

RESTRUCTURING, RESKILLING AND RETRAINING: INSIDE THE BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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It has become commonplace to suggest that the building and construction industry is high-cost, inefficient, and non-competitive (Thomas, 1991; Industry Commission, 1991: 45-46). Significant resources have been provided to change the industry, supported by employer groups and unions favourable to the initiation of reform (Department of Industrial Relations, 1991; Industry Development Working Group, 1991).

It is argued here that the reform process has been mis-directed in design, is inadequate for the desired goal of productivity enhancement, and has achieved little more than an increase of the administrative workload of union officials. Union officials have been co-opted into a complex network of committees and reform agencies to achieve dubious results. In order to fulfil their responsibility at this political/ideological level, they have been left with very little additional time for handling rank and file issues at the workplace, the job for which they were ostensibly elected.

When faced with international competition, capitalist enterprises have perennially promoted changes in technology, work organisation, training, and skill levels, consistent with maintaining the prerogatives of control. Restructuring, reskilling and retraining, the components of "structural efficiency", are not new ideas. What is new is that over the past decade in Australia, a large number of unionists have accepted a

particular explanation of the problems of the industry and a need to address them within an Tripartite framework.

Construction workers are held to be, in various degrees, corrupt, incompetent, inefficient, lazy, engaged in restrictive labour practices, falsely concerned about their own health and safety, overpaid, selfish and greedy (Royal Commission, 1992b). Concurrence in this assumption of guilt has permeated the trade union movement in Australia since the "real-wage overhang" was identified as the cause of unemployment in the late 1970s, viewing workers as collectively guilty of gaining real wages in excess of labour productivity. Ignoring other variables such as a decline in commodity prices and major downturns in the world manufacturing sector, unionists were subsequently committed in 1983 through the Australian Council of Trade Unions to the Accord with the express purpose of controlling real wages. This Accord was used in 1986 as the ideological foundation for microeconomic reform and enterprise bargaining (Thompson, 1992); and in 1988 for the pursuit of "structural efficiency" (Thompson, 1990).

This article outlines the state of play in building and construction at present and considers this in relation to the historical experience of labour process reform in the 20th century. A review of the general principles of restructuring is presented to provide a background for the more specific comments on the building and construction industry.

State of Play

The building and construction industry has been portrayed in the media and by most of the major players in the industry itself as troublesome, unproductive and inefficient. Accepting that there are problems, those operating within this sector have set upon a path of reskilling, restructuring and retraining, as an overall strategy of reform (Department of Industrial Relations, 1991). A close examination of the data suggests that much of the hand-wringing is based on hyperbole. The Australian construction industry, making allowances for productivity differences due solely to capital expenditure, was ranked as having the lowest costs relative to 12 other OECD countries in

1987/88 (Boyd, 1989: 233-4). The cost of Australian labour was amongst the lowest of OECD countries, about half the labour costs in the United States and West Germany (Davis, Belfield and Everest, 1988). The crucial cost comparisons, which suggest poor comparative performance, are being made with nations such as Malaysia and Singapore; not surprisingly, Australia does not fare well in such comparisons, but it is this type of comparison, more than anything else, that continues to drive reform in Australia (Industry Development Working Group, 1991).

According to representatives of the ACTU, a significant component of the reform process is to be achieved by award restructuring. Restructuring is defined as further training, the development of new skills, the establishment of new career paths, and a system of national accreditation for skills gained. The most important spin-off, it is argued, will be increased productivity and efficiency in the workplace. According to the "Speaker's Notes for Organisers and Activists" distributed by the Trade Union Training Authority on behalf of the ACTU, there are a number of problems facing workers in the building industry. These include:

- there are far too many workers performing narrow, repetitive and boring jobs such as hanging doors, erecting simple formwork or painting walls;
- some of the jobs are physically damaging because of the repetition (e.g., steelfixing);
- the vast majority of building workers receive no formal training;
- there is a lack of job security;
- recognition of extra experience and skills gained on the job is not formalised.

