer engaged by the SLA to assist its modernisation process, has managed to ensure that race courses take serious notice of what he has to say about poor staff accommodation and facilities and to get SLA notice boards at each course. He has triggered a serious review of staff accommodation (Racing Post 2005). He has seized the opportunity of pushing against the door opened by the Donoughue report (BHB 2004) that concluded that staff conditions are inadequate, not least with regard to employee voice.

It can be seen that there have been three ‘eras’ of voice mechanism in racing stables: the TGWU era lasting until the 1975 strike; the SLA/Bill Adams era from 1975-2006; and the post-SLA/Tim Lyle era, running from 2006-the present. Most of the comments offered above coincide with the period 1975-2006. It has not been possible to consider the post 2006 period in depth, but it is clear that the industry took the Donoughue Commission’s words seriously enough to start a modernisation process in the SLA. However, this also reinforces the fears of stable staff set out above that the SLA is an industry-controlled body which lacks the independence and ability to pursue their interests wholeheartedly and to a successful conclusion.

#### Voice through the NJCSS

The Donoughue Commission (BHB 2004) refers to the lack of SLA voice at national, decision making levels and the current research confirms that stable staff have lacked a voice in any forum that makes decisions about the future development of racing. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Chief Executive of the NTF is a co-opted member of the British Horseracing Board. The National Secretary of the Stable Lads Association enjoys no such position. The Stable Lads’ Association has no voice at the national level, either with the Jockey Club or the BHB. It might be argued that the National Joint Council provides a voice mechanism for workers but it is of course a voice

mediated by the employers who do have an effective national organisation, the National Trainers' Federation, which is regularly consulted on industry matters. The SLA was not consulted on the expansion of Flat racing, or any other national developments in the industry, as Respondent A17<sup>47</sup> revealed:

There was no consultation on the increased Fixture List. First we knew about it was from the Stable Lads Welfare<sup>48</sup>, two days after it was announced in the paper.<sup>49</sup>

As a general response to the issue of consultation, Table 7.5 shows that staff did not believe that they were properly or formally consulted on important matters relating to their terms and conditions.

7.5  
Staff consultation

	I am consulted on changes to pay/conditions			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	5	3	9	17
Female	3	1	6	10
Total	8	4	15	27

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

Respondent A24<sup>50</sup> also commented:

It was in the paper<sup>51</sup> that lads had agreed the pension and Sunday racing – they were not consulted nor did they agree.

As Table 7.6 reveals, staff overwhelmingly believed that they had not been consulted about this major change to the working week.

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<sup>47</sup> Head Lad interviewed in Newmarket June 2000

<sup>48</sup> This respondent was referring to the Racing Welfare charity

<sup>49</sup> This refers to the Racing Post, the industry newspaper

<sup>50</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>51</sup> Racing Post

Table 7.6  
I was consulted about increased racing

	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	2	1	14	17
Female	0	0	10	10
Total	2	1	24	27

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

Nor does it seem that the Stable Lads' Association, recognised for collective bargaining purposes within the National Joint Council, was consulted.

However, workers do have some opportunities to express direct, individual voice and the next section moves to discuss these.

#### Informal voice

If the SLA had proved ineffective at expressing worker voice at any level, how did workers deal with this at the level of the workplace? There was no evidence of formalisation at the workplace level round matters of grievance, for example. Staff interviewed throughout 2004 repeatedly told the author that they dealt with issues direct with their trainer, or his/her nominated deputy on occasion, saving the boss as the line of appeal against an unhelpful decision. On a slightly different tack, Respondent E5<sup>52</sup>, employed at a small Lincolnshire stables, said that she dealt with her boss's wife on most staffing issues but knew that if the trainer wanted to see her 'that means a bollocking'. Staff commented as follows:

We had a meeting with our trainer to air grievances. (Respondent A20<sup>53</sup>)

The boss is willing to listen and try things. (Respondent A46<sup>54</sup>)

<sup>52</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Cheltenham December 2003

<sup>53</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>54</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Lambourn May 2000

The office is approachable over employment issues. Our employer will show flexibility in a personal crisis when you need to take time off. (Respondent A21<sup>55</sup>)

Not one respondent was prepared to involve the Stable Lads' Association, seeing this likely to be more unsuccessful than a direct appeal to the boss. They argued that it was *their* individual relationship that counted here and if the trainer was a 'good boss' then s/he was more likely to see the force of their argument. This suggested that at the level of the stables, the reality was that individual staff were obliged to deal directly with their employer (Dundon and Gollan 2007) for want of any realistic alternative. It seemed from the above that for some staff at least this had proved successful and that where the employer acted positively in response to worker voice, this was likely to persuade workers to stay rather than use exit.

There was another problem with informal voice evidenced in Phase A of the research and particularly reflecting on the secretive nature of racing (Fox 2002). The Head Lad at one yard in the South East became acutely angry with his staff whom he thought were time-wasting - by being interviewed when, as far as he was concerned, they should have been cutting the paddock grass in their lunch period. Similarly, the wife of one trainer was very edgy and intrusive while staff at her husband's yard were being interviewed, chasing them out of the tack room to 'get back to work'. Also in Phase A, Respondent A12<sup>56</sup> expressed the belief that the researcher would be inclined to 'stir up staff' against his interests. Racing's small employers appear keen to keep voices silent.

