The foreman is of considerable importance, but the forgotten man of industry upon whom little research has been done, wrote Hugh Clegg when he described the British system of industrial relations.[1] From the late nineteenth century, the foreman has been symbolised with a bowler hat and a watch chain, neither management nor worker, the man in the middle.[2] An image illustrated by Robert Tressell in his description of Hunter, the journeyman risen to foreman who made life a misery for the workers and who lived with both fear and loathing for his employers duplicity.[3] Clegg's appeal for further research has been partially answered to show that there has been a historical transformation in the position of the first-line supervisor in British industry prior to 1939. The role is claimed by firms to be one of management but various industries have in practice operated very different models in reaction to changes in production methods and management prerogatives or with the adoption of scientific management techniques.

In the late nineteenth century industrial workplace management on the shop floor was exercised almost wholly by foremen. Foremen were promoted from the ranks of craftsmen securing permanent employment and in some firms the whole 'efficiency of the enterprise must have depended.'[4] Their status may have been high although Pollard has pointed out their pay was sometimes lower, factors central to the question on the position of the foreman relative to employer and worker.[5] The supervisor was not a cheery figure acting as the intermediary between labour and capital but as Joseph Melling has pointed out, the product of the demands of the formal control over the labour process by employers and who in addition was

an employee himself.[6] 'Managerial power was... effectively delegated to this key cadre of supervisory workers'.[7] It is therefore no surprise that Lenin equated the foreman as representative of a contemptuous capitalism predicting that the workers endurance was at an end.[8]

The growth of the firm created problems of management the scale of which made the introduction of foremen essential for the managing of the labour process and as Melling suggested the noticeable wide variety of ways that supervision was introduced.[9] As early as 1839 the problems of the division of labour in the Naysmyths foundry were managed by foremen responsible for both the quality of the workers output and the pace of work to keep up with the output of other departments.[10] It is from the 1870s and the slowness or failure of engineering employers to alter the division of labour towards mass production techniques that methods were devised to reduce the cost of labour with the substantial introduction of piecework and the intensification and enlargement of supervision to increase output.[11] The setting of piecework prices brought foremen into direct conflict with workers.[12]

Craftsmen reacted to the increasing numbers of foremen by recognising supervision only from a man who 'had served his time.'[13] This practice helped entrench the protection of craft customs with the appointment of supervisors from the ranks of skilled workers perpetuating a conservative resistance to change making it practically impossible for modernisation to be carried out.[14] The foreman became an indispensable part of industry controlling the shop floor with virtual unlimited power.[15] Howard Gospel quotes one contemporary engineering employer as saying,

'In most works... the whole industrial life of a workman is in the hands of his foreman. The foreman chooses him from among the applicants at the works gate; often he settles what wages he shall get; no advance of wage or promotion is possible except on his initiative; he often sets the piece price and has power to cut it when he wishes; and lastly, he almost always has unrestricted power of discharge.'[16]

The degree of autonomous authority from management held by the foreman was also echoed by Alfred Williams in his description of a railway factory. Williams recalled that foremen were widely respected on the shop floor and defended their respective craft and the price for the labour of their men.[17] However, changes were afoot and new methods of work revolutionised the shop floor, the tradition of appointing foremen based on seniority ended as did the 'considerable liberty... and privileges' previously enjoyed.[18]

The foreman, the link in the hierarchy between labour and management, was not a universal feature. The heavy industries of coal, iron and steel and shipbuilding continued with a traditional supervisory system based upon an amended version of the gang system from when work was subcontracted to individual contractors who were responsible for their own workers.[19] Studies of shipbuilding have stressed the significance of the continuation of traditional craft skills and the control of the labour process by strong unions like the Boilermakers.[20] Foremen had little to do with driving the worker and were much more associated with abilities at a particular trade or craft. Underforemen acted as subordinates who organised the work of smaller groups or gangs.[21] Foremen were expected to act as arbiters in conflicts between the different trades within the ship yards a system that was

even formalised in official agreements.[22] However on other occasions, such was their power that the firm acted as the arbitrator in disputes between workers and foremen.[23]