Thus, it is argued, a restructured award which allows workers to be trained in a broad package of skills will lead to job satisfaction, job security, certified training, and pay which is based on skills and training gained either on or outside the job. The "multi-skilling which results will enable workers to perform their core tasks without

unnecessary reliance on other workers" (Trade Union Training Authority, 1991: 3-13; Merritt, 1991).

Against these arguments for restructuring, rank and file members raise two recurrent concerns. First, 'multi-skilling' will reduce union solidarity, as expertise will be activity rather than union oriented (one will be a vaguely defined 'construction worker' rather than a plumber or builders' labourer). Second, the quality of work which comes with specialisation will decline, whether that be pouring concrete or formfitting. The reason for the differences in perspective between the hierarchy of union officialdom and employers and that of the rank and file suggest that principles of 'structural efficiency' and 'enterprise bargaining', present a hermeneutic as well as a practical problem (Thompson, 1990). What is said, what is meant, and what is heard cannot be taken for granted as they may all differ. Because the material interests of the various agents within the industry are dissimilar, the 'tripartite' notion of reasoning together to achieve consensus becomes problematic.

The institutionalisation of skills-based learning and training throughout industries or within enterprises has taken place during much of the 20th century. In the post-war 1920's, union leaders adapted themselves to the corporatist strategies of a wider political system, absorbing the new organising concepts such as Fordism or scientific management (Maier, 1975: Ch 3).

During the post-war reconstruction process in the 1950's, in nations such as the United States, France and England, controlling working class behaviour included manipulation of 'careers'. Skills based education provided a way to anchor 'promotion' on educational achievement and merit, which made assessment and personnel decisions appear legitimate as well as necessary. It remained management's prerogative to determine the purpose of training, who received the training, who got credit for having been trained, and the speed at which workers were trained (Boltanski, 1987: 269-272). In short, when training is institutionalised it is no longer simply a question of self-improvement, but also a matter of promoting company, rather than class or union, identification and solidarity.

Modern management consultants aim to "rationalise career decisions" within a framework of human relations. The concept of 'productivity' allows the old managerial ideas to be combined in a new synthesis. The concept contains the engineer's emphasis on efficiency and also suggests the possibility of psychological integration. "Productivity", declared the research director of the American Committee for Economic Development in 1947, "is a vitally needed lubricant to reduce class and group frictions. . . .This applies particularly to the common and conflicting interests of labour and capital. If it weren't for possibilities of increased productivity the struggle between capital and labour would be more severe and dangerous than it is" (Maier, 1975: 65).

As bureaucratic control within the enterprise has increased, career rationalisation has become common (Edwards, 1979). One of the purposes of career rationalisation is to reduce the tension arising from continuous restructuring of competitive, capitalist markets. Social and economic compensation and incentives are offered for the loss of security felt by workers as the old structures of the capitalist firm fall away due to changing markets and technology. In this way a new system of social relations can be created (such as becoming internationally competitive) that is not only more efficient but also appears essential, irrespective of one's class position.

New formalised and hierarchical classifications and career streams are deemed rational because they appear to reduce arbitrary decisions to a minimum. Each job is given certain formal prerequisites combined with a corresponding rate of pay. Assessment requirements are to be completed in the form of tests, questionnaires and interviews, so that when the worker fills the position it is seen as an individual achievement and fulfilment of a role model implied in the assessment. Conversely, failure to perform or achieve is the individual's responsibility. One's workmates and/or the union are irrelevant to this scheme. It is the employer one goes to for assistance (Boltanski, 1987: 135-137). What has been occurring in general terms for the past 30 years is now given credence throughout Australia in the "structural efficiency" principle, legitimated by the Industrial Relations Commission (Australian Industrial Relations Commission, 1989b: 8).

To suggest that "employment and skill formation", is somehow a new and visionary prospect for Australians, as do the Carmichael reports (discussed below), is to selectively interpret history.¹ This restructuring is a continuation, in a slightly different manner, of what has long been identified as "human resource management".

