UNION RENEWAL:
LESSONS FROM THE UK GAS INDUSTRY

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Abstract: Examines the process of union renewal in the context of the UK Gas Industry. Using the collective as the central characteristic of trade union organisation, presents a conceptualisation of union purpose that facilitates an empirical examination of workers' collective understandings of the purpose of trade union organisation as a basis for examining the potential for the realisation of union renewal. Concludes that the potential for union renewal in the industry is presently undermined by workers' restricted perception of the collective nature of trade union organisation and purpose. Interestingly this restricted outlook is found not to be undermining union joining.

1.0 Introduction

The results of a conceptual and empirical examination of the relations between workers and trade union organisation in the context of the UK gas industry are presented. Fairbrother's (1994, 1996a) claim that the restructuring of the public services in the UK provides the conditions for a revitalised trade union movement is examined. The purpose of this examination is to articulate a deeper understanding of the nature of the relation between workers and trade union organisation than is often presented in the literature. By developing such understanding it becomes easier to comprehend why the real potential for union renewal, particularly in the form articulated by Fairbrother (1990,1994,1996a,1996b,2000), remains, for the most part, unrealised.

The results of this study concur with views of Hyman (1975, 1983) and (Michels 1962) that suggest that work and employment relations presently existing in the majority of workplaces are more likely to restrict the active identification of collective interests rather than support their promotion. Despite the existence of conditions propitious to the development of union

renewal as articulated by Fairbrother (ibid) the empirical results demonstrate that the process of union renewal is not taking place in the workplaces studied. These conditions are in addition shown to be producing the opposite of union renewal, that is, movement towards increased bureaucracy and away from participative democracy. At the same time the results also show that it cannot be assumed that individualised perspectives and management practices necessarily undermine workers' desire to become union members.

It is concluded that the union renewal and individualisation perspectives underestimate the complexity of trade union development. Both approaches present partial perspectives and as a consequence are unable to adequately account for the real situations found in the workplaces studied.

In order to focus on the relationship between workers and trade union organisation rather than workers and employers, a definition of union purpose that brings together these aspects (union purpose and union organisation) from the workers' perspective is presented. The understanding of union purpose developed does not presuppose the world to be simply made up of either atomised individuals or economic / social classes. It attempts to deal with trade union organisation as understood, experienced and practiced by groups of workers in their place of work without denying the importance of individuals or classes.

In addition despite trade unions being widely understood as collective organisations (Mann 1973; Beynon 1984; Waddington and Whitston 1997; Deery and Walsh 1999; Terry 2000) a great deal of industrial relations research focuses on individual workers and / or key informants, (for example, union activists) rather than collectives. Thus, the dynamics of collective interaction between workers and trade union organisation is often missing from the

analysis. In contrast this work focuses on the collective nature of trade unionism by: 1) conceptualising trade union purpose in terms of the interactions between workers' collective interests and trade union organisation, and 2) undertaking the collection and analysis of empirical data from individuals *and* groups, based on that conceptualisation.

2.0 Background

The twin concerns for social order and social welfare previously embedded in UK public sector industrial relations (Hyman 1989) have been subsumed, revised and replaced over the past two decades (Mailly *et al* 1989; Sheldrake 1991; Kessler and Bayliss 1992; Thompson and McHugh 1995). There is little doubt that this upheaval has had a negative impact upon workers' conditions of employment and the ability of their representative organisations to influence managerial decision making (Ackers et al 1996; Kessler and Bayliss 1998, Wallis 2000; Millward *et al* 2000). Whether organised trade union responses have favoured the retention of co-operative relationships with management or the use more conflictual rejoinders workers have had to face up to this loss of trade union influence. Evaluation of how these changes have impacted on worker-union relations is bounded on one side by an optimistic assessment that focuses on opportunities for union renewal (Fairbrother 1990; 1994; 1996a; 1996b; 2000) and on the other side by a pessimistic assessments that focuses on the recent decline in union membership (see Millward *et al* 2000: 230-236).