The uncertainty of the position of the foreman between capital and labour drew the supervisor to the forefront of the industrial battles of the late nineteenth century with the growth of militant trade unionism associated with the intensification of mechanisation. The supervisor was perceived by labour to be on the side of management but conversely his power was curtailed.[24] McIvor has suggested that there was a 'discernible shift…with the foremen increasingly relating to management rather than men.'[25] Although contradictorily employers were alarmed by the degree of unionisation amongst foremen up until the 1920s.[26] In the engineering industry employers concerned about the allegiance of their supervisors to craft and craft unions embarked upon provision of additional benefits and privileges. They funded the Foremen's Mutual Benefit Society as a vehicle for the suppression of unionism amongst supervisors.[27] Even in new industries employers were worried, at the Humber car factory in Coventry foremen were strictly forbidden to join a union.[28] In mechanical engineering some employers overcame problems of allegiance by altering some grades of supervisors into white-collar salaried staff.[29]

In the early twentieth century industry became increasingly complex with greater technical skills demanded of first-line supervisors.[30] As the influence of scientific management and the work of F.W.Taylor came to be applied to British industry firms, employed greater numbers of staff and engineers with scientific and technical training who diluted the role of

foremen transferring functions to new grades within the management hierarchy.[31] The new methods, particularly work study were significant in changing the effectiveness of management on the shop-floor.[32] In 1915, Williams had noted the increased bureaucratisation of supervision in the railway workshop led to an increase in the number of supervisors as workers were watched and timed.[33] Scientific management demanded the 'maximum division of labour, control and supervision of the operatives at every stage in the labour process' together with a complicated system of calculating the financial reward to labour.[34] The job of the foreman became fragmented with the creation of functional supervisors for quality inspection, maintenance and 'speed and feed' men to control the output of workers.[35]

Fordism, the direct control of labour through close labour supervision and machine pacing came to Britain in 1912. British employers rejected the high wage strategy used by firms such as Ford to increase the effort of its employees they were still wedded to a nineteenth century 'low wage philosophy'.[36] In addition Fordism and scientific management was unsuited because of the attitude of the British worker who was less inclined to accept iron discipline. 'A great deal more efficiency and interest can be obtained from employees if those in charge treat them in a kindly and sympathetic manner', suggested one senior manager.[37]

British management was convinced that the Premium Bonus System would lead to increased output because workers would demand to be supplied with the means to earn more wages. To implement the system, Daimler introduced a new hierarchical supervisory structure and ended day to day managerial involvement by the Board of Directors. At the top a new Works Supervisor was appointed and the number of foremen reduced. On

the shop floor the number of lead hands and charge hands were increased who were paid on a percentage of the bonus paid to those they supervised.[38] The key to making the system work was centralisation of management control by placing new emphasis on information flows, proper costing of jobs and the absorption of former shop floor activities by the design office.[39] Other companies copied Daimler, at Dennis the incorporation of specific job cards and the Premium Bonus System was purposely designed to curtail workers having to make decisions and reduce the duties of foremen to surveillance of workers.[40] The Premium Bonus system was designed to reduce the supervisory demands on management but it failed to secure the productivity increases that were hoped and increased the numbers involved in supervision undermining the authority of foremen.[41]

The shipbuilding industry remained relatively impervious to the changes in supervisory control experienced by manufacturing industry and its system of squads led by an underforeman continued largely because of the strength of the Boilermakers' Society.[42] The nature of British shipbuilding with cyclical demand and retention of craft prevented management from adopting other forms of supervision other than using low supervision methods that were less subject to management control.[43] The system was however advantageous to employers due to the conditions of the industry in that it reduced the need for the employment of specialist managers.[44] As one manager in the shipbuilding industry said, 'These men are our non-commissioned officers and our economic production is largely dependent... on them.'[45] The foreman however remained a pivotal figure retaining control over distribution of work and overtime 'relationships with foremen were considered to be critical in getting jobs.'[46]

