

Review of "Statistics for Bargainers" by K Hedderwick, (Arrow Trade Union Industrial Studies, 1975.)

In the current attempts to define our identity as a Radical Statistics Group, proposals for "doing something" are beginning to figure quite prominently. It is with this thought in mind that I would like to discuss the issues raised by Hedderwick in his recent book "Statistics for Bargainers."

This book forms part of a series of monographs put out by Arrow books for the Society of Industrial Tutors, each volume concentrating on a different but related contemporary issue of importance in industrial relations, and written in a way "specifically directed to the needs of active trade unionists who want to equip themselves to be more effective." (cover notes) In this case, the focus is upon the ways in which statistics are used in collective bargaining, and how, "if today's trade unionist is to bargain effectively, he must match management's statistical sources and techniques." (back cover) But, first, it is necessary to dispel a few myths about statistics, for as Hedderwick rightly points out "the very word statistics may be enough to produce a defensive reaction." (p.12) The key aspect here is intelligibility, and by being sensitive from the outset to such problems a lucid exposition of quite complex technical arguments is made without using concepts not previously defined and illustrated. This lack of jargon is perhaps the most positive aspect of the book.

The aim of the book, then, is to provide the means for trade unionists to acquire an understanding of the techniques necessary to argue effectively within the collective bargaining process, for "statistical problems arise at nearly every stage of the preparation of the claim. Difficulties always arise; often the required information is unobtainable, at other times the information is not in the form which leads itself to adoption. A familiarity with statistical techniques and statistical sources will resolve many of these difficulties; establishing that degree of familiarity is the aim of this book." (p.13) Assessment of the value of the book must include, therefore, an evaluation of whether, in fact, a demystification and popularisation of already existing technique to improve the skill of union collective-bargainers is the best way to protect workers' interests, or whether new techniques should be developed based upon alternative ways of seeing and acting towards the industrial structure. This will be considered later.

The major part of the book consists of an attempt to illustrate, through worked examples of the various facets of a wage claim (assuming collective bargaining), the uses of basic statistical concepts and methods of presenting data for putting forward a case - particularly in the form of graphical representation. Hedderwick shows quite clearly here that the so-called "objective" measures of changes embodied in the indices commonly used to assess the right to a wage rise, such as those of money and real earnings, inflation and unemployment, or the earnings gap, tend to reflect the interests of the group responsible for defining the nature and scope of the statistics produced, the methods of collection, and the means of presentation, etc.

In doing this, Hedderwick is extremely successful in making intelligible the often misunderstood, (and, therefore, often misused), concepts representing variance. For example, in discussing the difference between average wage figures based upon the arithmetic mean as opposed to other measures of central tendency related to the median, he outlines the conditions under which each is most appropriately used, stressing how important it is for trade unionists to appreciate this by means of an example in which the average wage of seven employees in a firm, when worked out according to the arithmetic mean, is such that six employees have wages less than the average due to one being paid an inordinately high salary. (p.22)

To round off the book, a useful checklist is provided of factors to be taken into account when interpreting statistical data. These include asking questions of the data such as, who is covered by the statistics and who excluded, or what is the basis of any weighting undertaken?

To come back to our unanswered question, then, is this attempt by Hedderwick to provide trade unionists with statistical expertise ultimately the most fruitful way of achieving wage satisfaction, and, if so, would this constitute a form of activity which we as radical statisticians might wish to emulate in other fields? Here, the question of "successful" wage negotiation becomes of importance, for without some idea of the dimensions of this we cannot proceed much further. The age-old adage of "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay" exhibits certain ideological characteristics in that no criteria for critical assessment of "fair" are presented, or even suggested, and the same may be said of the results of collective bargaining. Hedderwick, for example, advances no views on what he means by talking about "the successful

outcome (of wage negotiations) from the shop stewards' point of view," (p.12) other than that the terms finally agreed upon might have been less agreeable had the negotiators involved been less conversant with statistics.

My answer to the last question is a firm no on both counts, but to fully justify the latter decision criticism must be directed against Hedderwick's conceptual framework. This delimits the problematics set and the tools, techniques, and forms of political action allowable in their solution. Hedderwick's "given" is collective bargaining - an extremely uncritical method of setting wage-levels based largely upon the manipulation of official statistics around normative structures of wage differentials. Further, in collective bargaining the workers themselves are rarely involved in any of the negotiations, and are presented with already finalised sets of figures to be rubber-stamped without really understanding their basis - a forced accession to a pseudo-rationality endorsed by their "union men." In many ways, Hedderwick's book stands as a justification to this intolerable situation.

The results of pursuing such a dependence upon historically fabricated norms are clear to see. Collective bargaining may be understood as an adjunct to the modified ideology of laissez-faire now operative in industrial relations - often being hostile to state-intervention whether the rationale behind it is reactionary (eg. the current "voluntary" £5 wage-limits) or progressive (eg. equal pay for women or blacks). In fact, to his discredit, Hedderwick is able without one word of critical comment to discuss in the section on "an index : catching up or falling behind" (p.44 - 47) the relative movement of male and female manual earnings between 1953 and 1973 in which male earnings actually increased more in percentage terms (297.8%) than those of females (282.0%). In conjunction with the book's cover picture depicting a bikini clad lady juxtaposed to the question "do you run away from statistics?" - a naked exploitation of a woman's body for commercial purposes - this sexism is intolerable. But, how is this related to the present reliance in industrial relations upon normative techniques such as collective bargaining? The answer is clear in this case. On commercial grounds, such sales techniques cannot be faulted for the sales of this book are aimed at negotiators and bureaucrats who are predominantly men - people who at the last TUC. Congress organised a stag party with strippers to entertain themselves (numbering 946 men) at the expense of the 84 women delegates from only 30 unions, many of whom protested bitterly at this but to no avail. Clearly then, if women are desirous

of equal pay - a situation not going to come about merely through the implementation of a government decree - then women must either gain equal representation in the union bureaucracies or push for the institution of alternative mechanisms for wage-fixing

The thrust behind this argument, then, is that if we are to see the possibility of a radical statistics applied to backing-up wage demands, then we must address our efforts not to union bureaucrats but to organised rank and file pressure. Hedderwick has clearly demonstrated the utility of statistical understanding as a means of furthering economic interests. But, a critical understanding of statistics must be made available to the ordinary worker so as to encourage develop self-help methods uncontaminated by the constricting division of labour imposed upon demanding a fair wage through collective bargaining.

In addition, Hedderwick imposes upon statistics a relativism which I find unsatisfactory. Wage negotiations seem to be reduced only to a conference table at which "each party to the bargaining process is tempted to quote the measure of central tendency which best suits its case," (p.22) for, "as this book will show, practically any collection of figures can be arranged and rearranged to show contradictory results." (p.13) This relativism, however, is not in any way a necessary feature of statistics and is rather a reflection of the theory to which the particular statistics are tied. A fair day's wage cannot be assessed normatively, and any attempt to impose a pseudo-rationality upon it through collective bargaining must ultimately fail.

As radical statisticians we must begin to attempt to apply radical perspectives upon the solutions to such problems, and this involves to some extent the development of new technique. The measurement of a fair day's pay might be related, for example, to measures of the rate of exploitation, as opposed to profit or wage-differentials. This potential that exists for the formulation and popularisation of scientifically based measures useful in political struggle is for me the issue with which the Radical Statistics Group must come to terms with. The demystification of traditional technique is one worthwhile step, and we should give due credit to Hedderwick for this. But radical statistics means more than dealing with technique, and improving upon this is a task which I feel is one worth considering in our search as radical statisticians for "something to do."

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