Fairbrother's (1996a) analysis of the consequences for workers and their trade unions of the reorganisation and restructuring of public sector during the 1980s and 90s, leads him to postulate that it is possible for workers to exploit the resulting circumstances in order to renew their unionism. Fairbrother contends that trade union democracy involves the active control of trade union leaders by the workplace membership, rather than the passive consent

redolent of the old structures. Thus union officials should become:

> [D]elegates of the workplace rather than representative leaders who speak on behalf of the workplace in the abstract……..It [union renewal] is a reversing of the flow of the traditional relationships characteristic of most unions, particularly in the state sector, so that the national level resources and facilitates rather than represents and thus controls (Fairbrother 1996a: 143).

This movement towards more participative forms of union democracy is central to Fairbrother's conception of union renewal (Fairbrother 1990; 1994; 1996a; 1996b; Fairbrother and Waddington 1990). In contrast to arguments claiming that it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, to avoid the creation of bureaucratic relations (Hyman 1975, 1983, 1989; Michels 1962) Fairbrother claims that the possibility of creating 'more democratic' union forms exists in the context of the restructuring of the state industries (Fairbrother 1996a; Fairbrother and Waddington 1990).

Fairbrother argues that whilst the detail of reorganisation and restructuring has varied to suit particular organisational conditions a general pattern is evident. This is a movement from a situation where centralised bureaucratic management structures dominate to one where decentralised management structures predominate (Fairbrother 1990; 1994; 1996a; 1996b; 2000). This in turn has led to a crisis for public sector trade unions. Their centralised and bureaucratic machinery designed to facilitate national bargaining is, it is argued, unable to cope with the new management structures and practices.

The new structural imperatives require local bargaining in line with devolved management. Thus, the existing union bureaucracies supported by consensual relationships and standardised conditions of service, policed by a hierarchy of knowledgeable stewards and

professionals are unable to meet the challenges of the new workplace (ibid). That is, the restructuring of public enterprise has undermined the material constraints that previously restricted autonomous trade union activity in the workplace. As a consequence local initiatives, intended to deal with the new conditions, are being independently instituted by workplace activists. These initiatives are reported to involve the development of new structures and union ideologies. It is these structures and ideologies that according to Fairbrother (1990, 1996a) are creating the possibility of a renewed trade union movement. The new structures are said to facilitate more participative and active forms of unionism, stress the importance of egalitarian forms of organisation and are decentralised. This is in sharp contrast to the previous structures that are described as remote, centralised and hierarchical (Fairbrother 1996a). The actualisation of the renewal process is therefore dependent upon worker / activist disaffection with past union forms based primarily on representative democracy *and* workers' / activists' recognition of the value of implementing new structures based on participative democracy.

Union renewal is therefore presented as an 'emergent' form of unionism whose emergence is made possible as a consequence of particular historical contexts and the development of new workplace conditions. (Fairbrother 1996a 112). The reality of renewal on the other hand is dependent upon workers' practical and subjective responses to the past and present contexts. The viability of the union renewal thesis is thus a question that will only be resolved in the experiences and practices of workers over time. However, this does not mean that theoretical issues are not involved. The principle theoretical issue underpinning the renewal thesis is the purpose and function of workplace trade union organisation and government. This issue is also central to arguments that highlight attitudinal change towards trade union membership

amongst individual workers as underpinning the decline in union membership (Millward *et al* 2000; Phelps Brown 1990).

Although the responses of workers are predicted to be very different the implication of both approaches is that in the contemporary workplace the old relationship(s) however, determined have been severed and a new situation is developing. However, discussion of theoretical issues does not feature to any great extent in either approach reflecting the lack of theoretical and conceptual development within the field of industrial relations in general (Kelly 1998). In contrast this work starts by theorising the relationship between workers and trade union organisation.

