

Competition and Control at Work:¹ Rural Miners and the Labour Process

CHRIS CURTIN

DAN SHIELDS*

University College, Galway

Abstract: For most of its short working life, the mining development at Tynagh, Co. Galway was characterised by "good" industrial relations. In explaining this phenomenon the authors of this paper suggest that while the structure of the labour process at the mine was such as to undermine worker solidarity, management control of the former was far from absolute and uncontested. It is further argued that worker-management relations were strongly influenced by factors external to the labour process; these included differences in the workers' class and spatial backgrounds; ambivalent attitudes to trade unions and the latter's inexperience with mining; the locality's dependence on the mine for employment and the alliance of the local élite and mine management.

I INTRODUCTION

An intrinsic feature of industrial enterprises is that their successful operation depends on the co-operation of parties who have competing interests – management and labour. A basis for conflict can be located in two broad areas: how should productive activity be organised and how should surplus

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1. This study is primarily based on interviews with ex-mine workers during a survey conducted in November-December 1983. The survey questionnaire was aimed at securing information on the composition and attitudes of the workforce but it was also used as an introduction to further largely unstructured interviews designed to construct a description of the labour process at Tynagh. The survey sample was derived from a workforce list (excluding members of senior staff) and the sample was

be distributed. In mining, particularly short-term mining,² a further possible source of conflict is the rate of exploitation of a non-renewable resource which governs the future of workers' jobs. While sociologists have studied industrial conflict in its many forms, they have become increasingly interested in the puzzle of why there is not more of it. Attempts at explaining "low" levels of industrial strife have increasingly focused on power imbalances between labour and management and the latter's capacity to control the former, in particular by its appropriation of the "labour process" through rationalisation, specialisation and mechanisation. Braverman (1974) and Burawoy (1979) have been particularly influential in the "labour process" debate. Braverman's work has emphasised the tendency towards deskilling and the rôle of scientific management as *the* form of work control under capitalism. Burawoy is most interested in the way and extent to which management gain the "consent" of workers and the latter's willingness to co-operate with management objectives. Any control that workers exert over the "labour process" is ultimately, according to Burawoy manipulated by management in its own interests.

The "labour process" literature has recently been criticised on a number of counts. Storey (1985) has argued that it is flawed by its "monist presuppositions", that is, it "rests on functionalist premises that capital can and must devise coherent systems of control to ensure the structurally necessary extraction of surplus value" (p. 94) and is incapable of coming to terms with the complexity and diversity of the actual control process in work organisations. Littler and Salaman (1987) have drawn attention to what they see as the major limitations of theories of the labour process. These include: the tendency to ignore or at least to minimise the role of class struggle in moulding the labour process; confining analysis to the interior of the workshop and thereby ignoring external factors such as the non-availability of alternative employment; failing to address the problems of division – other than between the skilled and unskilled – within the working-class and obscuring the variability of worker resistance, whereby "some changes are resisted more than

composed of all those on the list living in Loughrea town or its hinterland (defined as within 5 miles). In all 120 ex-workers on the list came into this category and of these 64 were interviewed. As the survey was conducted some three years after the mine had let most of its staff go and two years after it had finally closed, it is apparent that not all the 120 were available for interview. It seems that approximately 40 of the ex-miners had left the area so the actual sample was 80 ex-miners. Of these 3 refused to be interviewed, 6 could not make definite appointments and 11 could not be contacted. Additional information was derived from unstructured interviews with senior management at the mine. Financial information in relation to the company came primarily from a study of *Business and Finance* magazine and also from local and national newspapers.

2. It is difficult to define precisely what lifespan would make a particular mine long or short term. What is more important from our point of view is the extent to which mining is carried on in a location or region over an extended period. Here we are discussing a situation where a single mine was opened and closed within fifteen years. There were no other mines in the locality and there was no tradition of mining in the area.

others, some groups resist more than others, some groups achieve a 'negotiated order' whilst some groups became a privileged elite" (p. 256).

In this paper we examine the mining development at Tynagh in East Galway, where a rich body of ore was exploited over a short period with consequent large profits for the company and limited resistance from the workers. In our efforts at explaining the "good" industrial relations at Tynagh we found management control of the labour process a necessary but not a sufficient condition. We had to take on board many of the criticisms of labour process theory discussed in the preceding paragraph and bring into our analysis a number of "external" factors. These include the diverse socio-economic background of the labour force and the latter's lack of industrial work experience; the ambivalent attitude of workers towards trade unions and the latter's inexperience with mining; and the wider "communal" context of the mining development, in particular the rôle of local petty bourgeoisie. These factors had also to be set in the context of the dependent status of both the regional economy and the Irish mining industry. All the local and regional actors were involved to a greater or lesser extent in relations of dependency with a transnational mining company and this dictated severe limitations on their capacity and willingness to act. It is clear, in addition, that the short-term nature of the mine limited the capacities of those involved to develop perceptions, strategies or alliances which could have altered the situation (Shields, 1984). Finally, we also draw attention to the workers' capacity, despite all these forces, to offer resistance, even if limited, to management's plans.