The Structural Efficiency Principle

In 1986, a trade union delegation travelled to Western Europe to study industrial reform. The delegation included Laurie Carmichael, who was at the time national research officer for the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union. The result was the publication of *Australia Reconstructed* (ACTU/TDC, 1987). A central theme of that document was what subsequently came to be known as, the "structural efficiency" principle, a principle adopted by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) in the August 1988 *National Wage Case*. In general, the principle is meant to provide links between workplace reform, award restructuring, skill development, career paths for workers, and pay increases (ACTU, 1989).

Since then, Mr. Carmichael, in his new position as chair of the Employment and Skills Formation Council, has continued to develop the relationship between education planning, training and the labour process in order to make 'learning' relevant to the restructuring of the Australian economy (Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1991a, 1991b, 1990, 1989a, 1989b). Specifically, it is advocated that current apprenticeship and traineeship schemes will be transformed into a broader system covering all workers as well as potential entrants to the labour market. This 'competency based' training will focus on

¹ Of most interest in this regard, is the book by Ewer, et.al. (1992) written by a group which includes disgruntled union research officers, and launched by John Halfpenny, Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council. The book is primarily used to attack craft unionism, criticise leftist critiques of the Accord, distance award restructuring conceptually from enterprise bargaining, and to provide support for the development of employment and skills formation.

enabling the trainee to achieve and demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills required for the job, measured against national standards. Through the accumulation of these 'vocational competencies' the worker will become more capable, flexible, adaptable and useful. An 'Australian Standards Framework' incorporating these vocational competencies into levels of sophistication has been devised and sanctioned by the national wage decisions of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (Australian Financial Review, 1992: 31).

The practical application of the Principle was clarified in the 1988 and 1989 *National Wage Cases* by the AIRC. Employer and employee representatives are to negotiate pertinent methods of restructuring work which will promote increases in efficiency and productivity (Thompson, 1990: 72-74). Concurrently, investments are made in 'human capital' to provide for a better trained and educated workforce. On the basis of this workplace reform and reskilling, workers are able to gain pay increases, the satisfaction of 'multi-skilling' and a career path (Plowman, 1990). The commitment to award restructuring has become somewhat over-shadowed by a shift in the debate to unemployment and enterprise bargaining. However, the connection between vocational competency, education and work continues to be discussed and negotiated.

Restructuring in Building & Construction

The major thrust of the "structural efficiency" principle has been to broaden career classifications, to encourage multi-skilling, to promote skill development, to identify appropriate relativities between classifications, to introduce greater flexibility in working patterns, to eliminate discriminatory provisions in awards, and to rationalize and prevent the spread of over-award payments (Timo, 1989: 403-406).

Under Accord Mark V 1989, negotiations between the Australian Federation of Construction Contractors and the Building Industry Unions, on the basis of on-going restructuring of awards, led to a wage increase of \$20. This was paid under the first stage on September 12,

1989. A further increase of \$15 or 3 per cent (whichever was higher) was handed down by the AIRC on March 23, 1990. According to case studies carried out by Rimmer and Verevis on sites in New South Wales and Victoria, the process of award restructuring amounted to 'multi-skilling' which both sides seem to favour, with reservations. To management, 'multi-skilling' meant an end to restrictive work practices. To unions, it provided workers with a better career path and greater self-esteem. In Victoria, according to one construction manager, the most important gain was the transformation of attitudes at the level of senior management and union officials. However, at the level of the workplace there was very little in the form of results, interest or enthusiasm. This conclusion reflects the discovery by Rimmer and Verevis that the unions have given on-site delegates very little information. "There is no input from workers" says one delegate, "the agreements are really made beforehand" (Rimmer and Verevis, 1990: 46-53).

Overall the impact of award restructuring on the workplace has been minimal. The award variation in the building and construction industry, determined at the national level, can be gleaned from the findings of the Building Industry Inquiry (Australian Industrial Relations Commission, 1989c). The specific award variations included:

- the National Building Trades Construction Award 1975 is converted to a minimum rates award;
- a number of classifications are deleted from the Award to initiate broadbanding;
- any prescription for site allowances is deleted from the Award.