#### Worker exit

As another way of expressing voice, there is always the option of exit (Hirschman 1970) but that is not an appealing option for stable staff. Despite a continuing labour shortage, pressures on staff time, a long hours and low wage culture, the majority of staff do not seek to improve their situation by working in other industries. Exit is used marginally

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<sup>55</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>56</sup> Trainer interviewed at his stables in Middleham May 2000

to move between employers in racing, but not as a way of influencing industry outcomes, as the following comments reveal:

I was at one yard where we did very long hours, but I left 'cos the boss wouldn't sort out my holiday pay. (Respondent A27<sup>57</sup>)

I earned good money, £220 per week at that yard but the trainer swore at me and I'm not going to be treated like that for any money (Respondent A28<sup>58</sup>)

For Respondent A27, Ryan's (2005) finding that when voice is ignored, workers will choose exit holds true.

However, Respondent A23<sup>59</sup> found herself in the following dilemma:

I swapped my weekends in order to have time off to attend a family function. This was agreed but I've now been told by my Head Lad that if I don't work, I will be sacked.

She did not know whether to stay but she could see no other alternative way of resolving the problem other than to give into her Head Lad's demands. For her it seemed unlikely that she would raise a grievance with her trainer, reflecting Wilkinson et al's (2007) findings that employees in small firms are more likely to use exit over voice and Moore and Read's (2006) finding that voicing grievances represented a threat to the individual worker

Smith (2006:391) argues that 'the threat of exit is used as a form of labour resistance'; in racing, actual exit by moving jobs is used as a form of resistance, rather than the threat of doing so. The actions of Respondents A27 and A28 reflect the fact that this is likely also to be an issue in the small firm, which is generally not unionised in today's employment relations climate (Kersley et al 2004).

In Phase A, questionnaire respondents were asked to consider a series of questions on their future employment in the industry, as this was an issue that had arisen during the initial round of Phase A interviews with stable staff. Table 7.7 presents their response to whether they would remain in the industry. While the data shows that more staff

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<sup>57</sup> Stable Lass interviewed in Newmarket May 2000

<sup>58</sup> Stable Lass interviewed in Newmarket May 2000

<sup>59</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

would stay than go, more than half of the respondents were undecided about their future which suggests that there was at least a question mark in respondents' minds.

Table 7.7  
Future in racing

	I will be in the industry in 5 years' time			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	5	9	3	17
Female	4	6	0	10
Total	9	15	3	27

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

Respondent A23<sup>60</sup> said that she would stay but would like to move to the equine veterinary side of racing and it certainly seemed that staff development (or the lack of it) was a reason to move to another yard. Respondent A24<sup>61</sup> said:

We can only make sideways moves [from this yard] to get wider experience. At some stables staff do everything and thus learn a wider range of skills.

While Respondent A28<sup>62</sup> complained that there was no career progression, only to head lad which, for Respondent A44<sup>63</sup>, meant that:

In the longer term people will go, there's no career ladder. Younger staff will get out if they can, longer serving staff are more stuck.

However, Respondents A51<sup>64</sup> and A52<sup>65</sup> said that they would stay for the foreseeable future as they wanted to move on up the racing ladder. They said that they might move to another yard but had considerable job satisfaction with their current trainer who was successful and had several winners. This was a big incentive to stay, to be in a

<sup>60</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>61</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>62</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>63</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Didcot May 2000

<sup>64</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Thirsk May 2000

<sup>65</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Thirsk May 2000

successful yard, which not only gave access to prize money but meant that workers would get better horses to deal with.

However, there was one set of issues that staff said would materially affect their continuing participation in the industry, namely pay and hours of work. As Table 6.7 reveals, pay remained a unresolved and problematic issue with more staff believing

Table 7.8  
The effect of pay on retention

	I will leave if pay/hours do not improve			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
Male	8	5	4	17
Female	6	3	1	10
Total	14	8	5	27

Source: Source: Staff questionnaire Phase A

they were likely to leave over pay. This was subsequently reflected in the findings of the Donoughue Commission (BHB 2004) where 50% of their respondents said that pay was a likely cause of moving out of the industry.

Later in 2000, towards the end of the Flat racing season, Respondent A23<sup>66</sup> said that:

Everyone is bitter and fed up, our interest is waning and it's becoming just a job.

This was echoed by Respondent A31<sup>67</sup>, saying that:

Racing is a chore now, there's too much of it, it's just a business and no longer fun.

Respondent A24<sup>68</sup> commented that 'a decent wage and time off is the solution', but all the evidence from Phase E was that these problems still persisted. Respondent E10<sup>69</sup> said:

<sup>66</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>67</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>68</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

I won't stay in the industry long term as wages are too low to buy a house, start a family and provide for them. But horse racing is what I want to do.

Smith (2006:391) further argues that workers are now regarded as 'consumers' of workplaces and are encouraged to

Shop around if dissatisfied, rather than stay and improve conditions by organization through unionization, collective bargaining or recourse to law for dispute resolution.

This is applicable to the small firm where workers have lacked the voice mechanism of a trade union, certainly in the most recent past, although Henderson and Johnson (1974) argued that small firms stood to gain from collective bargaining just as much as larger organisations, while Rainnie (1989) argued that it is precisely the workers in small firms who need trade union protection. In Smith's words (2006:393) where the labour process is static it is 'the worker who expresses dynamism by leaving an unsatisfactory workplace'. However, this does not bring change in its wake, as several respondents attested. The quitting employee is seen as a troublemaker by the employer who is pleased to see them go (Scott et al 1989; Smith 2006). There is an additional problem with exit for this group of workers and this is that however many times they leave, they generally return to the industry time and again. As two respondents said:

I started in the industry in 1958 as an apprentice and became a head lad. I got out of the industry because I was raising a family and I was out for 19 years. I had my own business but I hated it. I came back into racing as soon as I could. (Respondent A45<sup>70</sup>)