3.0 Conceptualising Union Purpose

Despite trade union organisations being widely conceptualised as collective organisations, how this collectivity is constituted is not clear (Kelly 1998). Most commonly it is theoretically and empirically reduced to some aggregate of individual identities and interests, for example, Union Commitment (Meyer and Allen 1997), Public Choice Theory (Olson 1971) and Mobilisation Theory (Kelly 1998). These approaches treat the individual worker as the basic unit of analysis. However, as Offe and Wiesenthal (1985) make clear, such approaches misrepresent the complexity of the collective relationships involved in trade union organisation and government.

Adapting Ollman's (1993: 147-177) analysis of the components of class consciousness:

From the perspective of the collective 'union purpose' is not simply a matter of the union organisation having a particular understanding of each individual's relationship with the union. Nor is it just a numerically larger version of individual interests. It is understood as

embodying a shared interactive approach to understanding and acting upon the particular world union members have in common. It reflects a set of judgments and behaviours reserved for these common situations where an individual's fate is inextricably linked to the fate of the group. It embodies and expresses a way of thinking done in common, usually in a common place, using common language and advanced or retarded by common pressures and constraints. This also means that the collective purpose is elastic and changing. It encompasses all the stages in its evolution together with the time it takes to occur. That is, *the process* of developing a collective (trade union) purpose is not external to what it is but rather at its centre.

The preceding conceptualisation is not intended to imply that individual interests are irrelevant but that union purpose is more than simply the sum of individual interests. It is something that grows out of the common circumstances, experiences, issues, problems and interests that gives life to the collective organisation underpinning workplace union activity. What is important is what an individual comprehends and does as a member of the group, not his or her personal thoughts and actions.

> The workers spontaneous source of identity is collective solidarity with each other: each responds almost automatically to what he [sic] perceives as being the group's goals, even if he [sic] believes them to be irrational. (Mann 1973: 50).

Union purpose is therefore conceptualised as both a process and a relation that: -

• Develops through individuals in the group interacting with each other and opposing groups in situations that are peculiar to workers as employees.

- Has its main point of reference in the situation and objective interests of workers as a group in capitalist society and not the subjective interests of individual workers.

- Develops from whatever the group purpose is, into and alongside the purpose that maximises the group(s) chances of realising their interests.

The above presupposes that for trade union organisation to exist the following conditions apply:

1. The existence of collective identity and interests founded on group and opposing group interests (that is, between workers and employers or their agents) often referred to in the industrial relations literature as 'them and us' orientations.

2. The perception that trade union organisation and methods offer a viable route to the realisation of group interests. Workers' objective interest in developing trade union organisation is here given a definite role in their thinking.

3. A level of activity consciously directed towards the production and reproduction of trade union organisation and methods. That is, even where workers develop a collective identity and perceive trade unionism to be the most viable route to the realisation of their interests they must still respond in ways to make what is possible actual.

4. The direction of movement of union purpose amongst a group of workers can not be ascertained by identifying workers' individual qualities. However, such data may help explain why the subjective aspects of union purpose might not develop in individuals.

In addition the following consequences flow from the argument presented:

- All employees can be union conscious: trade unionism is not restricted to particular sections of the working class.

- A union's objectives and characteristics will *in part** reflect the collective will of its membership.

> *This qualification is necessary in order to acknowledge the influence on union purpose of other actors, previously abstracted out of the argument. (For example, trade union officials and employers).

- These objectives and characteristics will change as the collective responds in its own way to the prevailing material and ideological conditions.

This does not mean that union purpose is or should be *solely* a function of workers' collective interests. What a trade union purpose is becoming is an empirical question however, the presence of conditions 1-3 above provide a basis for assessing the subjective components necessary for its development from the workers' perspective. Viewed in this way what a union purpose is from the employers', managers', union officials' and governments' perspectives becomes part of the objective conditions within which workers' subjective judgements are formulated.

Trade union purpose as conceptualised here, unlike other definitions presented in the literature, does not restrict or proscribe the character of trade union organisation. The only defining feature of a trade union is that it functions as a means of achieving workers' collective interests.