II THE LABOUR PROCESS IN MINING

Understanding the labour process in mining is dependent on an appreciation of the features which set it apart from other large-scale industries. First, it involves primary production of a non-renewable resource. Second, the variability of geological and other factors has the consequence that a considerable degree of autonomy and control has traditionally been the preserve of the miners themselves. The physical nature of mining has rendered impossible the type of supervision and control utilised in other industries. We will now examine each of these "peculiarities".

Mining is based on resources which at least on a local level are scarce and non-renewable, with the necessary consequence that any particular mine will eventually be exhausted. It has also to be understood that scarcity of resources is a relative concept, ranging from absolute exhaustion, through difficulties of extraction, to absence of the most profitable ore grades. Information relating to geological conditions is typically concentrated in management, leaving

the miners in ignorance over the implications of their productivity. The outcome may be that the extra-productive miner is in effect digging out his own job but at a rate he cannot himself determine. In short-term mining situations in particular, control of information is a major asset in the struggle for control.

The job of mining itself demands that the individual miner and the small immediate work group retains a considerable degree of skill and autonomy. As Burawoy points out, "The distinctive features of mining organisations originate in the inescapable environmental uncertainty of the underground orebodies from which minerals are extracted. Unable to control the geological environment, work organisations can adapt to uncertainty in two opposed ways" (1979, Appendix). For the mining company the choices are the expensive option of constant supervision or the abdication of immediate control of the working environment.³ Although other means of control are increasing in importance, payment systems are still crucial. The two main payment systems are the daywage and piece-rate methods. Within these forms there are considerable variations but it is fair to say that the piece-rate or at least bonus systems have dominated in the mining industry. One problem for the sociologist is to explain what the concrete effects of these systems are on workers' perceptions and organisation and their activities at work.

If we look briefly at the history of the British coalfield we can see a range of payment systems which are associated with varying traditions of worker organisation and militancy. The "Board and Pillar" system centred on a pair of workmen coaling in a single workplace and was frequently associated with cavilling, a method of periodically rotating workplaces among workers by lot, to ensure that any work group was not left with an unfair amount of poor coal or dangerous conditions (Douglass and Krieger 1983; Krieger 1983). The second main method of work organisation was subcontracting. This involved the mine owner allocating or hiring faces, etc., to a "butty" who then took out as much coal as possible. The "butty" took his profit from this production and his workers depended directly on him for their pay (Goffee 1981; Krieger 1983). In the North-east where the "Board and Pillar" system predominated workers have long-established traditions of solidarity and militancy whereas their colleagues in some Midlands areas have seldom challenged management prerogatives. However, the basic problem here is the extent to which the wage systems themselves directly cause these effects. If we turn to the recent work of Krieger we see that he argues that the payment schemes are mediated through a range of factors which he designates the "politics in production" (Krieger 1983). Since these factors were generated over the long history of coal-mining in these regions, the short-term nature of the mine we are discussing is crucial for the understanding of the Tynagh case.

3. There is the possibility nowadays of computerised supervision (cf. Thompson, 1983, p. 115) but this is relatively underdeveloped.

III THE MINE

While it had been generally accepted throughout the nineteenth century that Ireland had no mineral reserves worthy of the name, the country experienced in the 1960s and 1970s a "mining boom". Accepting the proposition that "reserves are a function of exploration" (Bosson and Varon, 1977, p. 61), the problem arises why exploration was undertaken at this time. Because of the dependent situation of Ireland in the world economy, the primary reasons can be found in significant changes in international mining patterns in this period. With the growing move to independence in the colonial countries and the demands for "fair" returns from national resources, mining companies increasingly looked for "safe" countries (Tanzer, 1980). Advances in mining technology made feasible the development of mineral deposits previously considered uncommercial. Additionally successive Irish governments had enacted legislation facilitating exploration work and the acquisition of deposits, many of which were already State-owned.⁴ In 1956 the Government had introduced a tax exemption for the first four years of a mine's production and a 50 per cent rebate for the following four years. When allied to the presence of a surplus labour force which was relatively low paid and with no tradition of trade unionism, these conditions attracted foreign companies to explore for Irish mineral reserves.