I got out of racing because I lost a horse. I'd been in 10 years when a schooling accident killed my horse. They're like my children. But I came back in again because I love horses, missed that contact. Missed riding out. I wasn't ready to "hang up my boots". (Respondent E14<sup>71</sup>)

Exit therefore is not a potent threat to employers since they know that staff are generally doing the job because of their love of horses. Cassidy expresses the view (2002:112) that 'The lads' motivation to stay in racing was...essentially the same motivation as that

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<sup>69</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Chepstow January 2004

<sup>70</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Didcot May 2000

<sup>71</sup> Stable Lass interviewed Haydock Park February 2004

of the owner or gambler', ie chasing the elusive dream of the successful, winning horse. As Respondent E33<sup>72</sup> observed, racing life 'is an addiction'. This risk element may be turned to the employer's advantage at low points in the year, eg the middle of winter, by giving a lad an untried yearling which may turn out to be 'the one'. For example, at one yard in Yorkshire in 2000 Respondent A55<sup>73</sup> had exclusive care of the stable's top horse 'Fruits of Love' and had seen this animal develop from a gangly youngster to a racehorse with a string of wins to his name. She clearly gained huge satisfaction from this responsibility which far outweighed the relatively low wages she received, even as a travelling head girl.

While there is a turnover of labour, this is caused largely by staff moving within the UK industry or sometimes to take up work in racing overseas when the opportunity presents itself. For staff in Flat racing stables, this reflects the fact that there is less work to be done during the winter as racing has largely ceased and some trainers will seek to lay off staff as revealed by Respondent E21<sup>74</sup>. Staff go overseas largely to extend their experience, since it is very difficult to make progress up the UK racing structure. Data on rates of pay and the rate at which staff went overseas were not available as this had not been surveyed at industry level.

Of course it is also easier for some staff to move elsewhere than others, given that their skill base is so industry specific. In Phase E, some respondents reported having sought or possessing alternative qualifications, such as the HGV licence held by stable staff who also drive horse lorries<sup>75</sup> or as a skilled engineering worker (Respondent E7<sup>76</sup>), or with the skills to work in construction (Respondent E19)<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Goodwood 14 May 2004

<sup>73</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Middleham stables June 2000

<sup>74</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Uttoxeter March 2004

<sup>75</sup> Interviews at Warwick October 2003; Cheltenham December 2003; Taunton 2004; Goodwood 2004

<sup>76</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Taunton January 2004

<sup>77</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Uttoxeter March 2004

Nevertheless, the range of unresolved grievances does beg the question why workers do not feel encouraged to mobilise in order to pursue their demands. The next section therefore explores issues surrounding potential mobilisation amongst stable staff.

#### Difficulties of Mobilisation

The research has demonstrated that racing's workers have held grievances about pay and hours and the poor state of worker accommodation at UK race courses for a long time (Winters 2000a; BHB 2004) and that these have been added to by problems with a culture of bullying in some stables (BHB 2004). However, these grievances have not been articulated through their Association or through the NJCSS. As constituted over the years 1975-2006, the evidence from the research is that the SLA has proved itself a hollow shell of the type noted by Dundon and Rollinson (2004). However, this still remains as a gap in the research since the SLA was not able to share any material about this period.

Stable staff have nevertheless proved themselves capable of articulating their grievances formally as their responses to three separately commissioned pieces of research have shown – to the Stable Staffs Resources Study Group (BHB 2000); in the Phase A research on working practices in 2000 (Winters 2000a); and to the Donoghue Commission on Stable and Stud Staff (BHB 2004). Each study recognised that there were staff problems to be addressed but the industry has proved resistant to change in terms of taking these matters forward. Grievances were also articulated clearly to the researcher in Phase E. Examples of unresolved problems were pay and long working hours.

However, these grievances are being articulated to a third party, not direct to the employer reflecting Moore and Read's findings (2006) that grievances are rarely articulated at the level of the small firm, being often solved by exit on the part of the worker, rather than a negotiated and mutually satisfactory solution.

Kelly (1998) reminds us that it is not sufficient for workers to have a grievance but also that they blame their employer or managers for the problem. This is a potential stumbling block in racing, since the evidence suggests that stable staff lay the blame at the door of organisations such as the BHB or the Jockey Club. The BHB was blamed for the intensification of working hours in Flat racing:

This is part of Peter Saville's<sup>78</sup> plan to make money out of the industry. (Respondent A17<sup>79</sup>)

Alternatively, blame was placed on racing's supporters and the betting industry which were seen to be demanding more racing:

The BHB, what can they do about it? It's the punters. (Respondent A19<sup>80</sup>)

There was apparently no question of turning this around to say that it is 'our employers who are low payers'; the cause of low pay and the twin issue of long hours were regularly attributed to other sources, showing that workers were internalising the employers' message that the problems of low pay must be attributed to forces external to the stables, similar to the situation found in farming by Newby (1977).