T he intervention of government into industry during the First World War to control production resulted in the rapid escalation of change and a major impact on supervision.[47] Practices and new techniques of management previously only in embryonic form were brought to the fore. For skilled workers the cause for concern was the dilution of skilled work with changes to production methods incorporating new machinery and new labour as women joined the industrial workforce. Opportunity opened for skilled men to provide training and supervision of the new labour force. Although craft resistance to change allowed employers to bypass the previous norm and appoint supervisors from the ranks of the semi-skilled.[48] Once again, the shipbuilding industry was largely impregnable to such change and skilled workers kept their grip on their craft base.[49] In a quid pro quo for acquiescence to the adoption of changes on the shop floor, a whole new system of Joint Industrial Councils was established, bringing trade unions and employers into centralised collective bargaining agreements further eroding the power of first-line supervisors.[50]

As a consequence of the War women became the mainstay of industrial assembly work with the partial exception of the car industry.[51] During the inter war period, 1923-1937, the number of women employed in motor vehicle construction increased by 68.7 percent and 62.5 per cent in engineering.[52] Women workers were generally directed by female supervisors as was the case at Morris Motors in the 1930's as recalled by Arthur Excell.[53] The appointment of female supervisors created tensions and challenges to the norm that foremen were promoted from the ranks of the skilled craftsman, a role denied to women.[54] It is unclear if there was a differentiation in power

and responsibilities between male and female supervisors. Female supervisors however could not stop the abuse of authority by senior male supervisors over female workers.[55]

Whether co-incidence or not, the takeoff of women's employment in engineering proceeded with the development of Welfare Management.[56] The Welfare Workers Association, later to become the Institute of Personnel Management, was formed in 1913 and led by Mary Wood a former welfare worker at Rowntree, a principal employer of female labour. By 1918 over one thousand female welfare supervisors were being employed to look after industrial women workers.[57] The employment of women can possibly be linked to the diminution of the traditional control by foremen over recruitment and training during the interwar period as firms such as ICI created labour or welfare departments whose scope were later extended to cover male employees.[58] This process according to Thurley, was combined with training for the first time to improve the overall effectiveness of the supervisor.[59] Although on the whole welfare work is associated with enlightened employers such as Cadbury and Rowntree who emphasised its advantages in reducing the costs of supervision as well as ending friction between labour and management.[60]

The concept of the separate labour department that took responsibility for hiring, firing and allocation of workers away from first-line management became increasingly popular and was for example adopted by the Albion Motor Company in 1931. However, at Albion to counterbalance the loss of one area of supervisory authority over labour, greater emphasis was placed on inspection of output increasing the amount of supervision.[61] Formal systems of employment, not just hiring and firing but also lay-offs slowly came to be

increasingly handled by specialised managers in the employment office after the First World War.[62]

During the interwar period after the engineering lockout of 1922 employers gained freedom of action to introduce new techniques of management and supervision. In the car industry the power of the craftworker was broken and the unionised skilled engineer only remained a factor amongst toolmakers and sheetmetal workers whilst employers introduced piecework and bonus schemes on a wide scale.[63] Although there were some industrial disputes during the interwar period, generally shop floor organisation was too weak and therefore supervisors were not challenged collectively by workers.[64] The anti union policy at Morris Motors, has been told by Arthur Excell, where a form of supervision was enacted by the company appointees of workers representatives to the 'League of Industry.'[65] At the Dagenham plant of the anti-union company Ford, the discipline exercised by the visual supervision of the foreman from high above the shop floor was enhanced by 'Service men' who periodically launched raids to enforce strict disciplinary rules.[66]

The supervisory control of the pace of production is contrasted by Lewchuck between Ford and Standard. At Ford, he recounted a worker's description of the foreman speeding up the line towards the end of the day to ensure production targets were met. In comparison, at Standard when a foreman increased the speed, the workers reacted by breaking off work until the agreed equilibrium was restored.[67]

Jonathan Zeitlin has recorded that the shop steward evolved from the foreman. In Coventry during the 1920s, the gang system was widely used

with payment based on collective piecework. Management initially appointed the foreman the gang leader, however by the 1930s at the firm Standard and elsewhere, workers had won the right to elect their own gang leaders who in effect became their shop stewards and the negotiators of piece prices.[68] Other studies record examples of supervisors holding the position of shop steward and the consequent role conflict suggests that supervisory autonomy was widespread.[69]

