

REVIEWS

H. A. Turner, Geoffrey Roberts and David Roberts. **Management Characteristics and Labour Conflict.** Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 80.

One very much doubts that this book would ever have reached publication were it not for the reputation of at least two of its three authors, H. A. Turner and G. Roberts (better known for their work with G. Clack entitled **Labour Relations in the Motor Industry**). It represents what appears to be an attempt to rescue something from a research project which failed.

The authors go to some considerable lengths at the beginning of the book to justify their reasons for publishing their findings. To be fair, they are probably rather more honest than many researchers in explaining the original intentions of their research, what went wrong, and what they managed to salvage. The outcome, reported in this book, forms what the authors themselves describe as a 'modest enquiry' into the relationship between certain management characteristics and the conflict experience of a number of individual firms. The study is very much a pilot one, basing its findings upon an examination of 45 enterprises in six industries.

The research originally arose from a concern to answer the question of why it is that even within certain industries considered to be highly strike-prone, there are firms which are never or rarely involved in labour stoppages. This feature has not gone unobserved in some of New Zealand's troubled industries, most notably meat-freezing. Attempts to explain strike-proneness have often centred upon an examination of the shortcomings of the industrial relations system. The Donovan Commission, for example, proposed changes to the system of collective bargaining in Britain which it was felt would reduce the incidence of unofficial strikes. An alternative hypothesis for explaining labour unrest might be concerned instead with the part played by the kind of approach individual

managements take towards the conduct of their labour relations.

In this present study, the authors chose to interview management representatives of a number of strike-prone and strike-free firms, to ascertain which characteristics might be revealed as important in a comparison between them. Quite clearly, a major hurdle in this kind of enquiry involves choosing appropriate data to collect, and a means of measuring such data. For example, major difficulties were encountered in the attempt to assess the relationship between expenditure on industrial relations (for example in the employment of specialist industrial relations personnel) and the amount of industrial conflict. Most firms kept no records of such expenditures, and nor was it possible to neatly categorise those who were involved in industrial relations matters and those who were not. Similarly with industrial conflict, only one measure of conflict was used, that of strike incidence. Unorganised conflict such as absenteeism and labour turnover might be just as, if not more important, and yet few managements kept records of these.

Such matters as those outlined above relating to the question of research design must be borne in mind in any attempt to assess the study's findings. The quality and measurement of data in this study leave much to be desired, and as a result, it would be fair to say that many of the findings are inconclusive and somewhat banal. Even in those places where positive relationships between variables were noted, the authors' interpretations are extremely speculative and open to considerable dispute. In terms of its expressed aims, therefore, the study must be considered less than successful. No clear links emerged between differences in the state of labour relations by industry groups and the circumstantial or managerial distinctions between them. Apart from presenting some limited information which the authors' claim confirms the differences in patterns of strike-proneness between firms within the same industry, the

study does little to discover the causes of these differences. Indeed, it would appear that many of the possible causes of such differences, for example, comparative physical conditions of work in various establishments, were not examined in the study.

In summary, one must conclude that the study suffers from a number of methodological weaknesses and suspicious interpretation of data, making its overall value rather questionable. In their conclusion, the authors appear to recognise this, and decide that if it has done nothing else than perhaps the book may at least have helped to open up the whole subject of managements' impact on industrial relations to a more scientific analytical approach than has hitherto been common. A worthy hope indeed, but one with which it is difficult to justify the publication of a book of this kind. Nevertheless, and despite the sometimes shallow and questionable nature of their findings, one feels that perhaps the authors should receive some commendation for their attempts to explore such a difficult area. Unfortunately, in doing so, they add yet another book on industrial relations which makes little practical or theoretical contribution to an understanding of the field.

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Brian Picot, Claire Drake, Ted Thompson and Noel Woods. **Working Together**. New Zealand Planning Council, June 1978, pp. 9.

Working Together is the New Zealand Planning Council's discussion paper on industrial relations. The paper deals with seven topics:

1. **An economy under siege** summarizes the Planning Council's view of the New Zealand economy and argues that the difficult conditions require management and unions to minimize expectations and reduce conflict.
2. **Areas of responsibility** argues that the government has an important role in industrial relations and also makes a plea for manpower planning.

3. **Understanding and communicating** puts the case that better communications will go with increased trust and better human relations.

4. **Leadership, education and training** argues that better training of management and union executives will affect "work-place relationships" and "the nation's economic health." A strong case is also put for vocational training.

5. **Towards fair and responsible income distribution** is the major section in the paper. It deals with several issues. The virtually irresolvable problem of "fair shares" and the pernicious effect of inflation on the existing income distribution. A call is made for "responsible" bargaining and it is argued that everyone would be best served by our having fewer, but bigger unions and national industry agreements as opposed to occupational agreements. The paper states the need for a means by which issues of national importance can be discussed by organisations of those involved.

6. **Job enrichment and participation** endorses moves towards more participation in industry.

7. **Responsibility and legislation** again puts the case for "responsibility" by both managements and unions while arguing that much of New Zealand's industrial law is in need of reform.

The paper has a number of strengths and weaknesses. Council Chairman, Frank Holmes, pinpointed two of the weakest aspects in his **Introduction** when he stated:

"... it is inevitable that it will be criticised as superficial and idealistic."

Considering the text runs for less than six pages, the charge of superficiality is inevitable. The idealistic approach is less justifiable. The paper constantly makes calls for more "responsibility," an idea which must seem quaint to those on both the "left" and the "right" and its terminology in a number of places, e.g. "social partners" (page 4), highlights the "unitary" frame of reference which appears to lie behind the report.

The strengths of the paper lie in its highlighting some pertinent problem areas such as the need for vocational training in conjunction with manpower planning and reforms to industrial law. There is

little in the paper, however, for the serious practitioner or student of industrial relations. The paper is clearly addressed to "the man in the street" (as it should be) but it is disappointing that the paper is so brief and equally disappointing that public reactions should be limited to "not more than 1-2 pages" (page 3). Industrial relations issues are not as simple as this.

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BOOK NOTE:

Future Lobby and the NSW Association for Mental Health **The Right to Share Work? An Interim Report on Permanent Part-time Work.** Sydney, 1978.

This brief report (22 pages) makes a forceful case for more permanent part-time work. It argues that demand for such work is strong and growing and that it is desirable in both an economic and social sense. The need for more flexible employment patterns is stressed, as are advantages and disadvantages of permanent part-time work for workers, employers and unions. While being an Australian report, much of it applies with equal force to New Zealand. Copies may be obtained from:

Permanent Part-time Work Study
Future Lobby and NSW Association for
Mental Health
Suite 2 1st Floor 194 Miller Street
North Sydney 2060 NSW
Australia.

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PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

BAIN, George Sayers and Elsheikh, Farouk **Union Growth and the Business Cycle: An Econometric Analysis.** Warwick Studies in Industrial Relations, Blackwell, Oxford, 1976.

CELGG, Hugh, **Trade Unionism under Collective Bargaining: A Theory Based on Comparisons of Six Countries.** Warwick Studies in Industrial Relations, Blackwell, Oxford, 1976.

Future Lobby and the NSW Association for Mental Health **The Right to Share Work? An Interim Report on Permanent Part-time Work.** Sydney, 1978.

RIMMER, Malcolm **Race and Industrial Conflict: A Study in a Group of Midland Foundries.** Warwick Studies in Industrial Relations, Heinemann, London, 1972. ©