In addition, and possibly more important in the long-term, an agreement in principle was reached on a new five-level skill structure to replace the existing structure in the National Building Trades Construction Award 1975. The job classifications in each level are to be settled with the assistance of accreditation procedures determined by the National Building and Construction Industry Training Council. The National Building and Construction Industry Labourers (On-Site)

Award 1986 also underwent similar changes and has four skill levels. These two classification schemes were then combined into a single 9-level classification scheme by combining the Construction Awards and setting the trades base at level 4, paid at 100 per cent of the award rate; apprenticeship and pre-trades skills at levels 1-3; and advanced skills, additional skills and special responsibilities paid at the respective rates above the trades base at levels 5-9. Consequently, the old distinction between 'trades' and non-trades' work will progressively be abandoned.

The decision of the Inquiry reminded the parties that mere changes in award prescription were not enough. Justice Ludeke said "there must be change in fact, evidenced by increased flexibility through changing employment conditions and work patterns, and by employee mobility, education and training." He went on to comment:

Changes which are translated into award variations are the visible means of reflecting work place reform and will demonstrate the successful implementation of the Principle, but not all changes lend themselves to award prescription or variation. There will be some initiatives which are equally important manifestations of reform, and they will be just as important in their contribution to the objective of increased productivity and efficiency, but they may not appropriately be the subject of award prescription. . . . If it can be concluded that the parties have produced tangible evidence of a genuine reform program which is being progressively developed and applied, the requirements of the Principle will have been satisfied (Australian Industrial Relations Commission, 1989a: 7-8).

According to the Australian Federation of Construction Contractors (AFCC), award restructuring means the availability of training to all workers, payment made on the basis of certified skills, testing to certify that skills have been achieved, and encouragement for skill acquisition. Accreditation will be controlled by the tripartite National Building and Construction Industry Training Council (NBCITC) network. The objective is that workers will acquire skills which will improve the worker's value to the industry as a whole (even if not to the current employer). No specialisation will take place below level 4, which is

historically what would have been deemed the recognised craft (carpentry, bricklaying, etc.). Beyond the trades base, workers may continue to improve their skills (and pay level) across the spectrum of the stream in which they are working. A worker with accredited skills across part or all of a stream should be willing and able to perform any of that work, including any tasks which are incidental or peripheral to the work.

Negotiations between the AFCC and the building unions have continued. The AFCC has funded a skills audit in all building trades with the view to formalising and institutionalising career structures within the four skill streams. In the week of November 25-29, 1991, the building trades unions made application before Justice Ludeke of the Federal Commission to vary the national awards. In the submission the unions stated that their proposal:

represents the single most important step towards the attainment of genuine workplace change in the building and construction industry since the introduction of the Structural Efficiency Principle in March 1987 (sic). The aim is to replace a classification and pay structure to create a new classification system which will encourage workplace flexibility and reward the acquisition of skills. It represents a decisive break with the craft based classifications of the past (Australian Timber and Allied Industries Union, Building Workers Industrial Union and the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Union, 1991).

Matters which end up being negotiated on an enterprise-by-enterprise basis are not completely spelled out. The most important of these include the amount of training and number of people allowed to be trained, which is to be funded by the employer, and whether or not a person is to be paid according to the skills possessed or the skills which are actually used.

The task of carrying out competency assessments on workers who may be eligible for advancement to a new pay level is complicated. Those employer representatives who perform this function will themselves have to get proper industry accreditation. One proposal under consideration is that Technical and Further Education institutions will

run short courses for employer representatives. They will then carry out transitional competency assessments in the weeks running up to the implementation of the new award structure. An appeal mechanism will be provided but workers will not be eligible for assessment unless they have existing accreditation. For example, initial assessment to go from 100 per cent to 105 per cent of the award is likely to be available only to workers with a trades certificate (Australian Federation of Construction Contractors, 1990). Evidence exists to show that it will not go smoothly. An editorial placed in the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association newsletter complains:

There is an element of prejudice against the suggestion that plant operators are entitled to the same or greater rates of pay as tradespeople. Some have argued for the preservation of this position by reference to the amount of skills and training found in the trades system. Their model of award restructuring is to recognise only formal trade based qualifications while ignoring the experience and aptitude gained by workers in the non-apprenticed areas (FEDFA, 1991).