In two case studies investigated by Craig Littler on the introduction of the Bedaux work-study system he found that the reaction by supervisors to the bureaucratisation of management was different. The Bedaux system named after its founder the French fascist Charles E. Bedaux, drew on the work of F.W.Taylor and according to Littler, 'offered greater management power at the expense of the worker.'[70] In contrast, Lewchuk describes scientific management as social engineering designed to promote a 'harmonic fellowship' between management and workers but the enthusiasm for it largely passed Britain by.[71] Both studies by Littler show less harmony as they ended in strike action by the workers. In the investigation of the Wolsey hosiery company, the supervisors opposed its introduction as it threatened their own positions. In some cases supervision was to be replaced with written formal instructions for workers and quality control taken from the foremen to be replaced by a centralised 'control structure.' The Bedaux changes at Wolsey would result in the 'diminution of the power, autonomy and responsibility of the departmental foremen.'[72] The largely unskilled, non-unionised and female labour force combined with the supervisors to resist the changes. In contrast to Wolsey, the second firm studied was in engineering, Richard Johnson and Nephew, where there was a highly unionised, skilled

male workforce. Littler found no evidence of supervisory resistance although in this case a system of bonus payments to foremen and chargehands had been introduced which 'may have forestalled opposition.'[73]

Supervisors despite loosing direct responsibility for hiring still held considerable influence. In one Coventry car factory, it was common for the job interview to be a formality, 'the real decision had already been made by the foreman rather than the personnel officer.' It was therefore common for whole family networks to be employed in a single plant.[74] Many foremen retained not only influence but also management confidence and responsibility.[75] Foremen, however, also retained powers of arbitrary discipline and as Excell recalled favouritism was endemic and sometimes actions were brutal.[76] However, the foreman-worker relationship was a highly dependent one and in many cases of longstanding.[77] The foreman would often seek to protect his workers as one empirical study by Zweig published in 1948, but relevant to the 1920s and 1930s, has shown. In the study, a worker wanted piecework but the foreman was concerned that this would disadvantage elderly workers. His view was that the foreman should get co-operation from his workers 'by making them feel that they get a fair deal.'[78]

Much of the literature gives scant attention to the role played by front-line supervisors in British industry and some contemporary official enquiries even totally neglected them.[79] However, from the late nineteenth century up to the late 1930s it can be detected that a historical transformation of the position of first-line management in British industry did occur. At first employers controlled their workers by delegating complete autonomy to their supervisors who in some

instances acted as petty despots but the foremen also exercised beneficial power to offer protection for the spirit of craftsmanship and skills that they themselves had been infused with. The foreman with absolute control became less indispensable with increasing division of labour although more supervisors were required with numbers doubling between 1911 and 1951.[80]

Employers however could no longer rely upon their supervisors and uncertainty reigned in the relationship although evidence remains inconclusive in a number of instances foremen did choose to support labour.[81] The functions of foremen became fragmented and greater technical skills were demanded of some supervisors whilst others were confined to discipline and control. The ultimate power of the supervisor, to hire and fire was eroded with the growth of welfare and labour management although evidence suggests that up to 1939 foremen retained a great deal of informal influence. One development that has been unexplored is in the growth of female supervisors in the industrial employment of women workers. The transformation of the supervisory role was not universal, some industries like shipbuilding remained relatively impervious to the changes taking place in the car industry for instance. But although the role varied and functions changed, the individual front-line supervisor up to 1939 generally retained a great deal of autonomy.

NOTES

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[2] Wedderburn, Dorothy *introduction to* Child, John and Partridge, Bruce, <u>Lost managers: Supervisors in industry and society</u>, (Cambridge, 1982). *See also* Thurley, Keith and Wirdenius, Hans, <u>Supervision: A Reappraisal</u>, (London, 1973), p.9.

[3] Tressell, Robert, <u>The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists</u>, (St.Albans, 1965), pp.32-34.

[4] Pollard, Sydney, <u>The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain</u>, (London, 1965), p.85, 132, 178. *see also* Gospel, Howard F., 'Managerial Structures and Strategies: An Introduction', in Howard Gospel and Craig Littler (eds.), <u>Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations: An Historical and Comparative Study</u>, (London, 1983), p.8. *and* McIvor, Arthur J., <u>A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950</u>, (Basingstoke, 2001), p.82.