Some other examples were the lack of appreciation of workers' efforts, where it was observed that:

We don't feel appreciated by owners. Owners aren't the ones who sit up all night with a sick horse. (Respondent E14<sup>81</sup>)

and on staff accommodation at racing stables, as one stable lass found:

Staff accommodation at stables can be dire. At one yard three of us got together and tidied up to make it habitable. (Respondent E5<sup>82</sup>)

but she and her colleagues did not take this issue up with their employer. Perhaps the answer to this lay in the following comments:

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<sup>78</sup> Chairman of the BHB in 2000

<sup>79</sup> Head Lad interviewed in Newmarket June 2000

<sup>80</sup> Stable Lad interviewed in Newmarket May 2000

<sup>81</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>82</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Cheltenham December 2003

We don't pursue issues because we would be blacked by our employers.  
(Respondent E12<sup>83</sup>)

We need to be sure of our ground before taking things up with the boss  
(Respondent E21<sup>84</sup>)

Where respondents did give consideration to their own employer's actions, they still tended to absolve them of blame:

There's no quick answer – not every trainer is a millionaire. There's the issue of training fees. (Respondent A20<sup>85</sup>)

We need trainers on our side to improve things. (Respondent A21<sup>86</sup>)

The trainers have just as much a problem as we do, since they're expected to produce horses to fill the race card. (Respondent E23<sup>87</sup>)

Nor did staff seek to enlist their trainer's help with the problem of sub-standard staff accommodation at some of the racecourses they had to attend during work. As with other areas of complaint, there was a tendency to shrug shoulders and accept that this was part of the racing way of life.

Individual stable staff laid the blame for their growing workload at the door of the British Horseracing Board, regarding their direct employer, the trainer, as also being at the mercy of the BHB's race planners. They failed to acknowledge that their employers had an input into race planning via the BHB, while stable staff were not consulted about the possible impact on them of the expansion of Flat racing to a seven-day a week pattern. This attitude reflected Marx's (1977:899-900) observations that:

The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.

There was some individual criticism of the actions of trainers with regard to the use of part time staff who were seen as the 'lucky ones' who came to exercise horses but not to do mucking out and other stable duties. The industry has long relied on part time work

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<sup>83</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Chepstow January 2004

<sup>84</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Uttoxeter March 2004

<sup>85</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>86</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>87</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Hamilton Park April 2004

riders in particular. At the time of the Stable Staff Resources Study Group (BHB 2000:8) it was reported that 27% of trainers were considering separating riding and stable duties in order to address a shortage of experienced and qualified full time staff. This was against a background of an expanding horse population which had increased by 7% from 1992-1999, while full time staff numbers had fallen by 8%. In 2004, the Donoughue Commission (BHB 2004:16) commented that continued use of part time staff was in part a response to the increase in the Racing Calendar since 1999 and in part to give full time staff more time off, suggesting that some part time staff still undertook the full range of stables duties. However, the Commission (ibid:48) also acknowledged that use of part time staff could be a site of :

Tension between staff if more favourable terms are offered to the part timers to encourage their weekend working.

Part time staff therefore were envied for doing what was seen as the most interesting and skilled part of stable staff duties, and for the fact that their pay rates were high. For example:

One trainer brings in part-time just for weekends – so if he can pay them, why not pay existing staff a decent rate? (Respondent A20<sup>88</sup>)

Part-timers, we cannot do without them but they are earning only £30 less than the full time staff. Part timers come in at 6am, ride out two lots and go home. (Respondent A24<sup>89</sup>)

Part timers are a real problem, a source of grievance over pay. (A60<sup>90</sup>)

Here was a problem of pay differentials being eroded which staff did attribute to their employer. This was an issue which arose directly at the level of the stables, the employment of part time staff was in the hands of the trainer and there was some attribution of blame to the employer. However, here as elsewhere, stable staff lack an understanding that they can combine to pursue such issues and, more than that, they lack leadership and organisation.

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<sup>88</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Newmarket May 2000

<sup>89</sup> Travelling Head Lass interviewed at Newmarket July 2000

<sup>90</sup> Head Lad interviewed at Middleham May 2000

Kelly (1998) points out that conflicts of interest between employers and workers do not necessarily lead to conflict behaviour because of the dependence of workers on the employers to hire their labour. As we have seen, there is a considerable problem in racing since these workers want to do nothing other than work with horses and this labour market is virtually the only one which will meet that need. Others, such as eventing or livery stables offer even worse pay rates and employment conditions than racing.

There is no doubt that stable staff met one of Kelly's preconditions, a sense of injustice, and that this was shared. There seemed to be some idea that injustices had a source, the BHB, but not at this stage that their trainer was a direct or the main source of injustice, even though matters of pay, overtime, work allocation, hours, time off, were all dealt with directly at the level of the individual workplace. While staff might complain to each other, and to workers from other stables encountered at race meetings, they had not yet reached the position of being able to identify a sole agency around which would become the 'target for collective organisation and action' (Kelly 1998:29). Indeed, the evidence tended towards Moore and Read's (2006:366) findings that in small firms there was 'no belief that collective organisation could make a difference'. The additional issue in racing is that workers see the needs of the horses they care for, as a prime reason for not joining a union. Nevertheless, workers in other employment where there is a duty of care towards others, for example teaching, fire fighting and nursing, do find it possible to join a union and on occasion are mobilised to take industrial action. For example, Australian nurses were on strike over pay for nearly two months in 1986 (Fox 1990). More recently, fire fighters in Britain took strike action over pay in 2002 (Burchill 2004). The strike was strongly supported – on an 83.5% turn out, 87.6% voted for strike action. Seifert (1984) records a long history of teacher strike action in UK schools, particularly in London. It would appear that stable staff continue to

internalise the message that unions are not ‘appropriate’ in racing stables, a message which was borne out of the 1975 strike and has been disseminated ever since.

There is a further potential problem with mobilisation and that is the age profile of stable staff . Waddington and Kerr (2002) conducted research amongst workers aged 30 and under to find out the reasons why younger workers do or do not join trade unions. Their research is consonant with this thesis in certain respects. In particular it picks up on four points raised by Waddington and Kerr: workplace characteristics; rates of labour turnover; the availability of a union to join; and employee behaviour. In racing, it was found that the two key influences on unionisation in this group of young workers are union availability and employer influence.

