

THE CONTENT OF SHOP STEWARDS COURSES

Oyelekan Isola, Ayantunji (Ph.D)*

Mojirade Mary, Ayantunji**

Abstract

One of the most controversial aspects of Industrial Relations training is the training of shop stewards. Shop stewards are the local officers of trade unions who process the bulk of grievances of the grassroots and set the tones of the day-to-day relations in an organization. This paper has been able to provide a framework for the training of shop stewards under the general framework of workers education. The particular need(s) of each category of shop stewards will determine the focus within the general framework provided for shop stewards courses. Within this it is hoped that the controversy and the neglects which had dogged the training of shop stewards as a result of lack of agreement on the quality and quantity of the education required by shop stewards would have rested.

Key words: Shop stewards, workers education, Industrial relations training, shop stewards courses.

* Department of Industrial Relations and Public Administration, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos

** Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Introduction

There are three major actors, especially in the British system of Industrial Relations.

These are:

- i) The workers and their trade unions,
- ii) The employers and their associations, and
- iii) The government and its agencies

The role of the workers and their trade unions is to supply the skills necessary for the production of goods and services while those of the employers and their associations is to supply the materials necessary for the production of goods and services. The role of the government and its agencies is to provide the enabling environment for the production of goods and services. The performance of the above functions by each of the actors is not without its expectations. For instance, the workers and their trade unions expect bountiful rewards in terms of salaries, wages and other benefits in cash and in kind for its services while the employers and their associations also expect bountiful profits for their services also both in cash and in kind. The government and its agencies too expect taxes and orderliness as rewards for its services too. At the grassroot of the organizations where goods and services are produced lie a category of trade union leaders called shop stewards. Shop stewards are described as “non-coms who process the bulk of workers grievances of the shop floor and dictate the tone of day-to-day relations (Strauss 1962). Lawrence (1980) identified the following as some of the functions performed by shop stewards:

- i) agents of National Unions,
- ii) carrier of information from the National Union to their members and among their members at the grassroots
- iii) collector of union dues, levies and other subscriptions,
- iv) Interpreter of union rules, company laws and industrial regulations

Lawrence (op cit) asserts that shop stewards also perform the following functions towards the management of their organizations:

- i) advisers to management on issues as recruitment,
- ii) representatives of management in helping to communicate effectively and without bias the correct stand of management in stipulations contained in a collective agreement, industrial law or company rules;

- iii) early warning birds and thermometers for measuring the mood and temperament of the workers on various Industrial relations matters;
- iv) members of investigation panels and disciplinary committees, and,
- v) shock-absorbers in the industrial relations machineries “as they sometimes have to accompany the personnel manager to trouble spots to give workers confidence that the Personnel Manager is trying to deceive them in his address”.

It is unfortunate; however, that in spite of the onerous tasks performed by this category of trade union leaders their level of formal education is not much to write about. For instance, in a survey of one thousand and two hundred shop stewards conducted within ten randomly selected Industrial Unions in Oyo and Osun States of Nigeria, eight hundred and eighty-nine (889) representing about seventy-four (74.08) per cent have within secondary school education and its equivalents or below while one hundred and twenty-nine (129) representing about eleven (10.78) per cent have above secondary school education and their equivalents. In a similar survey reported in Ayantunji (1997) out of a total of one thousand shop stewards a total of six hundred and eighteen (618) representing about sixty-two (61.8) per cent have within secondary school education and its equivalents and below. Only three hundred and thirty-two (332) representing about thirty-three (33.2) per cent have above the secondary education and its equivalent. Bearing in mind the roles performed by these shop stewards these revealed level of formal education will rarely be adequate enough for effective performance of these functions most especially at this periods in the world. The above scenario therefore, as stated by Sawbridge and Keithley (1976) represent a prime educational need for the shop stewards and a big challenge to educational providers. The challenge to educational providers, however, is with some caveats, namely, “there has been no agreement on the quantity and quality of the education required by the shop stewards to perform its functions. Listen to Sawbridge and Keithley (op cit):

Thus, the argument runs, whilst trade unions suspect that a management-run course will have the aim of making shop stewards less militant and will have a management bias, management, on the other hand, feel that allowing the unions to train shop stewards is bad policy, because it is helping to produce stewards who are a greater threat to industrial peace...