[5] *On pay see* Pollard, <u>The Genesis of Modern Management</u>, (1965), pp.144-145.

[6] Melling, Joseph, "Non-Commissioned Officers': British employers and their supervisory workers, 1880-1920,' <u>Social History</u>, Vol.5, 2, (1980), p.188 and 191.

[7] McIvor, Arthur J., <u>A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950</u>, (Basingstoke, 2001), p.82.

[8] V. I. Lenin, <u>Lenin's May Day Leaflet</u>, First Published: April 19, 1896 as a leaflet printed by the Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class. http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1896/apr/19.htm [Accessed 2 December 2001].

[9] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), p.189.

[10] Pollard, <u>The Genesis of Modern Management</u>, (1965), p.268.

[11] Zeitlin, Jonathan, 'The Labour Strategies of British Engineering Employers, 1890-1922,' in Howard Gospel and Craig Littler (eds.), <u>Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations: An Historical and Comparative Study</u>, (London, 1983), pp.26-27. *See also* Lewchuck, Wayne, <u>American technology and the British vehicle industry: a century of vehicle production in Britain</u>, (Cambridge, 1987), p.68.

[12] Burgess, Keith, 'Authority relations and the division of labour in British industry, with special reference to Clydeside, c.1860-1930,' <u>Social History</u>, Vol.11, 2, (1986), p.219.

[13] Clegg, H.A., <u>A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, Vol.II, 1911-1933</u>, (Oxford, 1985), p.8.

[14] Thurley, Keith and Wirdenius, Hans, <u>Supervision: A Reappraisal</u>, (London, 1973), pp.2-5. *See also* Littler, Craig R., <u>The Development of the Labour Process in Capitalist Societies</u>, (London, 1982), p.141.

[15] Garside, W.R. and Gospel, H.F., 'Employers and Managers: Their Organizational Structure and Changing Industrial Strategies,' in Chris Wrigley (ed.), <u>A History of British industrial relations, 1875-1914</u>, (Brighton, 1982), p.102.

[16] Gospel, 'Managerial Structures and Strategies' (1983), p.8. *see also similar contemporary account in* Thurley and Wirdenius, <u>Supervision</u>, (1973), p.5.

[17] Williams, Alfred, <u>Life in a Railway Factory</u>, Reprint of 1915 ed. (New York, 1980), pp.78-81, 97-99, and 103.

[18] Williams, <u>Life in a Railway Factory</u>, (1980), pp.74-75, and 78.

[19] Gospel, 'Managerial Structures and Strategies' (1983), p.8.

[20] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), pp.200-201.

[21] Burgess, Keith, 'Authority relations and the division of labour in British industry, with special reference to Clydeside, c.1860-1930,' <u>Social History</u>, Vol.11, 2, (1986), p.214. *see also* Melling, 'Non-Commissioned Officers' (1980), p.201.

[22] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), p.206.

[23] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), p.206. *Such a system continued for many years see also* Cousins, Jim and Brown, Richard, 'Patterns of Paradox: Shipbuilding Workers' Images of Society,' in Martin Bulmer (ed.), <u>Working-class Images of Society</u>, Ch.4, (London, 1975), p.56.

[24] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), pp.192-193.

[25] McIvor, Arthur J., <u>A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950</u>, (Basingstoke, 2001), p.87.

[26] Burgess, <u>Social History</u>, (1986), pp.224-225.

[27] Burgess, <u>Social History</u>, (1986), p.230. *see also* Lewchuck, Wayne, <u>American technology and the British vehicle industry: a century of vehicle production in Britain</u>, (Cambridge, 1987), p.68. *and* Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), pp.206-208. *and* Reid, Alastair, 'Employers' strategies amd craft production: the British shipbuilding industry 1870-1950,' in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), <u>The Power to Manage? Employers and industrial relations in comparative-historical perspective</u>, (London, 1991), p.44.

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[29] Burgess, <u>Social History</u>, (1986), p.225.