4.0 Methodology

The research methodology adopted is underpinned by a philosophical perspective derived from the critical realist (Bhaskar 1998) and dialectical materialist (Sayers 1985) standpoints. Three epistemological consequences result. 1) The study of society is not reducible to an investigation of just the circumstances within which humans act or the actions and ideas of

individual or particular groups of humans. Social research *necessarily* involves the interpretation of *both* objective and subjective aspects of the particular parts of reality being investigated. 2) The choice of data collection methods and analysis should try to capture contradictions in social processes. 3) Studies that focus on visibly changing situations and or new developments are more likely to facilitate the identification of underlying contradictions than those that focus on situations of apparent stasis.

In concert with the above a case study strategy was used to collect objective and subjective data on the social processes taking place within the visibly changing situation of the de-nationalised UK gas industry[1]. Workplaces in two different companies within the industry were used for empirical investigation, those being the Lattice Group plc Transco office in Bolton Lancashire and the Centrica plc Billing Centre in Manchester. Lattice[2] is principally a gas transportation and pipeline maintenance (engineering) business, whilst Centrica is principally a gas supply and utilisation (sales) business. Together these two companies include most of what was formerly the British Gas Corporation. They trade in different markets, and have different strategic objectives and industrial relations policies. Lattice is still largely regulated and Centrica is unregulated and the post privatisation differential effects of 'political contingency' (Colling and Ferner 1995) are evident in their industrial relations policies and practices. The workers involved in this study fall under the remit of UNISON[3]. These are principally clerical, administrative, supervisory and technical workers. No particular significance is attached to this group of workers however 'white-collar' workers now constitute the majority of UK trade unionists (Cully *et al* 1999). They therefore represent a purposive sample that supports the external validity of the study.

Data were collected from various sources including documents, observation, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews provide the bulk of the data with between 35 and 40% of the workforces involved in the research, contributing either directly or indirectly to the interview processes. The methods employed were the result of compromises between the demands of the research perspective, established research methods, and practical necessity. Two factors in particular influenced the adaptations used to access group perspectives; *first*, the lack of established research instruments intended to facilitate access to collective / group understandings other than the focus group and *second,* the temporal and logistical problems of researcher access to work groups.

In the Transco case study and initially in the Centrica study the focus / work group discussions took place without the researcher being present. This directly challenges the emphasis placed on the role of the moderator in focus group research (see Goldman 1987). Three aspects of group organisation and composition are considered to have supported this approach. First, at both sites the focus groups were made up of pre-existing work groups. Thus, the need to facilitate and allow time in the process for group integration to take place was not necessary (see Bloor *et al* 2001). Second, the use of participants who have an interest in the research topic reduces the need for a heavily structured approach to the discussions (Morgan 2002). Third, all participants were issued with the topics / questions 1 week prior to the focus group discussions and informed that all topics were to be covered within the time allocated for discussion (only one group reported that they did not cover all the topics in the time). Therefore a degree of structure was afforded indirectly.

In Transco focus group representatives (chosen by the group) were interviewed individually by the researcher and data collected on the outcomes of the group discussions. In Centrica,

initial focus group representatives again chosen by the group were subsequently allocated by the researcher to second stage focus groups. That is, these groups were made up of group representatives and the same topics discussed. However, on this occasion the discussions were moderated by the researcher (primarily to collect data rather than lead the group). Thus, the particular adaptations to the focus group method used raise additional issues about the validity and reliability of the data. For example, the absence of the researcher from the focus group discussion process raises issues of biased reporting on the part of group representatives. Also, even if reported accurately, it is not known if the views presented represent the views of the group or simply those of particularly vociferous members of the group.