Internationally the mining industry is dominated by large-scale multinationals with their home bases in the capital exporting states (Bosson and Varon, 1977). However, many of the companies which commenced exploration in Ireland in this period were Canadian. Because mining in Canada has historically been dominated by American capital, many of these companies would not be dominant forces in international mining. Given these factors, the source of dependence in Irish mining must be located not solely in the individual companies involved (whether local or foreign) but in the financial arrangements which these companies are obliged to enter into.

Among the foreign mining companies attracted to Ireland was Northgate Exploration Ltd., a Canadian public company.⁵ In 1958 five Irish immigrants bought, and re-organised the Canadian Public Company, Kirk-Hudson Mines Ltd., which they renamed Northgate Exploration Ltd. Northgate was a publicly quoted company, registered on the Toronto Stock Exchange. Despite its Irish directors, therefore, the company's viability and success was deter-

4. Minerals Development Act 1940 (still the legislative foundation for exploration and development); Slieve Ardagh Coal Development Act 1940; Minerals Exploration and Development Act 1941 which set up Mianrai Teoranta, a wholly owned state mining company.

5. Tynagh was actually owned and operated by Irish Base Metals Ltd., an Irish public company which was wholly owned by Northgate Exploration. The board of Irish Base Metals was composed of appointees of Northgate and the various foreign interests involved in financing the mine.

mined by the assessments of its Canadian shareholders, and the readiness of Canadian financial institutions to support it. Long-term planning was based in Canada.

In 1961 three employees of Northgate prospecting in Clare and South Galway discovered a lead-zinc deposit of major proportions at Tynagh, some thirty miles from the port of Galway in the West of Ireland. Between 1961 and 1965 construction and development work was undertaken; the mine went into production in 1965 and finally closed in 1981. Workforce figures varied considerably over this period but on average 350 people worked in all departments of the mine. Lead and zinc were the primary products but silver and copper were also produced at various stages. Initially the ores were mined from an open pit but in 1969 work was commenced on an underground tunnel. Surface mining was discontinued in 1973 and thereafter until 1980 all the ore was brought from the underground section. The ore was concentrated by a flotation process in the "mill" and was then transported by road to Galway docks for export to foreign smelters. At one stage it was the largest individual lead-zinc mine in Europe and over its lifespan, but particularly in its early stages, the mine was a very profitable undertaking. It had a total revenue of £253.75 million, of which £85.5 million was surplus (Walsh, 1981).

This short-term mining operation was conducted with minimal overt industrial problems. While there were two large-scale work stoppages which will be considered below, it is clear that there was no major contest over the control of extraction rate or conditions at the mine. The possible explanations for this consensus constitute the core of this paper but it is important to understand the factors in Northgate's "corporate economy" which dictated this rapid exploitation of the mine.

In the first place in the pursuit of profit, the Company had widespread interests. These included in Canada a 7½ per cent share in Whim Creek Mines and shareholdings in Silver Eureka Corporation, Westfield Minerals Ltd., and Western Mines Ltd. In 1981 it paid 184 million dollars for three gold mines in Northern Quebec. Elsewhere the company had an interest in the Black Angel Mine in Greenland and had undertaken exploration work in Spain and Australia. More fundamentally the scale of a company's operations can determine its ability unilaterally to plan its operations, while access to smelting and marketing facilities is of fundamental importance in "base metal" mining.

In an industry dominated by multinational corporations, Northgate was a relatively small company. The high cost of developing the mine and concentrating facilities could not be sustained by Northgate alone, as a result of which it had to involve a financial consortium which included arrangements for the smelting and selling of ore produced at Tynagh. This deal had crucial consequences for Tynagh in terms of the speed and nature of the exploitation. In 1964 Northgate raised 12.5 million dollars through the sale of First Mort-

gage Bonds. Northgate took approximately 50 per cent of the bonds using finance raised in Canadian banking circles. A consortium composed of two British firms – Midland and International Bank and British Metals Corporation – and three European smelting corporations were given first preference on Tynagh's concentrate production. Of the three smelting corporations, one was Metallgesellschaft A.G., Frankfurt, which was the largest non-ferrous metal corporation in Germany and the other two were Societe Minerale Metallurgique de Penarroya S.A. Paris and Societe Generale des Minerals S.A. Brussels. These financial and smelting arrangements tied up production for the most lucrative periods of the mine's life. Therefore the overall policies and plans shaping the mines, miners' and communities' futures were often determined by forces, about which many were only dimly aware.