With regard to labour turnover, here the thesis challenged Waddington and Kerr’s (2002) findings that young workers often have several jobs in a short space of time, thus reducing the likelihood of unionisation. In racing young workers stay in one sector, in the same or a similar job, working for the same type of employer and often in racing centres where there are large concentrations of stable staff and yet they still do not unionise. Waddington and Kerr (2002) point to the fact that young workers in small workplaces are less likely to be in a union. In racing, while the SLA exists, it is clear that it does not function as a trade union might be expected to, lacking the means or the will to organise recruitment campaigns. Young respondents mainly said that they had never heard of the organisation but did not show deep-rooted opposition to the idea of joining a union. However, it was clear that trainers had a key influence as a number of respondents did say that they would only join a union if their trainer agreed. This lent further support to the fact that ‘the attitudes of employers have a wide-ranging impact on the unionisation of young people’ (ibid:313).

Generally, all respondents showed themselves to be open to the idea of joining a union. Despite the fact that they might be regarded as ‘Thatcher’s children’ and thus to have

rejected trade unionism in favour of a 'commitment to neo-liberal values' (Waddington and Kerr 2002:303), interviews did not reveal this attitude amongst younger stable staff. Lack of union availability was definitely a barrier, because the SLA could not be regarded as a union and because none of the younger stable staff had ever been asked to join a union.

It is clear then that stable staff do have important issues around which mobilisation could be organised but that their current voice mechanism, the SLA, is not capable of achieving this. As it will become apparent from the next section on collectivism, the racecourse staff canteen would be an ideal place for organising and to provide a visible union presence on race days.

#### Informal collectivism

While there is little by way of formal collective organisation, there is nevertheless evidence of a residual collectivism based in the cultural bonds of the racing industry and the informal ways in which workers 'look out for each other' in the stables, at race meetings and outside of work in the various towns, such as Newmarket and Lambourn, on which racing is centred. McBride (2005), in her study of industrial and unionised workplaces in Tyneside, looks at informal workplace collectivism which she argues is at once neglected and important, for workers devise their own strategies of resistance, outside formal union organisation. Work groups show dynamism and workers 'look out for each other'. This is in contrast to the individualisation of resistance which has been discussed in much of the recent literature. She states (ibid:720) that her research:

Suggests that both members and non-members viewed trade unionism favourably, yet very few had a developed sense of how their actions could be further mobilised.

Stephenson and Stewart (2001) argue that a range of 'collectivisms' must be identified so as to avoid the binary divide between individualism and collectivism, which persists in much of the literature. They argue that collectivism may be found both in the

workplace and in workers' relationships with each other outside of the workplace. In Phase 4, four comments particularly referred to this being a reality in racing also:

The staff canteen is a tremendous information exchange. (Respondent E12<sup>91</sup>)

There's a lot of word of mouth recruitment – staff swap notes at race meetings re good/bad trainers and stables. (Respondent E10<sup>92</sup>)

The canteen is an information exchange. (Respondent E22<sup>93</sup>)

We work as a team, we've become protective of each other. We all enjoy seeing staff from other stables at races. Its an information exchange, gossip, who's having an affair etc. (Respondent E12<sup>94</sup>)

Affiliations between staff span the boundaries between individual firms and across other organisational boundaries because staff are required to be highly mobile to the point of travelling literally from one end of the country to another; the author witnessed this at Hamilton Park race course where one Kent trainer had transported three horses, plus stable staff, 460 miles each way, to compete in two races<sup>95</sup>. It is at this level that the author found most expressions of solidarity between workers, being told by Respondent E35<sup>96</sup> that 'we look out for each other, even when we don't work at the same yard' or by Respondent E27<sup>97</sup> 'the craic is good but we need it because of the bloody boss'.

It was possible in Phase E to speak to workers collectively and away from their employers and the research also uncovered the possibility of mobilizing workers around their various grievances. There was also brief evidence of informal collective activity over lack of adequate meals facilities. However, 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.

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<sup>91</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Chepstow January 2004

<sup>92</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Chepstow January 2004

<sup>93</sup> Stable Lad interviewed at Perth April 2004

<sup>94</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Chepstow January 2004

<sup>95</sup> Hamilton Park April 2004

<sup>96</sup> Stable lass interviewed at Goodwood May 2004

<sup>97</sup> Stable lad interviewed at Market Rasen May 2004

### Occupational community

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 subject, the co-location of many racing stables in racing towns and the necessary social bond between workers at race meetings. It is possible therefore to draw an analogy with other traditional occupational communities, such as those found in mining, cotton spinning or steel production. Drawing on his study of Newmarket racing stables, Filby (1987) has stated that stable staff constitute such a community, their working and social lives revolving around the racehorse and racing but rejects a causal link with occupational or class solidarity (1987), favouring the common thread of skill which binds the occupation together. Workers' lives outside work also tended to revolve around horses and racing. In Newmarket, for example, social life was conducted in one of eight pubs in the town or the Astley Club (Scott 1987); this pattern of after-work socialising was reflected in other racing centres and is still the case today. Opportunities to socialise also exist when attending race meetings, since lads are generally accommodated in hostel accommodation and/or have their meals in the staff canteen provided by the racecourses. Stable workers were drawn together in a way that could be analogous with other similar groups, such as miners and steelworkers, whose lives in and outside of work were dominated by the colliery or steelworks.