However, it is important to bear in mind the purpose of the methods used when considering such questions. Apart from satisfying practical necessity and unlike typical focus group research their use in this study was not primarily intended to access a wide range of opinion in a more naturalistic setting than a one to one interview (Krueger and Casey 2000). Nor were they used to observe (control) group dynamics and individual contribution, that is, the micro dynamics of group interaction (ibid). They were used to facilitate a process of (focused) dialogical interaction and to try to capture the collective understandings, feelings, and views of those involved.

In this respect some aspects of the research situation that might normally be considered problematical are viewed as integral to and or beneficial to the data collection process. For example, removing the researcher from the discussions and the uncritical inclusion of situations whereby particular individuals probably did have a disproportionate input is viewed as reproducing a more normal work-group environment. Also by issuing the discussion topics / questions to all those involved and anyone who asked for a copy in advance of the focus

group discussions an opportunity was provided for cross group dialogue and increased general awareness of what was being discussed. This was a conscious attempt by the researcher to raise the dialogical validity of the work (see Kvale 1996)[4].

With respect to the validity of the data provided by individual representatives (most of whom used and supplied contemporaneous notes / aide memoirs of their group discussions without being asked to do so); viewed as key informants (Mason 1996) they arguably, as a consequence of their representative role, provide more reliable sources than key informants who have no moral / ethical obligation to be accurate in their reporting. In addition, in Transco most representatives were interviewed by the researcher within earshot of those they were representing, thereby helping to sustain a focus on accuracy rather than satisfying the perceived desires of the researcher a situation that also at times provoked additional input.

Also the researcher continually throughout the interview process sought clarification as to whether what was being reported represented the views of the group or particular individuals and how the perspective being presented had been arrived at. In the Centrica case study where representatives presented their groups views to other representatives this challenge often came from other members of the focus group rather than the researcher. In addition the reliability of the data collected via the focus group interviews is afforded increased integrity as a consequence of the large numbers of groups (70) involved compared to standard focus group studies that use three or four groups (Morgan 2002).

Further, as previously noted this study also used alternative sources of data and collection methods. Not by way of triangulation in the sense that one data set derived from say observation is used to corroborate the findings of another set derived from some other source /

method. But by way of approaching the research problem(s) in a multi-faceted and holistic manner whereby triangulation is understood as a means of accessing different aspects or dimensions of the social phenomena being investigated, thereby increasing the validity of the research (see Mason 1996: 145-149). The use and adaptations of the focus group method used in this study therefore need to be judged in the contexts of the study as a whole and not as isolated techniques with particular problems.

That said the level and depth of dialogical interaction that took place within the groups as reported by the representatives varied considerably both between groups and over particular issues within groups. It is not known which particular issues were discussed more than others or whether certain groupings of workers tended to become more involved in discussions than others, nor whether the eventual perspectives were enthusiastically or grudgingly adopted. Thus, whilst the data collected is accepted as being valid it is clear that any claims to have captured the collective responses of the workforces involved in the study must remain circumspect thereby reinforcing the need for further theoretical and empirical study.

4.1 Data Analysis

Having chosen an employment context that has undergone and continues to be impacted by radical change, (de-nationalisation and its aftermath) the accounts provided by workers, union activists and managers are not taken to be simple reflections of that context. They are understood as interpretations constructed within a particular socio-historical setting. This is in line with the approach of critical theorists in general (Crotty 1998). However, in concert with the materialist and dialectical outlook adopted the interpretations of those experiencing that change can be expected to include manifestations of the underlying contradictions supporting and undermining the changes taking place. Thus, the accounts provided by informants have

been analysed (reinterpreted) by the researcher in the light of prior analysis of the changing context (meaning interpretation).

The analytical technique of 'meaning interpretation' used in this study re-contextualises the original accounts within a wider frame of reference than that of initial appearances. This is in contrast to the de-contextualisation that results from simple categorization (Kvale 1996). In this study the wider frames of reference are provided by: a) the theoretical contexts of the development of union purpose, b) development through dialectical contradiction implicit in the concept of union purpose and c) the objective aspects of the environment and characteristics of union organisation identified in the literature.