The Western Australian director of the AFCC sees skills training as absolutely crucial to the survival of the industry "which has suffered a lowering of standards and productivity during the past 45 years". In his opinion:

Changing technology is having an increasing impact with more and more fabrication being done off site (e.g., entire toilet blocks and pre-cast columns and floor slabs)." The importance of this "is that it is decreasing unit labour costs and labour disputation at the same time thereby reducing penalty costs for the employer. . . . We have the most amount of disputes with the BLF. [The BLF continues to exist at the state level in Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia] I think the problem with the BLF is that they are out of date. They think disputes must have strong-arm tactics which may be good for their members but not for the community. . . . Although there is greater control of quality when it is fabricated off site, quality training will give better results. The importance of this is that when employees have an increased skill base, management will

have better control - I mean less close supervision with better results. We wholeheartedly support competency-based training.²

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) position is that:

the 1987-89 decisions achieved nothing except to provide excuses to pay more money; but employers and unions have been forced to talk about issues they have never looked at before. The Chamber did not support the Building Unions submission, Appendix Q [cited above], because the BLF refused to allow 'working down'; and because pay should reflect skills used, not simply acquired. Accordingly, the good thing about competency-based training is that the BLF will disappear which is most likely why the other unions are supporting it.³

The Royal Commission into Productivity in the Building Industry in New South Wales made a strong case that employers must re-capture control over the workplace. Commissioner Giles claimed that the main problem with restructuring was that it did not enhance managerial prerogative quickly enough. His argument, outlined below, shows impatience and is more reminiscent of the old-line "Taylorist" position. Alternatively, we would suggest that many employers see restructuring as an alternative to crude forms of Taylorism, and more likely to achieve the required intensification of labour. This is certainly the case with reference to the AFCC.

According to the Royal Commission:

Stripped down to its essentials the objectives of award restructuring are to: remove award conditions which interfere with a business's ability to deploy its work force in the most efficient and productive manner possible, and to encourage multi-skilling, career paths and the creation of satisfying and

2 Interview, February 6, 1992.

3 Interview, February 4, 1992.

well paid positions for employees. . . . A well trained workforce which can carry out whatever work is required by the employer to suit the needs of the project obviously suits the builder very well (Royal Commission, 1992a: 33-60)

Further:

Even the most enthusiastic advocates for the benefits of restructuring would not claim that it has yet had any appreciable impact throughout the industry. . . . In summary, 4 years application of wage fixing principles intended to improve efficiency and productivity within all industries has had little or no practical impact on the building industry to date. The best that can be expected is a new occupational classification in perhaps five to 10 years. . . .

The Structural Efficiency Principle has failed to deliver any substantive changes to building award conditions and it will not do so now. . . . The opportunity has therefore been lost. . . . To believe that restructuring will bring about the kinds of changes predicted by its supporters, requires an act of faith" (Royal Commission, 1992a: *Ibid.*).

With reference to one of the more prominent enterprise agreements, Ludeke offered an assessment. In proceedings before the Commission on September 24, 1991, evidence was given of the successful operation of a training course for mature age construction workers who had not had the benefit of apprenticeship, but who have now been offered another path to the acquisition of skills needed in the industry. This was carried out at the Skills Centre in the Melbourne Cricket Ground. According to Justice Ludeke, the Southern Stand project there was one of the largest and most difficult construction projects completed in the last few years. In 1991, there was a workforce of 600 on this project alone. In the spirit of 'restructuring', the contractor, John Holland Construction Pty. Ltd., had established a Skills Centre. Some of the workers on the job were given time off to complete a 15 week course designed to enhance their skills. One example included a group of formwork carpenters who had little or no previous formal training. Hanging doors, hanging plaster sheets, setting up exterior claddings and

the use of explosive power tools were some of the subjects being taught in the Centre (Ludeke, 1991: 1-2). Some of the training sessions were for those activities specifically listed by the ACTU in the trade union training notes as "narrow, repetitive and boring jobs".