[30] Gospel, Howard F., 'Managerial Structures and Strategies: An Introduction', in Howard Gospel and Craig Littler (eds.), <u>Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations: An Historical and Comparative Study</u>, (London, 1983), p.8.

[31] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), pp.196 and 210.

[32] Thurley, and Wirdenius, <u>Supervision</u>, (1973), pp.2-7.

[33] Williams, Alfred, <u>Life in a Railway Factory</u>, Reprint of 1915 ed. (New York, 1980), p.304.

[34] Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), p.195.

[35] McIvor, Arthur J., <u>A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950</u>, (Basingstoke, 2001), p.94.

[36] Lewchuck, <u>American technology</u>, (1987), pp.93-94.

[37] *Quoted in* Lewchuck, <u>American technology</u>, (1987), p.159.

[38] Lewchuck, <u>American technology</u>, (1987), p.76.

[39] Ibid. pp.140-142.

[40] Ibid. p.143.

[41] Burgess, <u>Social History</u>, (1986), p.227 *and* Lewchuck, <u>American technology</u>, (1987), p.140.

[42] Reid, <u>The Power to Manage</u> (1991), p.39.

[43] Ibid. pp.43-44.

[44] Lorenz, Edward and Wilkinson, Frank, 'The Shipbuilding Industry, 1880-1965' in Bernard Elbaum and William Lazonick (eds.), <u>The decline of the British economy: an institutional perspective</u>, (Oxford, 1986), p.115.

[45] *quoted in* Melling, <u>Social History</u> (1980), p.210.

[46] Cousins, Jim and Brown, Richard, 'Patterns of Paradox: Shipbuilding Workers' Images of Society,' in Martin Bulmer (ed.), <u>Working-class Images of Society</u>, (London, 1975), pp.58-60.

[47] Burgess, Social History, (1986), pp.228-229.

[48] Melling, Social History (1980), p.213.

[49] Melling, Social History (1980), p.214. *including the exclusion of female workers, see* Reid, The Power to Manage (1991), p.41.

[50] Burgess, Social History, (1986), p.229.

[51] Miriam Glucksmann, Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Interwar Britain, (London, 1999), pp.2-3.

[52] Ibid. pp.48-49.

[53] Excell, Arthur, 'Morris Motors in the 1930's. Part I,' History Workshop Journal, Issue 6, (1978), pp.60-61 *see also* Melling, Joseph, "Non-Commissioned Officers': British employers and their supervisory workers, 1880-1920,' Social History, Vol.5, 2, (1980), p.214.

[54] Melling, Social History (1980), p.215.

[55] Excell, Arthur, History Workshop Journal, Issue 6, (1978), p.61.

[56] *Melling links welfare work with female employment see* Melling, Social History (1980), pp.197 and 214.

[57] Clegg, Industrial Relations, (1970), p.161. Gospel, Howard F., 'Managerial Structures and Strategies: An Introduction', in Howard Gospel and Craig Littler (eds.), Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations: An Historical and Comparative Study, (London, 1983), p.9.

[58] Gospel, Managerial Strategies, (1983), p.10. *see also* Melling, Social History (1980), p.198.

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[71] Lewchuck, American technology, (1987), p.89.

[72] Littler, Development of the Labour Process, (1982), p.121.

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[74] Thompson, Paul, 'Playing at being skilled men: factory culture and pride in work skills among Coventry car workers,' Social History, Vol.13, 1, (1988), pp.54-55. see also Excell, History Workshop Journal, (1978), p.65.

[75] Thompson, Social History, (1988), p.59.

[76] Excell, History Workshop Journal, (1978), pp.53-54. *See also* Zeitlin, History Workshop Journal, (1980), p.122.

[77] Thurley, and Wirdenius, Supervision, (1973), p.6.

[78] Zweig, F., Labour, life and poverty, (London, 1948), p.76 and 183.

[79] Survey of Industrial Relations, Parliamentary Committee on Industry and Trade, HMSO, (1926).

[80] McIvor, History of Work, (2001), p.40.

[81] *This is a conclusion of the Clydeside study of Burgess, see* Burgess, Social History, (1986), p.233.

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