The interpretation process was also supplemented by 'meaning condensation' whereby accounts are abridged using conceptual themes derived from theory. This process took place in two stages. The initial condensation reduced and interpreted the empirical data in line with the predetermined themes (for example, the presence of 'them and us' perspectives amongst workers). The second stage reduced the information that resulted from the first stage using the concepts identified from the literature[5] as defining trade union organisation (Fig.1) and related the results to the research objectives.

Fairbrother (1996a) argues that in some workplaces the possibility of renewal has been blocked due to the 'reaffirmation' of hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of union organisation. This assessment is based on the assumption that the tension between bureaucratic and democratic organisational form had previously been resolved in favour of bureaucracy, producing a state of stasis in the development of union government (ibid: 140). However, given the variability of contexts within which trade union organisations develop,

explicating organisational change is not simply a question of whether one organisation is becoming more or less democratic than another. It is also a question of the impact of changing conditions on the direction of internal movement in the social relations of the organisation being investigated.

Fig. 1 Characteristics of Union Organisation and Government
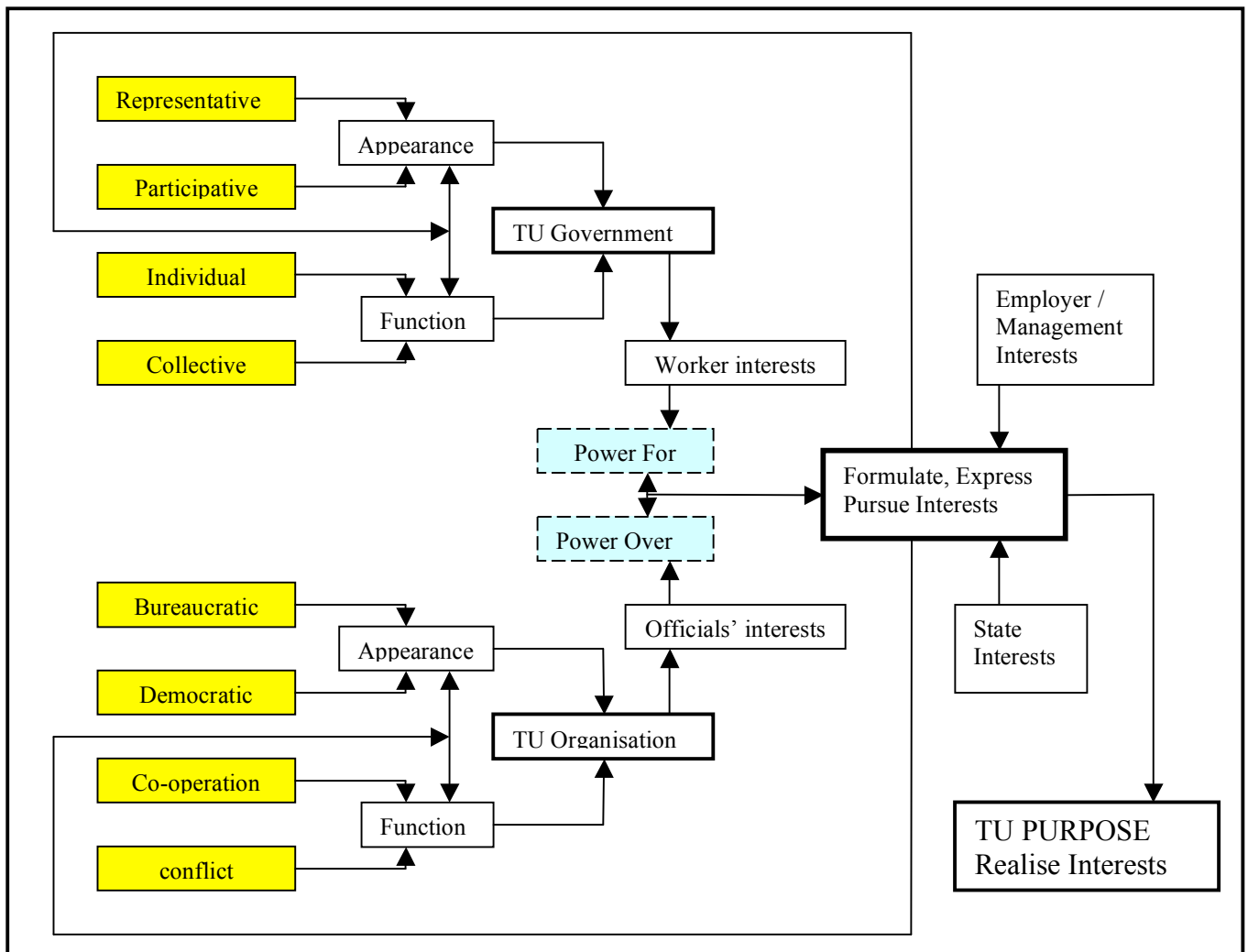
At its inception the staff union in the industry rigorously separated representation from mobilisation, established a hierarchy of activism and control, and split the general membership from involvement in the internal political process of the union (Spoor 1967). This *modus operandi* characterised the union as a bureaucratic and hierarchical organisation with membership involvement in the decision-making processes generally facilitated via the practices of representative democracy. However, a historical analysis of the movement between bureaucracy and democracy prior to de-nationalisation and reorganisation reveals a long term internal tendency away from bureaucracy and individualised participation, towards democracy and collective participation as outlined below.