However, stable workers are employed by hundreds of small employers and have not traditionally cast their employers in the light of the common enemy. Workers in small firms have a greater day-to-day contact with the proprietor/employer and are more likely to identify with that individual. In particular, small firm employers often work alongside their labour force – this is particularly the case in racehorse training. Trainers demonstrate their horse(wo)manship, and expect their workers to do the same; this may be directly reinforced by the trainer riding out to the gallops where the lads are at

morning exercise with the stables' horses. Many of the younger lads in the 1970s also lived adjacent to their employer in some form of tied accommodation and, as discussed above, on site accommodation is still offered for at least some of the industry's younger workers.

This strength to be found in an occupational community has not translated into enduring workplace collectivism in the case of stable staff. Nevertheless, this is an important factor in the future possibility of mobilising and organising workers, since large numbers of workers are concentrated in racing towns and significant numbers of workers come together on a daily basis at race meetings. Although it is inevitably an estimate, drawing on the numbers of stables concentrated in Newmarket, Lambourn and Middleham and the human-horse ratio of 1:3, it is likely that the corresponding concentration of staff will be as follows:

Table 7.9  
Estimated numbers of stable staff in three racing centres

LOCATION	NUMBER OF STABLES	ESTIMATED STAFF NUMBERS
Newmarket	50	786
Lambourn	29	518
Middleham	12	159

Source: Horses in Training 2006

As far as race meetings are concerned, it is difficult to give an accurate number of staff likely to be in attendance but from observation at the various meetings, it is likely to be 20-30 at an ordinary weekly meeting and nearer 100 at a major event such as the National Hunt Festival at Cheltenham. So the occupational community is translated to racecourses as well as the 'home' location of the stables.

It is already clear that there are a significant number of issues around which mobilisation could be structured and from the following section it will be clear that

workers do resist the demands of capital, if only on an individual basis. This again could be drawn on in future mobilisation.

### Opportunities for resistance

Edwards (1982:70) argues that:

The phenomenon which needs to be explained is...the fact that workers do not resist more and that they are prepared to commit their energy to a degree which is acceptable to employers.

A striking example of what he is talking about is the events observed by the author in 2000 when one trainer in the Lambourn area abruptly changed the daily routine to exercise horses in the evening on top of everything else, particularly a staff shortage back at the yard when staff were away racing. This was an entirely new way of working, not observed at any of the other stables visited during the research, or indeed at this one. Those staff who remained were so hard pressed that they could not even take a few moments to speak to the author. Nevertheless, they cooperated with their trainer's new demands, not least because they respected his background as a former stable lad. Respondent A46<sup>98</sup> said:

He's got a point, the horses have had a chance to 'open their lungs' but we're short staffed too.

As already shown in Chapter 5, lads have considerable control over particular stages of the labour process, most notably when exercising racehorses and transporting them to race meetings. The product that they are dealing with at this stage in particular is a perishable one and there is a real sense in which poor or inadequate treatment by workers will materially affect the performance of the individual horse. Respondent E25<sup>99</sup> asserted the view that unless staff gave uninterrupted and consistent care 'The horses become upset and won't race as well'. This view was generally accepted by stable staff but this is a point of control that they do not turn to their advantage as a collective industrial weapon.

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<sup>98</sup> Head lad interviewed at Lambourn July 2000

<sup>99</sup> Travelling head lad interviewed at Hamilton Park April 2000

Roscigno and Hodson (2004:32) argue that workers will display agency on the shopfloor, even in informal situations, in order to 'combat the harshness of their jobs on a day to day basis'. In his research in Newmarket stables, Filby (1983:210) argued that

It should be clear from this account that 'labour' performs essential functions in the transformation of the thoroughbred into a thoroughbred racehorse.

and that poor stable management and/or relationship can mar the horse irrevocably. It is clear therefore that opportunities do exist and several potential forms of resistance were referred to by stable staff respondents; these were fooling around when on horseback; teasing each other; meeting in the racecourse canteen; taking advances of salary then 'disappearing' without repayment; and absenteeism.

In the case of racing, workers generally treat resistance as an individual act and one which may, in extreme situations, necessitate exit, a change of employer, rather than using voice to resolve matters at the immediate workplace level. Hodson (2001) argues that workers, in what he terms 'disorganised' workplaces, are more likely to accommodate the demands of labour than to resist them. By 'disorganised' he means 'poorly run', rather than 'non-union'. By his definition (ibid:295)

Accommodation behaviors are strategies used by workers to minimize their involvement in work without directly challenging the organization of work and without exiting from the organization.

This research suggests that workers in racing are similarly inclined to adopt accommodative behaviours in order to repel an otherwise harsh management regime. These were variously cited as socialising, drinking, betting on horses, and travelling to and from the races. However, these workers do not bear out Hodson's assertion that workers under direct control may be relatively unenthusiastic about their work, while not resisting their employer's demands outright. Experienced lads develop speed in accomplishing tasks, allowing for effort to be conserved and opportunities for 'down time' to be created, very much reflecting Ram's point about labour, even in small, non-unionised firms, resisting the demands of an overbearing employer (Ram 1991).

Cassidy suggests (2002:111) a further, industry specific reason for this, which is that lads:

Fulfil this role with minimal effort thereby implying that a lad could achieve a great deal more, given the opportunity

in order to combat the low status that stable work commands in the racing world.

They do seem to undertake their tasks with some relish but find opportunities to manipulate the rules of their workplace to create small oases away from management control. As already established, the boss cannot be in every stable at each point of the worker's day, nor can the head lad(s). 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 such as trying to pull another worker off balance 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 about which Respondent E16<sup>100</sup> said:

The social side of working life makes it worthwhile – we all had a good night out as we came up from Dorset yesterday. But, there are high rates of drunkenness since staff go and get drunk as often as possible.

