Introduction to “The Rise and Fall of Autonomous Group Working in the British Coal Mining Industry”

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In this “Perspectives” Section article, Dr. David Allsop, Learning and Teaching Fellow in the Work and Employment Unit, University of Hertfordshire (United Kingdom) and Mr. David Wray, Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the Work and Employment Unit, University of Hertfordshire (United Kingdom) have authored an interesting, insightful and well-written essay on the group organization of work and the transformation of the labor process in the British coal mining industry. Both authors bring an insider’s perspective to this topic. Dr. Allsop’s industrial background includes working for 13 years in the British coal mining industry. Mr. Wray possesses experience similar to that of Dr. Allsop. Having dropped out of school at 16 years of age, Mr. Wray began working in the coal mines as an apprentice electrician. After spending nearly a quarter of a century in the mining industry while being employed at various collieries in the Durham Coalfield, he lost his job upon the conclusion of the historic 1984-85 strike.

Although discussions in the employment relations literature often credit the Japanese systems of work organization with the initial promotion of teamwork, the authors point out that in the British coal mining industry, production was organized around work groups decades before the advent of the heralded Japanese production systems. In this article, Dr. Allsop and Mr. Wray argue that workers possessed much autonomy and exerted considerable control over the labor process in coal mining while exhibiting a strong commitment to the work group. Even though management sought to limit worker autonomy through the adoption of new technologies and the modification of payment systems, it was not until the implementation of full automation which included surveillance systems that coal miners’ autonomy was negatively impacted in any kind of meaningful way.

If any of the journal’s readers would like to respond to essays published in the “Perspectives” Section or would like to write on any topics in the field of employee relations, please do not hesitate to contact me with your proposal. I welcome both practitioner-based and scholarly-based articles written from any one of a variety of theoretical perspectives. I hope that you enjoy this article and find it most illuminating.

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