

THE OTHER CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 by Bacon and Storey and Chapter 3 by Kelly rehearse a long-standing debate within the trade union movement, between moderate (pluralist) and militant (radical) strategies, in the context of current management rhetoric about HRM and the unions' search for 'new realist' policies which will attract employers as well as workers. Bacon and Storey articulate the prevailing TUC view that unions may turn the claims of HRM to their own benefits and suggest a co-operative style consistent with the consultative ideas emerging from the EU. Their chapter draws on the findings of a large-scale research project on individualist and collectivist approaches to the employment relationship. This has involved case studies of nine 'mainstream' organisations, interviews with union officials and representatives, and attitude surveys of employees. They conclude that unions need to develop a vocabulary of the individual to meet the challenge of HRM strategies, while at the same time pressing for a collective social partnership with employers. Against this, Kelly evaluates the arguments for labour-management co-operation and finds them wanting. The more radical forms of moderation can seriously weaken unions' autonomy and power, eroding members' capacity to challenge or resist employers' priorities. Advocates of moderate unionism have seriously underestimated the antagonism displayed by employers to workplace union organisation and collective bargaining. He argues that militant unionism better serves union members' interests because it is predicated upon a recognition of the different interests of employers and workers. Militant unionism does not preclude collective bargaining relations with employers; it embodies an element of contingency, taking different forms in different circumstances. Nevertheless, this antinomy between moderate and militant informs many of the chapters that follow.

Chapter 4 by Fairbrother and Chapter 5 by Waddington and Whiston consider the situation from the perspective of trade union activists. Fairbrother's chapter discusses the potential of union renewal – the creation of new participative values and social relations which constitute trade union organisation – within the context of restructuring of the state sector (separation of purchaser and provider, decentralisation, financial measures and controls) initiated by Conservative governments during the 1980s. Hitherto standard terms and conditions of employment – negotiated nationally – have been qualified within new specific organisations and

discrete sections, providing opportunities for bargaining initiative by members and representatives. A particular danger is that the centrifugal forces thus unleashed may subvert unions' national cohesion to establish a form of enterprise unionism. However, union renewal remains only a possibility, dependent upon members' action, since existing centralised and hierarchical forms of union organisation may be reasserted. Waddington and Whiston present the findings of a major survey of union activists, which offers an important corrective to the customary managerial sample. They cover a wide range of new management practices, including new HRM and EI initiatives, and new forms of work organisation, and question whether management is empowering employees or merely intensifying the pressure of work. In the first instance, they report a substantial take-up of new EI techniques, but note that the most popular of these are 'soft on power', like team briefing. In addition, they identify an upsurge in grievances related to new forms of work flexibility, especially in the 'exposed sector' considered by Fairbrother. Crucially, they find that concerns about work intensification have eclipsed any sense of enhanced commitment and empowerment. This is because the EI techniques chosen are too 'weak on power' to make a difference, and because any positive impact they might have on employee attitudes has been swamped by the perception that managers are forcing through unfavourable changes in the quality of work. To revive an old labour process metaphor, the realities of the economic 'base' of workplace realities, as experienced by these union activists, has overwhelmed the EI 'superstructure'.

The relationship between new production practices, shopfloor workers and union is the subject of Chapter 6 by Anna Pollert, which explores the development and operation of 'teamworking' within a mature mass production food company. While the literature of new production concepts does, as discussed previously, support the idea of their prevalence in unionised workplaces, we know relatively little about the actual relationship between unions and these techniques in practice. This chapter uses as its method a 'vertical slice' through the company, interviewing senior management, teamleaders, workers and trade unionists about the operation of teamworking and what it takes to make it work within a mature unionised environment. The case records, in considerable ethnographic and representative detail, the reorganisation of authority within a well-unionised factory, and shows that in certain

ways shop steward co-operation was required to facilitate the operation of teamworking. Far from creating an alternative path of communication which undermined union channels, teamworking unintentionally created a new niche for trade union activity and influence. This outcome arose from the contradictory delivery of the system and the lack of training and inexperience of team-leaders who were frequently thrown on to shop stewards for guidance and help. While this reinforces a well-trodden literature on unions as the lubricant and not irritant of production, Pollert is careful to avoid a complacent reading of this experience, stressing the perhaps transitional nature of team organisation, and the quite different experience of their performance in different areas of the factory. Indeed, she concludes by highlighting the longer-term threat to shopfloor unionism as teamworking becomes more embedded and management more sophisticated at reaping its potential for reducing the influence of union-controlled channels of communication on the shop floor.