IV THE LABOUR PROCESS AT TYNAGH

Labour process theorists contend that the source of workers' ideology (particularly "consent" to management practices) and their solidarity or lack thereof, must be sought in the actual politics of production, as shaped by management strategies. In this context it is now pertinent to ask how the labour process at Tynagh was organised and what impact it had on productivity and worker attitudes. From this perspective it is clear that the differentiation and geographical separation of the workforce shaped their perceptions, and ultimately undermined solidarity. In particular the place of workers in the production process determined their power or lack of it and consequent capacities to secure their interests. The scale of job differentiation in the mine was remarkable. Underground where there was an elaborate job classification, there were development, production and service workers. In production there were long-hole drillers, long-hole chargers and mucker-outers. The men on development worked in small groups and had a broad range of skills. Servicemen included general labourers, those sinking raises, pumpmen and those driving mobile equipment. In addition, there were crusher operators and the underground maintenance team. On surface, apart from the mill, one had maintenance crews, general labourers, drivers of front-end loaders, dumpers, etc., and crusher operators.

In the mill, differentiation was not as marked as men moved between various jobs as mill operators or senior operators, but at any particular period they could be working on dryers, filters, etc., or on mill sampling. As well as these manual jobs, there was work in the laboratory, stores or offices. A further differentiation occurred with shift work. Virtually all the workers at Tynagh, apart from administration, store and some day crews, did work shifts with consequent difficulties for trade union organisation. There was a number

of different shift cycles in the mine and these changed over time. Gradually, maintenance crews worked on a two shift basis, but were on call at other times; underground workers operated the three basic eight-hour shifts, while the mill had a number of different shift systems over the years.

Production at the mine had two essential components, the mining stage — on the surface initially and later underground — and the milling stage, which concentrated the ores for export. Between the mine and the mill, the lumps of ore were put through the crusher and the ball mills to reduce their size. Samples of the concentrates went to the laboratories for checking of the ore grades. There was a sizeable maintenance crew at Tynagh, the majority being fitters with quite a few electricians and one carpenter. In addition to these there was a large stores and administrative staff, plus the engineering and geology sections. Supervising the entire operation were the senior staff, including mill superintendent, underground manager and the general manager. The mine workforce was spread over a wide area with concentrations in the underground, mill and maintenance sections, but with sizeable numbers in the laboratory and stores as well. Even this breakdown does not give an indication of the spread of the workforce within the mine. This will involve looking at each of the sections in more detail.

There was a considerable variety of jobs in the underground. To place them in their context it is necessary to describe the area and the various phases of production carried on there. The underground section was entered through the main tunnel from the opencast pit. During its initial construction, conditions were poor, with virtually no facilities or ventilation. This was the main access road to the underground mine, connecting the various levels with each other and the surface. Off this were the different levels at which the actual mining of the ore took place. Tunnels known as sill drifts, were developed off the main tunnel. These were drilled at least 50 feet apart, and interconnected through the orebody. The basic differentiation among underground workers was between those working in development, others in production crews and the remainder who performed an assortment of tasks. As their name implies, development crews drilled the tunnels paving the way for production workers who extracted the ore. Other people in this area were primarily involved in the service and supply of equipment, transporting the ore and maintaining the roadways, pumps, etc. We will now consider how the actual organisation of work at the mine sectionalised the workforce, either by actual differentiation or through perceptions of separate interests. In the main this will focus on the underground but it will be necessary to consider some other groups particularly the mill-workers.

The development worker is in many respects comparable to the prototypical face-worker in coalmining (Goodrich, 1977). They possessed a variety of skills and considerable autonomy. As one ex-miner noted: "People were

working in different areas so with shift bosses covering those distances when moving around to them, you were your own boss for most of the time". Working in pairs they drilled the headings to prepare the orebody for extraction. Their work involved all the various stages of tunnelling viz. drilling the holes for the explosives, charging them, setting them off and mucking-out. Each rock formation in hard rock mining demands a particular cut so these men had to be trained (in this case by Swedish miners) and experienced in order to secure the optimum footage. Similarly, the scaling down and clearing out of the headings required skill and knowledge because of the dangers involved. Each individual development worker had to possess this expertise. Thus although the shift boss was generally responsible for safety and the assignment of tasks, the mode of proceeding and the actual obedience to safety regulations was in the main left to the miners themselves with only occasional and infrequent supervision.

