

## REVIEWS

**Gilmour, Peter and Lansbury, Russell D** *Marginal manager: the changing role of supervisors in Australia* University of Queensland Press, 1984, xvii and 178p. Price: not stated.

The main purpose of Gilmour and Lansbury's book is to examine the role within industry of the supervisor or first-line manager — the marginal manager — and to explore some of the changes in that role. Supervisors have always been something of the poor relations of management research. Studying managers and executives may give the researcher a sense of access to the inner sanctuaries of corporate power and decision-making, a veneer of glamour by association. Studying workers may open up a whole organisational counterculture and a fruitful database for ideological debate about the basis of commitment and control in the modern corporation. Supervisors, in contrast, seem to be adrift in a no-mans land. They are eminently displaceable by greater control being exercised from above through extensions of information technology and the development of flatter organisational structures. They are eminently replaceable from below by increased worker participation in decision-making, by autonomous and semi-autonomous work groups, and by the shop floor power of organised labour. It is the dilemmas of the supervisor's role that Gilmour and Lansbury address:

Should the position be abolished or enhanced? Should organizations develop other concepts, such as autonomous work groups, which can operate without a supervisor? Should the "supervisor" be upgraded to "first-line manager" by shedding some of the minor supervisory functions and acquiring more of the managerial? Should the supervisory role be redefined as technical specialist or group co-ordinator? There are many unresolved issues.

Indeed there are and Gilmour and Lansbury's book, while not resolving the issues, does illuminate them.

The book is in 3 tenuously related parts. The first part provides a framework for studying the first-line manager, drawing heavily on Thurley and Wirdenius' classifications of supervisory systems and examining the long-standing question as to whether or not supervisory skills are general in nature or are specific to particular industries and organisations. Gilmour and Lansbury's own survey results are included here. This I found to be the weakest part of the book, both conceptually and in terms of the data presented. If, as the authors accept, the supervisor's job is something of an empty box to be filled according to specific organisational and technical environments, then general surveys aggregating information on the common characteristics of supervisors' roles have little meaning. High rankings of such characteristics as "commonsense", "trustworthiness", "an ability to make decisions", "reliability", "an effective leader", beg more questions than they answer and do little justice to the real complexities and ambiguities of specific supervisory jobs. Unfortunately it would seem that the authors were prisoners of their own data in this section. The survey that Gilmour and Lansbury draw upon was a study commissioned in 1975 by the Technical and Further Education Commission in Australia. It was designed to examine supervisory-level education, especially that offered in further education institutes. The results they report are based mainly on data from 1200 respondents enrolled in the Certificate of Supervision at technical and further education institutes in 1975. Such certificate courses operate almost exclusively on assumptions of common supervisory skills. The research design, therefore, such as it was, and the Australian data collected and presented in this part of the book, tell us little about the changing nature of supervisory jobs.

The second part of the book, while cobbled in as part of an overall grand design of changing supervisory roles, is, in my view, something quite different and separate from the first part, useful in its own right, certainly, but not integrally related. Essentially it is a bringing together of some basic theoretical models from the organisational change and organisational analysis literature, illustrated by case studies both from the overseas literature and from the authors' (and others) work in Australian companies. Thus, there are outlines of the work of Douglas McGregor, Rensis Likert, Blake and Mouton; there are summaries of the group

technology and socio-technical systems approaches to job and organisational design; and there are descriptions of some of the classic studies — General Motors' Quality of Work Life Programme in the USA, Volvo's Kalmar Assembly Plant in Sweden. Interlaced with this general review of the overseas literature and practice are a variety of Australian cases — a mid-1970s programme of organisational change at General Motors-Holden's Elizabeth assembly plant, an industrial relations and organisation development programme at the Mount Newman Mining Company, group technology projects at Mulgrave Gear and Ajax Pumps, new systems of work organisation at Woodlawn Mines and Siddons Industries. This section comprises over half of the book and periodically within it some attempt is made to assess the impact of specific change programmes on the jobs of supervisors. Given that the authors are in many of these cases working with secondary data, and with cases where the role of supervisor was often only one of many different aspects for investigation, the analysis of changes in supervisory roles is necessarily limited.