A behaviour which was also borne out by Respondent E13<sup>101</sup> who remarked that there was a lot of time spent hanging around at racecourses which was often spent visiting the racecourse bars. All workers use the racecourse canteen to exchange information aimed at avoiding bad bosses wherever possible.

For stable staff, resistance does work in subtle ways as found by McBride (2006) despite the lack of obvious collective organisation. There is dynamism amongst these workers but they find it easier to express when away from their daily workplace, the racing stables. This does again represent a source of strength for a mobilising initiative,

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<sup>100</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>101</sup> Jockey Club Security Officer interviewed at Chepstow January 2004

should the National Association of Stable Staff be able to take this forward. However, what is most unlikely at present is that informal or formal collectivism would lead to outright industrial action. As Herbert recorded (1974:107):

Strikes are almost unknown in racing stables. A knowledge that each captive horse depends for its life on the care of its lad deters any mass walk-out and postpones any general laying-down of tools.

This has ensured little industrial action on the part of stable staff, further evidence of the ideological control referred to above. Though little evidence of concerted resistance was offered by interviewees there was the exception of Respondent E7<sup>102</sup> 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 because the manager had allowed members of the public access to a facility from which they would normally be excluded. Commenting on how this arose he said:

We couldn't believe it, we couldn't even get into the canteen, let alone get food. 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.

Although not specific about the numbers involved in organising the blockade, he estimated that 30 staff (and at least as many horses) were in the queue of lorries, all of whom were expecting to be able to get 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. Along with the 1975 strike in Newmarket (see chapter 4), this is an example of Hodson's (1999:318) assertion that workers will resist, regardless of the system of management control, when 'management fails to respect worker rights'.

With regard to worker resistance, a complex picture starts to emerge which tends to support Ram's findings (1991) that workers in small firms often resort to individual methods of resistance. Individual staff resistance was evidenced by absenteeism,

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<sup>102</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Taunton January 2004

mainly a subject of complaint by staff interviewed, three of whom reported that workmates regularly failed to turn in after a night out<sup>103</sup> and by labour turnover. Respondents E31 and E33<sup>104</sup> reported their experiences of borrowing money from the boss, then leaving the job. A particular example was offered by Respondent E6<sup>105</sup> who had been summarily, and apparently unfairly, dismissed. She did not feel inclined to pursue her case, either through the 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. That she had achieved this was supported by Respondent E13<sup>106, 107</sup>. He approached the author showing some curiosity as to her purpose at Chepstow and at Taunton the day before when he had also been in attendance. During a conversation outside the Chepstow stable yard security barrier, he particularly pointed to the Travelling Head Lass referred to above saying:

You see her, she was sacked by her boss just because he wanted to give someone their old job back. She’s a very good worker, very well respected and she eventually cleared her name, became a head girl again.

This worker’s personal act of resistance bears out Callaghan and Thompson’s (2001) finding that sometimes workers resist through being ultra efficient and also Rosenthal’s (2004) suggestion that in some cases workers are able to use management controls as a form of resistance.

Callaghan and Thompson (2001) remark on the isolated nature of call centre work which pushed workers to resist as individual workers. Nevertheless, there was evidence of employee resistance that was not always individual. Collective responses may be found in other behaviours such as socialising between workers, regaling each other with

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<sup>103</sup> Interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004

<sup>104</sup> Interviewed at Goodwood May 2004

<sup>105</sup> Travelling Head lass interviewed at Taunton January 2004

<sup>106</sup> Member of Jockey Club Security interviewed at Chepstow, January 2004

<sup>107</sup> Member of Jockey Club Security, second interview at Goodwood, May 2004

tales and this was borne out by several respondents<sup>108</sup> who particularly remarked on the support they derived from travelling to race meetings together, away from the scrutiny of the trainer. Among the 43 staff interviewed, 15 men and 10 women (all stable staff) remarked on the importance of meeting staff from other stables across the country and how much support they derived from sharing experiences and the opportunity to compare workplace experiences.

All respondents in Phase A and Phase E were consistent in their experience that a great deal of emotional blackmail was used on individual workers with the effect of atomising workers at the level of the stables. Respondent A23<sup>109</sup> had been told that she would be sacked if she took a pre-arranged day off when 'her' horse was going racing. Respondent A59<sup>110</sup> was told that 'her' horse, an exceptionally successful Flat racing animal, would be taken away from her if she didn't obey the trainer's instructions to the letter. In Phase E, the research confirmed that workers were inculcated with the notion that each horse they dealt with was 'their' horse, Respondent E19<sup>111</sup> stating that he could put up with poor working conditions 'so long as my horses are ok'. It was very clear that working at the stables enabled the expression of some group or collective identity, but that this could only be initiated more strongly away from that workplace. Work 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 employment relations perspective, to informally pool knowledge about good and bad workplaces and bosses.

It has been noted elsewhere (Ram 1991) that employment relations in small firms is complex and contested, not conforming to the dichotomy of small is beautiful/small is exploitation. However, it is also known that the voice of workers is often absent from

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<sup>108</sup> Interviewed at Haydock Park February 2004, Goodwood May 2004

<sup>109</sup> Stable Lass interviewed at Newmarket June 2000

<sup>110</sup> Stable lass interviewed at Middleham June 2000

<sup>111</sup> Travelling Head Lad interviewed at Uttoxeter March 2004

accounts of working life in the small firm (Scase 1995; Marlow and Patten 2002). Our research reveals that workers do combine together, at least at an informal level, and that this is felt by them to be both necessary and beneficial.