Like most of the underground workers, the main control the company exercised over them was through payment and particularly bonus systems. Their bonuses were paid on the basis of the footage developed per shift. They were thus, within the limits set by the company, in autonomous control of this component of their pay. Combined with their skills, experience and control, the solidarity achieved through working together in small groups welded them into a united section of the workforce. Effectively other miners were dependent on their productivity which tended to heighten the perception of separateness induced by their comparatively high wages. While they were the highest paid workers at the mine, it is interesting that up to two-thirds of their wages came from overtime and bonus payments.

Although the processes involved in the production phase were virtually the same, though on a larger scale, the production work group was internally much more differentiated. Each step of the process was performed by different men, viz. long hole drillers, long hole chargers and mucker-outers. Equally importantly, each of these workers was paid bonus at a different rate. This was calculated as a percentage of the basic rate which was paid on the basis of production "brought out", i.e., tonnage of ore that went to the surface calculated by reference to the number of skips brought up per shift. For these men overtime and bonus payments also formed a significant proportion of their earnings. Others working underground were also paid on the basis of production but their rates were in general considerably lower. As a result their wages were a good deal less, reflecting in part the rather marginal and diversified nature of their tasks and their consequent lack of solidarity. One relatively well-paid group among them were the crusher operators but they also formed a solidary group with separate skills and experience.

Before the ore went to the mill it was crushed, while in the mill various chemical processes were applied to separate the valuable ore by flotation.

The waste was pumped into the tailings pond, while the concentrates were dried and shipped out. In many ways the mill was similar to assembly line work, with the general workers operating equipment supervised by a mill shift boss who was responsible for the smooth and efficient running of the plant. Here one can locate the crucial factor separating the mill workers from those working underground. Possessing few recognised skills and even less autonomy, they were in no real sense exercising control over the workplace. Their work in the main involved the individual operation of machinery rather than co-operative tasks, and while there was some movement between jobs, this was under management control rather than at the behest of the workers. Also the level of production in the mill was dependent entirely on the productivity underground so that mill workers did not regard themselves as controlling this important aspect of their work. Their levels of pay were up to 50 per cent less than those of production and development workers. In the main this differential arose from the insignificance of bonuses in the pay of mill workers.

In the overground sections of the mine, workers in the stores, laboratory and offices occupied separate work space, enjoyed different conditions of employment and payment and came to regard themselves as almost separate workforces. In the underground there was no possibility of supervising all the men with the work systems then in use, so that the workers there had considerable control over how and when they did their work. The bonus system dictated that the men had to produce a certain minimum to bring their wages to adequate levels. There is evidence that after the first few years of underground mining the men began to restrict their output to these minimal levels. In addition, it seems that some night shifts, at least, rarely worked the full shift. This was done through the day shifts not claiming for the full tonnage or footage which they had done. As a result the night crew had only to work half or three-quarters of their shift to make up the required output. It is difficult to be certain that this was an everyday occurrence but the interviewees who claimed this seemed convinced that this was the case. They asserted that both senior and junior management turned a blind eye to this practice as they were happy so long as output remained at the required level. If anything this indicates that the company had set up output and bonus levels in such a way as to maximise benefits for themselves. On the surface there does not appear to have been any real scope for controlling output, as the pace of work was essentially determined by the underground operations.

The divisions between the workers, in terms of payment, levels of control and importance in the overall production routine had very severe implications for worker solidarity. This was evident in interviews with former Tynagh employees and is illustrated by the following quotes: "We didn't have to take any action to get the bonus. It was drawn out pretty well all right. We'd just

show them the benefit we were to the company, leave them stuck occasionally or threaten them." "Power factions evolved within the workforce, i.e., electricians, fitters, and miners all formed themselves into cells in order to squeeze more concessions from the company. In those days a man's value was not measured by his work output but rather by his ability to stop production." "We were doing what the company wanted. All the pulling against each other. It took a few years to get the workers to unite." "Too many groups in the mine didn't get any bonus while others got more or less. Management paid some very well and others much less, even if they were working in the same conditions." The divisions which are obvious to the external observer were also apparent and their implications evident to the participants.

Yet, management's control of the labour process at Tynagh was far from total or unilateral. The physical environment of the mine and the existing technology placed definite limitations on control over the underground miners who, as we have seen, had considerable room for manoeuvre. Friedman's (1977) distinction between "central" and "peripheral" workers is pertinent here. Central workers — in our case the underground miners and in particular the development workers — were granted a considerable degree of autonomy while the overground crews and mill workers were subject to more direct control, exercised through the work organisation and manifested in rules, regulations and procedures. Consent from the all-important underground miners was based on negotiation and trade-offs, in which the bonus system played a central role. This latter control strategy, as we shall see, only held good while the mine was in full production. Our research also shows that the sources of management's influence and control have also to be sought in factors that operated outside the mine gate.

V EXTERNAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The significance of the labour process for worker control at Tynagh is now evident but we suggest that on its own it does not explain the low level of worker solidarity and militancy. To provide a more adequate explanation other factors have to be introduced. First, there is the geographical and more importantly the social diversity in the miners' background. General workers were in the main natives of the surrounding area and had either worked on the construction of the mine or had some personal contact there. Electricians, fitters and carpenters were recruited over a wider area but were mostly from County Galway or surrounding counties. Advertisements for junior staff were initially placed in national newspapers but those with special expertise (mainly in mining and metallurgy) had to be brought in from abroad. In the first phase the senior staff were virtually entirely foreign but after 1973 many

of these positions were filled by Irish people promoted from within the company. Within the manual labour force, 75 per cent were drawn from a farming background. The precise implications of this factor are difficult to determine but negative views of fellow workers particularly between farmer and non-farmer were forthcoming in interviews. "Sometimes they went on strike when they shouldn't have." "When the weather was fine they wouldn't go near the management before going out. There were too many farmers." "A lot didn't mind closure because they had farms well stocked from the mine money." "A good percentage were from farming and their attitude was that it was secondary to their position as farmer. The rest were mostly prepared to move on." "I was working here and had the bit of savings to fall back on but some of the lads in town thought there was no tomorrow. Some of them were no better off than when it started."

"Farmers" and "non-farmers" also lived apart. A compact residential mining community did not emerge as less than 20 per cent of the workforce resided in the nearest large town (Loughrea, with a population 3,500). The Tynagh workforce did not form a homogeneous residential community and the majority of miners were not totally dependent on the mine for their livelihood. This latter point should not be over emphasised as most of the "farmers owned only very small amounts of land from which they derived a minimal income. Miners from the town, however, who possessed no resources but their capacity to work, were of the opinion that the farmers were potentially independent of the mine, were ideologically in tune with management and were less willing to become active in industrial action. There is little evidence, however, to show that this was actually the case.

We have already discussed the national context of mining in Ireland in the 1960s. It is clear that in this period Ireland was undergoing dependent development and the mining boom was a significant part of this. On the regional level, the West of Ireland was the poorest and least developed area in Ireland with limited capacity for generating independent growth. In the local area this dependent relationship was expressed in the interaction between the company and the local community. There was throughout the mine's history a clear identification of the interests of the mining company with that of the local "community" and there are a number of explanations for this. The immediate area had been devoid of any major non-agricultural industry since the decline of linen production in the mid-nineteenth century. The petty bourgeoisie who dominated the town had proved incapable of generating independent economic growth and in pursuit of its interests in expanding retail markets had devoted their energies to attracting external capital which would provide employment. They were more on the side of management at the mine than the workers, sharing a common ideological commitment to private enterprise. There was also a close personal contact between the local business élite and

mine management. Many of the latter were active in the local Chamber of Commerce. When the newly elected Coalition Government in 1973 abolished a tax concession for mining, the Chamber held an emergency meeting and issued the following statement:

We wish to express our deep concern with regard to the proposed ending of the twenty years tax concession granted to mining companies operating in this State, by the Government. We fear that if said concession is ended, as proposed, that this may have an adverse effect on employment at the Tynagh Mine and consequently on the economy of Loughrea and District where there is already much unemployment. We fear, too, that the proposed change in the Tax System with regard to the Mining Industry may have a detrimental effect on the Industrial Development Programme, by discouraging foreign interests from establishing planned new industries here unless they are assured of a continuation of the tax incentives and grant aid already in operation in this State.

Business and recreational contacts ensured that both local élite and management understood and appreciated the other's position. Northgate frequently sponsored local events, e.g., the Seven Springs Festival and the Chamber of Commerce's promotional brochure. The company also offered to provide £30,000 towards the construction of a Sports and Social Centre, primarily for the mine employees, but also to be used by the people of Loughrea. This project fell through because none of the mine's employees produced a design for the centre; but locals tended to blame themselves or town bodies for the failure to secure this facility. Finally, the company donated part of a site which it owned on the shores of Loughrea Lake, to the town of Loughrea. Although there have been some problems about the gift, the County Council is now developing it as a facility for the people of the town. These various factors combined to ensure that the local élite (even if they were capable of considering it) would not attempt to kill the goose "that laid the golden eggs". Thus, for a small expenditure, the company assured themselves of the acquiescence of, and acceptance from, those who dominated Loughrea's economy and social structure.

