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"WE CAN'T JOIN A UNION, THAT WOULD HARM THE HORSES": WORKER RESISTANCE IN THE UK HORseracing Industry

Introduction

This paper reports a study of workers in the UK horseracing industry. It addresses a gap in the small firms’ literature, where there is a measure of agreement that the voice of workers, if not absent, is weakly reported in contemporary research (Ram 1991; Marlow and Patton 2002). The working lives of the stable staff that work in the UK’s racing stables are discussed, as are the ways in which they are able to resist the demands of capital. It draws on earlier research which argues that the conduct of industrial relations in small firms is complex and subtle, particularly where there is no formalised collective bargaining relationship through which resistance can be channelled and employee voice can be asserted (Ram 1991; Ram et al 2001).

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

Worker resistance

Worker resistance has traditionally been presented in the literature as a response to management control (Braverman 1974; Callaghan and Thompson 2001) but not as the starting point for analysis (Rosenthal 2004). Its absence from accounts of the labour process has been remarked (Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997; Spencer 2000). While attention has been paid to control in hotels and catering (Ram et al 2001a; Ram et al 2001b) and manufacturing (Moule 1998), far less is known from the workers’ perspective (Marlow and Patten 2002). Resistance is characterised by small employers as a failing of moral character (Scott et al 1985) and, as related by one worker (interviewed at Taunton racecourse) ‘Joining a union? You’d be regarded as a traitor’.

Racing employment is divided between 530 small firms, some 40% of which employ 10 staff or less. The traditional, deferential relationship between stable staff, their employers and the racehorse owners on whose animals they work, is reinforced by hegemonic control throughout the industry, manifesting particularly at the level of ‘racing towns’ such as Newmarket where large concentrations of racing stables may be found. Ideological incorporation is possible via an extension of management authority into workers’ lives outside the workplace (Hughes 2005; Glover and Noon 2005); in racing mechanisms include housing provided on site by trainers, advances of salary for the purchase of riding apparel, the promise of riding in races if a worker shows sufficient promise.
Burawoy (1981:90) refers to the ‘psychological and other processes through which subordination to capital is secured’ and the evidence from racing is that workers do identify very closely with the object of their labours, the horse. All those who have daily dealings with horses will of necessity develop a very strong emotional and psychological bond with a large and potentially dangerous animal (Gallier 1988; Cassidy 2002). In order to ride and provide care safely, this animal requires complete attention. In the case of racing’s employees, this emotional bond forms part of daily working life also and allows the employer to manufacture consent quite easily – workers accept their employer’s assertion that it is ‘your’ horse to deal with because they are socialised to do so.

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

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

Stable staff do also find an opportunities to create small oases away from management control. The boss cannot be in every stable at each point of the worker’s day, nor can the head 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 grappling with the cold of a morning exercise regime in winter. Additionally, stable staff find opportunities to play games while on horseback - teasing about personal appearance or riding ability or the performance of individual horses. When off duty they may indulge in heavy and competitive drinking.

All workers use the racecourse canteen to exchange information aimed at avoiding bad bosses wherever possible. Several respondents remarked on the importance of meeting staff from other stables across the country and how much support they derived from the opportunity to share and compare workplace experiences. It is at this level that we found most expressions of solidarity between workers, being told by
one stable girl that ‘we look out for each other, even when we don’t work at the same yard’ or by a travelling head lad ‘the craic is good but we need it because of the bloody boss’. Our research finds the presence of latent collectivism in the racing sector in tune with the work of McBride (2006) and Stephenson and Stewart (2001) who also find evidence of worker collectivism, irrespective of trade union presence.

Though little evidence of concerted resistance was offered by interviewees there was the exception of one Head Lad who organised a lorry blockade of the stable yard at Kempton Park racecourse when staff discovered they could not get served in the staff canteen during the autumn of. He said ‘Its amazing though how one ‘broken down’ lorry can change things. Soon there was a queue right back down the drive. We weren’t going to move till the management made sure we could get fed’. He estimated that 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.

While ‘bad’ bosses are identified through discussion at race meetings, and avoided if possible, the possibility of mobilisation breaks down at the level of the individual enterprise, especially where stables are isolated and remote as pointed out by Metcalf (2004) in his study of pay issues in the racing industry. However, our evidence points to the fact that long running issues of low pay and unsocial hours are grievances around which workers could organise and display their collective voice.

Conclusion

Our findings support Ram’s conclusion (1991) that workers in small firms often resort to individual methods of resistance. However, it was very clear that working at the race course was a very important opportunity for staff to form alliances with their fellow workers across the country, to gossip about horses and races but, most importantly from an industrial relations perspective, to informally pool knowledge about good and bad workplaces and workplace issues.

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

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

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