

Sport, Industry and Labour Relations in Northern England between the Wars

Jack Williams
Liverpool John Moores University, England

The growth of sports facilities provided by firms was a major development of recreational sport in Northern England between the wars. Advocates of company sport usually argued that the provision

of sport facilities by firms would encourage co-operation between capital and labour. Almost of all large firms with traditions of benevolent management and high levels of co-operation between management and labour established sports facilities, but the existence of such facilities was not invariably proof of amiable relations between capital and labour. Coal mining was characterized in general by animosity between employers and labour, but colliery companies by law were compelled to finance the Miners' Welfare Fund which could be used for the establishment of sport facilities. The cotton industry provides examples of firms with harsh styles of management setting up sports facilities. Where management established sport facilities, employers probably hoped that this would stimulate co-operation from labour and some employers believed that company sport could combat support for trade union militancy and revolutionary socialism, but other managers supported company sport because of their enthusiasm for sport and desire to be associated with successful sport clubs. Some employers dismissed company sport as a waste of money and not wanted by workers. At some firms, the provision of company sport facilities resulted from pressure from employees and especially from those wishing to play sports, but who found that opportunities to do so for other social institutions were limited. Worker reactions to company sport varied between firms. Concentration by trade unions upon other types of industrial welfare suggests that it was not expected that company sport would be contrary to the interests of organized labour. Suspicions that those who played for company teams received preferential treatment could increase hostility towards management, though satisfactions gained from success in interdepartmental sport competitions at large firms could divert grievances about the differential treatment of different categories of workers into channels which did not challenge the prerogatives of management. At concerns with high levels of antagonism between labour and management sport facilities tended not to be used unless they were firmly under the control of workers, though if sports fields of firms with a tradition of amicable relations between capital and labour were situated far from the homes of workers they could be underused. Company sports clubs could help to discourage strikes only where they were accompanied by other generous forms of company welfare and traditions of company benevolence.