Part 3 of the book, "Conclusions", seeks to draw from the survey research of Part 1 and the case studies of Part 2, some analysis of the future prospects for supervisors and first-line managers in the context of organisational change. The situational dependency of the supervisory role is reiterated and supervisory styles are related to different organisational contexts and structures, and to the overall impact of corporate strategy. There is a recognition of the general impact of technological, organisational and social changes, and of changes in industrial relations practice at the shop-floor level, on the supervisory function and role but the specific impacts of these changes remain obscure. Thus technology, for example:

will continue to lessen the direct participation of labour in manufacturing processes as machine power continues to replace people. This process will either lessen the importance of the first-line managers or result in an expansion of their activities.

Overall, then, the book is a bit of a mishmash. It is not a custom-built study of supervisory roles but rather an attempt to scratch together from the survey and case study data at hand some analysis of changes in those roles. That analysis essentially flounders along in the shallows of an inadequate primary data base, promising to launch into important and uncharted waters but never quite making it. The old adage never to judge a book by its cover should perhaps be reversed in this case. The dust jacket of *Marginal manager* has a precariously balanced man on a tightrope gently feeling his way across an abyss. The tightrope is not anchored at either end and its support is unclear.

The strengths of the book lie in its useful summary of some of the literature related to supervision, in some of its case study descriptions, and in its excellent bibliography.

John Deeks  
*University of Auckland*

**Nicholson, Marjorie** *The TUC overseas: the roots of policy* Allen & Unwin, 1986. Price: US\$45.00

This text has a particularly involved set of themes to explore. In order of importance these emerge as: the relations between the British TUC and the emerging union movements in the colonies from about 1900; the relations between the TUC and the various international socialist and communist groupings from about 1900 to the outbreak of World War II; and relations between the TUC and governments (both UK and Colonial). The reviewer must stress the involved nature of the book because, although Ms Nicholson is by no means a bad writer, the density of the material does require considerable effort on the part of the reader.

Of general interest to students of labour history is the account of the TUC's early responses to requests for help and advice from budding labour organisations in the Empire, particularly the Indian Empire and the West Indies. The author shows the early lack of knowledge that the TUC had of existing conditions in the Imperial possessions and the detailed steps that were taken to overcome this ignorance. She also shows the TUC's consistent policy as one of fraternally helpful detachment. Requests for aid and advice were normally met within the limits of the TUC's powers and finances but attempts at overseas affiliation were consistently

declined by the General Council. The discussion of the TUC's involvement with the nascent Indian labour movement is of interest to more than students of labour history. Ms Nicholson shows in depth the conflicts engendered between the British labour movement's sympathy for Indian aspirations for independence and recognition that Congress was primarily a middle-aged grouping, including segments of Indian employers. The class composition of the National Congress raised the question of whether the TUC should concentrate on helping Indian workers even where this meant conflict with the issue of Indian independence.

The treatment of the TUC's dealings with the USSR and the RILU (Profintern) organisation of trade unions is interesting as a comment on the tangled state of USSR diplomacy between the 2 World Wars. It emerges as a clash between 2 totally opposed concepts of trade unionism. The essentially Leninist RILU saw the unions as training grounds for revolutionary cadres and subservient to the political parties of the Third International. The TUC, despite its close ties with the British Labour Party, traditionally kept a policy distinction between bread and butter trade union issues and explicitly political activity. This reviewer was reminded (perhaps not too fancifully) of the difference in attitudes between the church of the early Christians who believed the second coming to be imminent, and those of the Catholic Church of the high middle ages.

From a specifically New Zealand standpoint, Chapter 6 is probably of most interest. It deals with the period of Sidney Webb (Lord Passfield) at the Colonial Office in the second Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald. The author is clearly incensed at what she sees as Webb's apparent belief that emerging unions in places like the West Indies should be subject to compulsory registration (page 179) and this reflects Ms Nicholson's acceptance of the legal/structural tradition of British trade unionism as it developed after the period of 1867-71, which emphasised voluntary unionism as the legal basis for registration and membership; a tradition which contrasts with the IC & A in New Zealand, originated by Pember Reeves, a long term associate of Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

There are 2 heroes in this book. One is Earnest Bevin, creator of the Transport and General Workers' Union and eventually UK Foreign Secretary. The other (to whom the book is dedicated) is the late Walter Citrine, an organiser of genius who managed to combine bureaucratic efficiency with a profound humanitarianism.

Although this review has stressed the effort required to absorb this book, I would suggest that students of comparative labour studies will find the effort worthwhile. The issues discussed are still very much alive not only in third world countries but much nearer home. A final caveat, the reviewer found having on hand Henry Pelling's *History of British trade unionism* (Pelican Books) a useful *aide memoire* for the early period covered in the book.

P Henderson  
University of Otago