In this paper some attempts are made to review literature to identify appropriate curriculum for the training of shop stewards so that the controversy surrounding their training in terms of the quality and quantity of the education required by the shop stewards to perform their functions will be rested.

Workers Education

The term 'workers education' is very contentious. One of the factors responsible for the contentious is the meaning of the terms "workers" and "education". The two words, in the opinions of these writers belong to the category of words described by philosophers as systematically ambiguous. According to Akinpelu (1987) a word may be described as systematically ambiguous when it is elastic in usage or is capable of multiple meanings and when such words persist in their ambiguity in whatever context and situation they maybe found. The two words "workers" and "education" behave exactly in these manners. For our purposes, however, the term worker will be described as those who produce by hand or by brain or those Frantz Fannon quoted in Akinpelu (2002) describe as "the wretched of the earth", and those who Jesus Christ refer to as those who labour and are heavy laden. This will be differentiated from those who take decisions in organizations. Akinpelu (op cit) definition of education could serve as guide for the purposes of this paper, namely all planned and systematic processes of human improvement or development, as well as the organizational modes in which these processes are promoted". On workers education, Hopkins (1985) definition will be our guide, namely, that sector of adult education which caters for adults in their capacities as workers and especially as members of workers organizations.

The Relationship between Workers Education and Shop Stewards Courses

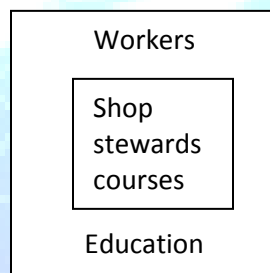
Hopkins (op cit) identified about three major categories of learners in workers educations. These are:

The primary groups: Among this are "officers and representatives" one of who shop stewards are. Other members in this category according to Hopkins (op cit) are specialists and rank and file.

- i) **The secondary groups:** In this category are women workers, young workers, rural workers, illiterates and neo-literates workers, migrant workers, seafarers, heavy manual workers, shift workers, white-collar workers, unemployed and striking workers, among others.
- ii) **The special category:** In this category according to Hopkins (op cit) are workers' educators.

Hopkins describe those in category one, that is, the primary group as "priority targets" most especially officers and representatives among who shop stewards are. If shop stewards are even not just part of the learners in workers education and also not just part of the primary group but a "priority target", shop stewards courses are therefore not just part of workers education but a priority part of workers education.

Figure 1: The relationship between workers education and shop stewards courses.



The Content of Workers Education/shop stewards courses.

Hopkins (op cit) identified five major areas of focus for workers education. These are:

- i) Basic and general skills
- ii) Role skills
- iii) Technical and vocational skills
- iv) Social, political and economic education, and
- v) Cultural and scientific education

What and how much will be taught in each of these areas, Hopkins (op cit) assert, will depend on the needs of each of the learner groups. Since shop stewards courses are not only part of workers education but a priority part, shop stewards courses would adopt the general framework of provision of workers education with particular attention to that area in the courses which touch more of the needs of the particular group or individual of shop stewards.

Conclusion

One of the most controversial areas of industrial relations training is the training of shop stewards. One of the factors which make the training of shop stewards controversial is the

agreement over the content of the shop stewards courses. This paper has been able to explore the opportunities provided in Hopkins (op cit) work which provides a general framework for workers education and which are applicable for shop stewards courses as well since shop stewards are a priority target in workers education.

Bibliography

- Akinpelu, J. A. 1987: *Relevance in Education*. Ibadan University Press, Ibadan.
- Akinpelu, J. A. 2002: *Philosophy and Adult Education*. Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd. Ibadan.
- Ayantunji I. O. 1997: *A modular approach for the training of the local officers of selected Industrial Unions in Oyo State, Nigeria* (an unpublished) Ph.D thesis in the Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.
- Hopkins, P. H. G. 1985: *Workers Education: An international Perspective*. Open University Press. Keynes.
- International Labour Organization 1976: *How to improve workers education*. International Labour House. Geneva.
- International Labour Organization 1976a: *Workers Education and its techniques*. International Labour House Geneva.
- Lawrence, G. K. 1981: *Shop Stewards in Nigeria's Industries*. PERMAN, 8-3.
- Sawbridge, D. and Keittoley, G. R. 1976: *Industrial Relations Training for Shop Stewards: Training without objectives?* Management Decision. 14, 3.
- Strauss, G. 1962. *The shifting power balance in the Plant*. Industrial Relations. 1, 3.