WORKPLACE DELEGATES and GLOBALIZATION

Ever More Expert, But to What End?

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From an accidental sociological observation to some questions about strategy:
- a case study in a French plant
- some theoretical and strategic questions on workers representation and its hidden hierarchies.
CASE STUDY OF A WORKPLACE UNION

• We are in the main site of a large dominating international firm, using many local subcontractors and temporary workers.

• The whole panel of representative structures is implemented, from floor to European headquarters.

• We are asked by the local union to speak to the delegates about union representation outside France.
• The group consists of twenty mostly male delegates, with a large range of ages.

• The elder delegates, organisers of the training, relate their experience in the national and international structures of representation and the need to know about other unions.

• These structures are an essential union gain, with more rights for workers and better means of action for the union.
The aim is to convince the young of the importance of these levels of representation, often unknown.

The young are impressed by the technicity, the expertise which are demonstrated but they are not convinced.

They stress, shyly at first, the gap between this level of representation and their own daily action as shopfloor delegates.
• They then question the representative pyramid proposed by their elders. Presence in central structures does not compensate for the loss of contact with the workers they are experiencing.

• They emphasize the situation of the most precarious workers with whom the union has no relationship. They feel themselves nearer to these people than to the professionalized central delegates.
• The training session has to be reorganised in order to cope with this conflict. Formerly latent it is now out into the open.
THEORETICAL AND STRATEGIC LESSONS

• This conflict illustrates a double interlaced tension between:
  – The different representative tasks
  – The different strata of union delegates.

• The elder delegates promote the strategic value of these institutions as a matter of course. They identify themselves with the union gains obtained in a period of union strength.
• They run these functions:
  - explicitly as key attributes of union activity,
  - implicitly as hierarchical attributes inside the group of delegates.

• The young perceive first the growing isolation of the union group. They minimize the symbolic conquest of central representation structures. They deny them the strategic role the elders are stressing.
• « What’s the use of spending time on reading big dossiers, that don’t change the workers’ situation and don’t make the union any more attractive for the workers? »

• Young contest the hierarchy of union tasks held up as linked to internationalization and unions struggles. They plead for a reevaluation of this hierarchy.
• « You have time enough to go to useless meetings here and there, whereas we lack time to respond to the needs of the workers ». 
• By questioning the hierarchy of union tasks solidly established by the elders, the young delegates come back to the basics of representation. 
• Responding to workers’ daily concerns first is a central condition for running « expert » functions.
• The expert elders are not credible for their younger fellow delegates.
• The tangible risk is that the youngest move away from the union « as it is». They make it clear that they could quit.
• The elders interprete this attitude as a lack of engagement.
CONCLUSION

• Even with spezialised structures, in order to adapt to internationalization, actors have first of all to act on themselves:
  - Evaluate their relationship with their changing constituencies, in a political and not only institutional sense;
  - This implies responses to workers’ questions and claims; organization of contradictory debates and strategic choices which workers feel to be their own.