However, the evidence of a bullying culture revealed by the Donoughue report does beg the question with regard to lack of mobilisation on the part of stable staff. One line of argument might be that as employees of small and very small firms, they do not see the need to join a union or make the SLA a credible representative body since the individual employment relationship does enough to resolve their individual grievances. This would not appear to be the case, taking the results of the author's fieldwork, confirmed by the Commission's findings (BHB 2004:68) that:

The need for proper representation of stable staff has been repeatedly emphasised to us during our investigations.

The Commission conducted three focus group interviews with staff, one in Lambourn, one in Middleham and one in Newmarket, the three leading racing centres in the UK.

### Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the position of stable staff in the racing labour process, a position which is apparently one of subordination and domination by the employer. As noted before, this is a labour process which embodies working practices which have hardly changed in the history of racing and one which brings workers into daily direct contact with their employer. However, it was acknowledged in this chapter that the voice and experiences of workers in small firms is often neglected in the literature; this chapter starts to redress that balance. Specifically the chapter examined worker voice, worker exit, mobilisation of workers, informal collectivism amongst workers, opportunities for resistance and identified the fact that stable staff are an occupational community which may in itself provide further opportunities for mobilisation and resistance.

With regard to worker voice, it is known that stable staff have had union representation in the past but current workers are not convinced that a union would be appropriate or helpful in the horse-dominated world of racing stables. Since many workers have only joined the industry since the onset of union decline in the UK, there is a lack of understanding of what a union could do to further their interests. There is the Stable Lads' Association which is deemed by the industry to represent stable staff and to be able to voice their grievances and resolve these. However, the SLA is a weak organisation which is not financially independent of the industry, has no network of workplace representatives and no real means of holding a dialogue with its 'members'. Nor does it receive strong support from stable staff who either claimed to know nothing about the organisation or said that they had no belief in its capability to represent them. However, there had been some attempts to modernise the organisation, following a review of staffing issues in 2003, although it was not yet clear how successful these would be in improving the voice mechanism

A corollary of this position was the fact that stable staff lacked a formal voice at industry level, despite the existence of the National Joint Council for Stable Staff on which the SLA was the sole negotiating body. Staff did not feel that they were consulted on important changes to their working lives, such as the expansion of the Racing Calendar, which might have been expected in a more robust employment relations environment. The outcome of this was that staff had no choice but to rely on informal voice at the level of the stables, with mixed degrees of success. Respondents were not inclined to seek the assistance of the SLA here.

Worker exit was not seen as an appealing way to express voice, although some staff clearly had moved between stables to get away from an unpleasant working relationship with their trainer. Exit was used marginally in this way but it did not look as if staff would seriously contemplate leaving the industry completely in order to better their

positions. Their strong affinity with horses lay behind this, suggesting that unresolved grievances over pay and working hours would continue to be sources of complaint but no more than that.

It was clear, nevertheless, that such issues could form the basis of mobilisation if workers could be persuaded to identify their immediate employer as the source of their dissatisfaction. Employers seemed all too capable of deflecting criticism to forces outside their control, a view apparently shared by their workers. A lack of conflict behaviour stemmed directly from the desire of workers to be with horses and the fact that they would regularly put the needs of the horse before their own. Of course, the currently constituted SLA could not act as the kind of organisation which could rally workers round their various grievances and it did not seem likely that workers would look elsewhere for such an organisation.

Nevertheless, there was some evidence of informal collectivism amongst stable staff, which on at least one occasion had spilt over into unofficial industrial action. Staff formed bonds across organisational boundaries in the various racing towns and at race meetings and used what opportunities there were to pool knowledge and resist 'bad bosses' by avoiding working at some stables. It was important to realise that stable staff form an occupational community and may draw on strong bonds formed from the industry's unique culture and shared experience of a common labour process. Nevertheless, this has not yet been transformed into lasting workplace collectivism from which stable staff could draw strength and support.

Stable staff did nevertheless demonstrate a capability for at least using what opportunities they found to resist their employers on an individual basis. They also were capable of manipulating points during the labour process to evade management control, both at the stables and when going racing. Socialising in the racing towns and when at the racecourse were valuable opportunities to form resistance but underlined the

fact that workers found it easier to express resistance when away from their main workplace.

Stable staff said that they had a particular problem resisting the emotional blackmail used by their employers to ensure cooperation with sometimes unreasonable management requests. Again the horse was a tremendously important factor here. Workers do, therefore, find what means were at their disposal to resist but in a situation where they wished to continue working with horses and cannot, as yet, contemplate taking actions which might compromise this. For them this is what makes employment relations complex and contested (Ram 1991); they wished to be treated fairly but are prepared to tolerate sometimes harsh working conditions to remain in a job which gave them much intrinsic satisfaction. Struggles at the workplace are more likely to arise from individual issues rather than a challenge to the system they work in. What is evident from this research is that resistance, while providing at least temporary relief for the individual worker, does little to change the face of the industry and the approach of its management.

The working lives of stable staff have hardly changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which makes them a remarkable group amongst 21<sup>st</sup> century workers and amongst workers in small firms. However, they lack a perception of their workplace power. For example, stable staff have power through their mobility and their ability to disrupt organisations through leaving (Smith 2006). More than that, they possess 'scarce skills'; they occupy 'a crucial position in the production process'; they have 'the immediate ability to disrupt production'; and may have 'the ability to create or cope with uncertainty in the production process' (Batstone et al 1978).