Building workers and shop stewards in Victoria indicate that Justice Ludeke might have been somewhat profligate in his description of this particular instance. According to the workers and stewards on site:

The so-called 'Skills Centre' was disgraceful and described on site as the 'Chicken Coop' or 'Dog Kennel', where workers who were bored with their job could take time off to go learn other boring jobs. The Centre was made up of a number of roofless sheds located in the basement with a chain-link fence around it. In order to learn skills which are meant to establish new career paths, workers spent 2 hours per week for 15 weeks. I can tell you the results were pretty rough stuff. The theory room was attached to the shop steward's office with people traipsing in and out. It had 2 tables, plastic chairs with a hell of a lot of noise in the adjoining room. People who say this is a 'Model Site' should be ashamed of themselves.⁴

Conclusion

Productivity and efficiency can be increased in the building and construction industry, but this requires investment in new capital goods and technology and not simply an intensification of the labour process (Baumol, et. al., 1989). Justifiable criticism can be directed at the industry for the comparatively small amount of research and development which has taken place. Manufacturing industry in Australia spends about 1 per cent of its annual revenue on research and development; mining -0.5 per cent; finance -0.2 per cent; agriculture - 0.1 per cent; and non-residential construction only 0.05 per cent (Construction Industry Reform Agency).

⁴ Interviews with shop stewards in the Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union, Victorian office, March 18, 1992.

By contrast, the recent construction industry 'reform' has emphasised the separation of union officials from the rank and file to reduce the militancy and volatility of building unions. Whether this is a realistic strategy for capitalist enterprise can be interpreted in terms of the analytical distinction between absolute and relative surplus value. Absolute surplus value is increased through lengthening the working day or intensifying the amount of labour carried out during the working day. Relative surplus value [productivity] is increased through the provision of investment capital and advanced technology to the labour force.

As Marx portrayed polemically in the *Communist Manifesto* and analytically in Volume III of *Capital*, what separates capitalism from other modes of production are the spectacular advances made in productive forces, and increases in relative surplus value. Increases in absolute surplus value, euphemistically identified as microeconomic reform, structural efficiency or Taylorism, have historical and social limits which are more immediate than those of relative surplus value.

One would expect that if long-run productivity increases were the real issue at hand, then research, development, investment in capital goods and technological advance would be the primary components of economic restructuring. If, the goal is the short-run desire to break the trade union movement, particularly the traditionally militant unions in the building sector, then the current type of structural efficiency changes may be more appropriate. Of course, pursuit of one does not exclude the other.

In practice, micro-economic restructuring in the building industry has pursued the short-term agenda of deconstructing militant trade unions, co-opting trade union officials and thereby reducing the content of worker solidarity. While this may lead to efficiencies through the intensification of labour, real long-term productivity gains are not at this time being pursued. A more sophisticated vision amongst employers may be that only when trade unions have been made irrelevant will the benefits of relative surplus value be worthwhile pursuing. In this sense they are wielding a double-edged sword because the value of trade unions lies in their capability to prevent super-exploitation. Without strong unions the potential gains in

productivity will accrue to capital and we will return to reliance on the "trickle-down effect".

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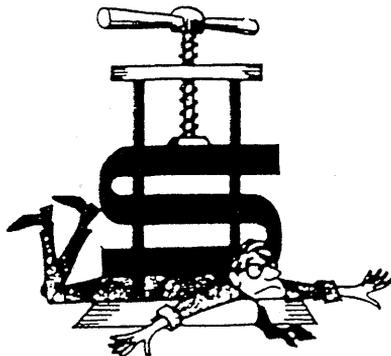
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