In Chapter 7 Stephenson examines two case studies of workplace trade unionism on greenfield sites from inward investors in the North-East of England. Nissan is possibly the most celebrated of Japanese companies in the UK, being the first major Japanese car assembler, applauded by the Conservative government as introducing a new industrial relations into Britain, and given a high profile by its ex-Personnel Director, Peter Wickens, who through various publications and media appearances has presented the 'Nissan Way' as a new phase of 'partnership' industrial relations for British industry. The second case, Ikeda Hoover, is a Japanese-US joint venture car seat supplier to Nissan, located on the industrial estate bought by Nissan to house its Just-in-Time (JIT) supplier firms. The US parent, Johnson Controls, has thirty-one automotive seat plants world-wide supplying customers on a JIT basis; nine of these are in Europe. The case therefore offers an interesting perspective on Japanese and North American attitudes towards unions.

The chapter contrasts the quality of unionism in the two plants through interviews with workers, conducted away from the workplace over several years. In contrast to the work of Garrahan and Stewart (1992), which predicted that Nissan would form the model of shopfloor unionism for all its suppliers in the industrial site, Stephenson highlights the major differences between the two plants. At Nissan, despite gaining the right to have one shop steward in the plant, the union exercises no control over the labour

process, and conditions of a passive, enterprise union prevail. At Ikeda-Hoover, by contrast, trade unionism, inherited through recruiting union-experienced workers conscious of their skilled and relatively secure place at work, operates at shopfloor level as an outlet for worker discontent. Stephenson explores the nature of unionism in the two plants, and how workers are able, despite the restrictive nature of the imposed union deal set up behind their backs, to create their own voice on the shop floor. While the contrasts between the two plants are considerable, redundancies and increased employment uncertainty at Nissan may be a spur to changes in the direction of worker organisation in the Ikeda-Hoover factory, thereby potentially reversing the logic of Garrahan and Stewart's thesis. But what is clear from the chapter is that Japanese ownership and working methods in themselves are no guarantee of a standard form of workplace unionism, as other factors such as employee selection, skill levels and union experiences are critical intervening variables influencing workers' desire and opportunities for building unionism on the shop floor.

The process of bringing marginal groups of Asian workers into trade unionism forms the substance of Chapter 8 by Wrench and Viree. They chart the relationship between ethnic minority workers and unionism, changing through the generations from a high propensity to unionise amongst early migrants to a reduced propensity and under-unionisation by Asian minorities in many areas today. The problematical association between British unions and ethnic minorities is analysed by way of background for two case studies which examine two typical employment situations of ethnic minority women workers in contemporary capitalism: a large service-sector employer and a small sweatshop manufacturer. The first explores a TGWU campaign to organise mainly Asian female cleaners at Heathrow Airport, and the difficulties encountered from management non-recognition, wider environmental obstacles and problems of the union's strategy itself in this process. While charting the failure of one particular union drive, the authors stress the lessons of this and the importance of unions linking with ethnic minority organisations, to pursue more innovative and community-specific unionisation strategies. The second case deals with the experience of mainly Asian women sweatshop workers in the West Midlands, who struck with the GMB over a series of grievances including low and unequal pay, health and safety, management-imposed overtime and union recognition. The

lengthy strike by the twenty-six mostly Punjabi women strikers eventually ended without reinstatement, and bitter acrimony between the strikers, union officials and Asian community groups. Wrench and Virdee analyse the social and political dynamics of this dispute and place this within a wider context and the prevailing perspectives towards recruiting marginal and ethnic-minority workers in the sweated trades and beyond. Their conclusions speak of the need for unions to take far more seriously unionisation of small firms, which are becoming the employment experience for an increasing number of workers, but particularly ethnic-minority women.