VI TRADE UNION ORGANISATION AND WORKER RESISTANCE

As we have already indicated there was some restriction of output at the mine, reflecting, within the parameters set by management, the divergence of interests between employers and workers. We now examine the overt conflicts in industrial relations. It took some time for unions to become established at Tynagh. During the construction phase the workers on the site were

employed by various contractors. As a result unionisation levels were low and varied from employer to employer. Like most major construction programmes, Tynagh had its fair share of industrial conflict and stoppages. However, during this period these tended to be relatively short and have little impact. When the mine went into production the large numbers of fitters and electricians employed brought with them their craft unions. These were followed into the mine by the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. At no stage was a closed shop arrangement negotiated. Rather, it seems unions were formed by the workers and the company reluctantly agreed to negotiate with them. All but one of the unions at the mine were then established when the mine went into full production. The company's attitude seems to have been that although they would have preferred the mine to be non-unionised they regarded unionisation as a *fait accompli* and as inevitable in the Irish context. Therefore, although they frequently complained about union interference in what they saw as purely management decisions, e.g., manning and promotion, there were no recognition problems for the unions representing the general workforce.

The Irish Trade Union movement had little experience of organising miners and many of the workers believed that the unions did not understand the issues involved. This view was summarised by one ex-miner when he stated that: "I found that the Trade Union officials did not have a proper grasp of what mining entailed, and therefore were not in a proper position to understand the grievances of their members. They didn't have first hand experience of the kinds of conditions their members were working in and the health and safety aspects of mining". Others claimed that the principal reason for inaction was the workers' own ignorance and lack of experience of trade unionism: "The local lads didn't realise what the union could do for them. We worked in very bad conditions because we didn't realise that we didn't have to if we reported to the Union. There were extremely bad conditions in the early stages with dust, lack of ventilation and diesel fumes." Only 19 per cent of the ex-miners interviewed felt that the unions had done a good job. At the same time the organisation of production made the building of a strong trade union movement more difficult. Some miners suggested that when it came to taking action, the workers were reluctant to back their unions. "The union is the workers. There was too much disagreement. Solidarity disappeared at the crunch so there was no real union. That is the Irish nature but it was particularly true of Tynagh" (ex-worker).

Throughout most of the mine's operation the workers endured poor working conditions and relatively low wages without industrial action. In February 1969, craftsmen at the mine went on strike for a wage increase. This dispute lasted for 10 days and the company settled it by breaking away from the Federated Union of Employers (the main employers' organisation in Ireland) and increasing craftsmen's wages to 10s/2d per hour. In addition they gave

them additional increases, a lump sum and a built-in bonus. However, this was merely a prelude to a much longer stoppage involving all the workers which closed the mine from July to October of 1969. The workers were looking for 10s/5d "conditions money" which neither the company nor the Labour Court were willing to grant. This time it was the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, the largest union in Ireland and their members which were pursuing the claim. From midnight on June 6th, 1969 all work at the mine, including development of the new tunnel, ceased. Throughout the following months the dispute remained deadlocked, with neither side prepared to give ground. While management did make a number of offers, these were all rejected by the workers as insufficient. However, in October the dispute was settled with the workers receiving the very small increase of 2s per hour. This was the only significant strike at the mine until the major confrontation over redundancy terms in 1978.

Despite the impact of factors in the workplace and outside, which we discussed in previous sections, the workers at Tynagh did eventually take on the company. Both ore grades and productivity began to decline in the early 1970s and rumours of the mine's closure were rife. The workers lacked even basic knowledge of the mine's possible viability and duration. Anticipating closure they focused on the issue of redundancy. Many miners felt that they would have to secure some agreement while they still had some leverage over the company. Redundancy negotiations were commenced by the unions in very unpropitious circumstances. Newspaper reports based on company information predicted early closure. The company refused to pay a National Wage Agreement increase and demanded that any redundancy package be directly linked to productivity. Despite a dramatic increase in production in April-May 1978, management maintained its uncompromising stance. It was at this point that the workers realised that they shared a single objective and that their united efforts would be more effective. As a result they formed an across-mine workers' committee which had as members representatives of all the different unions. Effectively this meant that it spoke for all the people working at the mine except senior management. (Junior management had formed a branch of The Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers – Technical and Supervisory Staff some years before in spite of considerable company pressure.) Gradually this body took charge of negotiations on redundancy. "The union weren't well informed in my opinion. They were doing a lot of pussyfooting around, people were frustrated and time was running out. Wheels would have to turn so they were blamed for what was not happening." Amid the growing uncertainty and confusion, with the direst predictions constantly appearing in the Press and emanating from the management, it was felt by June 1978 that action by the workers was now called for. "From the workers' point of view we felt that our only leverage at that time was a full

