

# 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.

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## **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.

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- « 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.

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- « 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.

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- 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 interpret this attitude as a lack of engagement.

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## CONCLUSION

- Even with specialised 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.