

Cornerstones in the Finnish paper industry - the growing importance of shop stewards between 1980 and 2005

Paul Jonker-Hoffrén

Abstract - The power of labour unions is a diffuse concept. As union density rates are in decline and a trend towards decentralisation can be observed, the scientific consensus is that labour union power is in decline as well, even the relatively favourable Finnish industrial relations system. This study focuses specifically on the role of shop stewards within the Finnish system of industrial relations. Shop stewards are cornerstones of the labour union, as the industrial relations at the local level, in the Finnish case, depend a great deal on the efforts of shop stewards. An analysis of legal and practical aspects of the Finnish shop steward system in the paper industry, along with an economic sociology view of the labour market of the paper industry, shows that the shop steward in the Finnish system of industrial relations is perhaps now even more important than before. The analysis also seems to confirm Vernon's view that union density represents 'constraints on managerial prerogative by routinised regulation.' It is likely that in the paper industry's industrial relations, the future lies in the shop stewards rather than in centralised bargaining.