Although the process of democratisation in the union has been heavily circumscribed by liberal democratic notions of democracy, the history of the government of the union is testimony to the admittedly slow and uneven, but inexorable, movement towards increasing involvement of the membership in the decision making processes and politics of the union. Particular signposts of this movement are: the inclusion, following membership pressure, of improvements to pay and conditions as objects of the union; the formal registration as a union following a referenda of the membership (Spoor 1967); membership involvement in industrial action and activist challenges to union policy in the 1970s (Newman 1982); the development of a government structure able to facilitate the active involvement of a large and diverse membership (Ironside and Siefert 2000) and the provision of reserved posts and facilities for self organised groups in the 1980s and 90s (Terry 1996; 2000). The latter changes have however also been criticised for focusing activists' attention on organisational practice outside the workplace to the detriment of workplace organisation (Heery 2002). Nonetheless, the historical evidence demonstrates that whilst worker-union relations in the industry were

hierarchical, bureaucratic, and representative, *the dominant long-term tendency was for these characteristics to be undermined rather than strengthened*. Therefore in the period before de-nationalisation, the characteristics of union government and organisation were not static, as implied by Fairbrother, but tending to move in the direction of increasing participation. It is against this background that the contemporary movement in worker-union relations in the industry has been assessed.

5.0 Findings

The findings from stage one are briefly summarised in Table 1. This table is only indicative, uses arbitrary indicators and by its nature presents a simplified picture of a number of interconnected, complex and often subtle social processes and relationships. The findings from stage two identifying the direction of movement in worker-union relations within the de-nationalised UK gas industry are then summarised. A more detailed presentation of the findings is not viable within the context of this paper.

5.1 Stage One Findings

Table 1. Brief Summary of Initial Findings

Objective Aspects	Transco (Lattice plc)	Centrica (Centrica plc)
Organisational Restructuring Company Union	Yes (Multiple) Yes (Multiple)	Yes (Multiple) Yes (Multiple)
Product Market	Engineering/Service	Sales/ Service
Competition	Minimal	Full
Direct Regulation	Yes	No
Labour Process	Specialist/Routine Project Based	Highly Routinised Continual Production
Labour Market	Internal /Dual	External/Dual
% Male / Female (employees)	60/40	40/60
Unionised (Core workers) (Periphery workers)	Yes (85%) No	Yes (75%) Some (not known)
Union Recognition	Yes	Yes
Company Approach to Industrial Relations	Pluralist (HRM)	Formal Partnership
Union Approach to Industrial Relations	Pluralist (Traditional)	Formal Partnership
Senior Management Approach to the union. Line Management approach	Supportive Supportive	Supportive but qualified Ambivalent
Shop Stewards' approach to: The union. Workers.	Supportive Individual/ collective	Qualified Individual
Subjective Aspects		
'Them and Us' attitudes amongst workforce	Evident but variable	More evident but more diffuse
Perceived Need For Trade Union Organisation amongst workforce.	Strong	Strong
Worker Involvement with Trade Union Organisation	Minimal	Minimal