shed of ore in Galway. The only pressure we could bring on the company at that time was to stop that going out. Time was against us. In particular we felt that the Unions were not putting in enough effort at all." They therefore gave an ultimatum: enter meaningful negotiations or no more ore would be allowed to leave the country. The company refused to negotiate and when two ore ships arrived at the end of June 1978, the employees at the docks were suspended for refusing to load them. All the company's employees were put on protective notice and on the 10th July the gates of the company were locked against the workers due to "lack of storage space".

The ensuing bitter dispute lasted six months. Because it was neither an official action nor a strike, none of the men received strike pay. Yet, due to the fact that they were in dispute with their employers they could not get any social welfare payments. As a consequence many of them had to rely on part-time work or the Supplementary Welfare Allowance merely to survive. To many of the miners this seemed to indicate a "starve them back to work" strategy which heightened their resolve. This determination to see the dispute through was reinforced when the company used a High Court Injunction (including the threat of jail for contempt for the workers' committee) to limit picketing of their premises. Matters came to a head when the committee organised a protest march to the company's headquarters. When they got there they were locked out which was the final provocation for many miners. They broke into the office and demanded that serious negotiations be undertaken. This seems to have precipitated action as the dispute was settled within a week and on the 18th December 1978, the men voted to go back to work on redundancy terms significantly better than those originally offered.

In explaining industrial conflict in Ireland much emphasis has been placed on the success foreign firms have achieved through long-term employee relations policies. Although Northgate was unusual in the West of Ireland context in the range of benefits it made available to some workers (e.g., housing and education), there is little evidence of a coherent industrial relations policy. It is striking that the two main disputes at the mine should have been settled by informal negotiations between the men and the directors. An IDA survey (1984) outlined two basic approaches to industrial relations in Ireland; the employee relations strategy, emphasising dispute minimisation through personnel management; and the industrial relations strategy, emphasising negotiations with unions in conflict situations. The policy emphasis at Tynagh particularly at crisis points, was on direct negotiations with the workers.

VII CONCLUSION

Northgate's objective at Tynagh was the rapid development and exploitation of the highest grades of ore. The company was able to take advantage of

the generous tax concessions and generate profits which could be used to pay off its debts and be the basis of future ventures. In the successful furtherance of this goal it possessed significant power resources which included a monopoly of knowledge and experience and formidable financial assets. The one group who could have opposed the company, the miners, had also an important resource, their labour power. Their capacity to mobilise this resource was contingent on overall solidarity. This did not materialise until the mine's future was very much in doubt. Good industrial relations were central to the success of the company's objective. By combining a relatively low basic wage with good bonus and overtime (which increased rapidly towards the upper end of the scale) management ensured a situation where the men were working together to shorten the lifespan of the mine. One ex-worker summarised as follows: "Anyone will work extra for the money even if it is killing the job. It was better for Irish Base Metals but bad for the workers. The basic wage was lower there than everywhere else." Spatial and task differentiation at the mine was such as to successfully transform management-worker conflicts into intra employee competition. The combination of the bonus system and sectional divisions of skill and power resulted in conflict, most often taking the form of lateral struggles.

Yet management control of the labour process was far from absolute and varied between the mine's sections and certainly the mine owners and management were not preoccupied with the issue of control. We would concur with Littler and Salaman (1982) "that the first priority of capitalism is accumulation, not control. Control becomes a concern when profitability is threatened" (p. 265). Workers' behaviour at the mine was strongly influenced by factors external to the labour process. These included variations in the spatial and class background of the workforce, the ambivalent attitude to trade unions and the latter's inexperience in mining situations, the dependency not only of the workforce but the wider community on the mine for employment and the support for, and alliance between, the local élite and mine management. This case illustrates the point that the subordination of labour cannot be understood at the level of the labour process alone. Tynagh also indicates that the manufacture and manipulation of "consent" cannot be absolute, as the redundancy dispute illustrates. However, this was essentially a very short-term gain, ultimately leading to the company's wish, the mine's closure. As one ex-miner put it: "The workers got what they wanted and the company got what it wanted. Profits secure, it closed Tynagh and left with a clean sheet."

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