Chapter 9 by McKinlay and Taylor is a case study of team-working in a large North American non-union firm. Their study of PhoneCo illustrates how workers challenged management-imposed boundaries and perceptions as to how teams should operate. They are critical of Foucauldian concepts of surveillance and discipline which overstate the panoptic reach of management organisation. They indicate that the nature of teamworking itself became a contested issue as workers probed managerial commitment to devolved decision-making. This suggests that the power of HRM techniques to diffuse employee resistance and channel their individual and collective aspirations through corporate agendas has been exaggerated. Management responded by an open assertion of power within the employment relation, restoring hierarchical structures and norms.

Chapter 10 by McLoughlin draws together some of the implications of non-unionism, particularly in the high-technology sector, by characterising the various types of non-union business and hypothesising what sort of trade union strategy might succeed. In line with WIRS (Millward *et al.* 1992), he argues that, in general, non-unionism cannot be regarded as a product of seductive HRM policies promoted by 'sophisticated unitarists' since none of his cases fit this bill. This tallies with Waddington and Whiston's view, that even in those unionised workplaces where HRM techniques are most evident, the seduction factor is low. Rather, McLoughlin argues, these employees do not unionise, notwithstanding considerable grievances with their existing non-union employers, because they doubt the efficacy of union membership – whether it is feasible for them to gain union recognition against employer opposition, and whether it will make a difference. This returns us to the issues raised by Bacon and Storey, and by Kelly, though it

offers no easy solution for union strategy. On the one hand, it might support a conciliatory and consultative overture to employers to nudge them in the direction of union recognition. On the other, it might support the view that unless unions are forceful and combative bargaining agents, employees are unlikely to regard the benefits of membership as worthwhile. Alternatively, the efficacy of trade unionism may depend, as it partly did in the period before 1970, on supportive political and legal framework. In this third view, a change of British government, an alternative political economy, and a new rapport with the EU are prerequisites for any resumption of the 'forward march' of labour.

NOTES

- 1 The Trade Union and Labour Relations Acts 1974 and 1976 – the first passed by the minority Labour government, 1974–6, the second by the majority government, 1976–9 – had restored the legal position of trade unions to take industrial action to the position prior to the Industrial Relations Act 1971, as governed by the Trades Disputes Act 1906. But the language used was wider than the 1906 Act in order to give immunity to the various torts which had been developed by the courts during the 1960s (Wedderburn 1989: 565–8, 589–96, 619–23). The response of some judges, led by Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls (the senior civil judge), was hostile, and they interpreted union immunity narrowly. This was an important factor creating the favourable political climate for the subsequent imposition of statutory restrictions upon industrial action (*ibid.*, 596–7).
- 2 See Wedderburn (1989: 598–606) for the ineffectiveness of the 'gateway' to legality, now abolished by the Employment Act 1990.
- 3 The Conservatives' free market programme is a pragmatic amalgam of maxims drawn from both neo-classical and Austrian economic schools; see Fine and Harris (1987). For other sources see Fosh *et al.* (1993).
- 4 Employment Act 1980, Employment Act 1982, Trade Union Act 1984, Wages Act 1986, Sex Discrimination Act 1986, Employment Act 1988, Employment Act 1989, Employment Act 1990, Trade Union Reform and Employee Rights Act 1993.
- 5 The detrimental effect of unions upon productivity has now attained the status of a self-evident truth in government pronouncements (Department of Employment 1988: 15; 1989: 5–6, on the pre-entry closed shop).
- 6 *Kenny v. South Manchester College* [1993] IRLR 265.
- 7 *Solihull MBC v. NUT* [1985] IRLR 211 (see Wedderburn 1989: 588); *Tiechurst and Thompson v. British Telecommunications* [1992] IRLR 219.
- 8 The only exception which still remains is the freedom of pickets (achieved through tort immunity) to seek to dissuade workers

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