5.2 Stage Two Findings: Contemporary Movement in Worker Union Relations

The direction of movement between the contradictory aspects identified in Figure 1 are summarised below.

5.2.1 Individual – Collective Tendencies

Workers in Centrica exhibited less appreciation of the collective nature of trade union organisation than workers in Transco. However, collective articulation of the value of trade union organisation by workers in both Centrica and Transco demonstrated minimal conscious identification of collective interests and activity. Present conditions in the industry are thus interpreted as supporting the identification of individual rather than collective interests, although the tendency is weaker in Transco than Centrica.

5.2.2 Representative – Participative Tendencies

Interaction between trade union officials and workers in both workplaces is generally conducted at the level of the individual via face-to-face, paper and / or e-communications. This is consistent with the practice and principles of representative democracy and individual activity rather than participative democracy and collective activity. Thus, present conditions in the industry are interpreted as supporting representative and undermining participative involvement of workers in the union organisation. This tendency was present in more or less equal measure in both workplaces although the workforce in Centrica exhibited less cohesion and associated *ad hoc* collective interaction.

5.2.3 Bureaucratic – Democratic Tendencies

The individualised understandings and representative practices noted above both support, and are in turn supported by, organisational structures that separate union members and ordinary

stewards from collective decision making and union politics. This separation is facilitated in both workplaces by a hierarchy of representation whereby the responsibility for framing workers' interests, problems and possible solutions are progressively passed from individual worker to ordinary steward to senior steward to national officials. Thus, the formulation, expression, and pursuit of collective interests rely on and promote the expertise of union representatives not the active support and involvement of the general membership. This produces and reproduces a hierarchy of activism and control reminiscent of the bureaucratic system built in the early years of the union (see Spoor 1967). Heery and Kelly (1994) also highlight this strengthening of the role of the 'professional' officer as a more generalised phenomena related to the development of what they term 'managerial unionism'. The present conditions in the industry are therefore interpreted as supporting bureaucratic[6] and undermining democratic organisation. This tendency is more pronounced in Centrica than Transco.

5.2.4 Co-operative – Conflictual Tendencies

The downgrading of worker interests and increased use of managerial prerogative are increasing the tensions between employer and employed. This tendency is generally evident across the public and former public sectors (Carter and Fairbrother 1999:146). This situation in principle supports the development of conflict rather than co-operation in the workplace. However, the ideological and practical approach to worker management relations propagated by union officials in the UK gas industry is one of co-operation. This creates tension between union policy and the reality of daily life for workers that is mediated through the jointly operated institutionalised systems of individual conflict resolution, with collective issues either passed up the ladder or dealt with via informal interpersonal relations rather than formal inter-organisational relations at workplace level.

In summary the present conditions in the workplaces studied are considered to be both undermining and supporting the development of collective interests amongst workers. However, the tendency to undermine collective interests is the more pronounced. In the absence of any alternative trade union ideology, workers are presented with a limited choice; they can leave or not join the union and lose representation, or join / stay and accept the limited benefits presently on offer from trade union membership. As an ex-Transco steward put it,

It's the devil or the deep blue sea; you can't win (Diary note. 19.3.2001).

As a result the development of workers' collective interests is bereft of a coherent ideological focus. As Fairbrother (2000: 312) acknowledges, "[i]t is the construction and reconstruction of the collective identity and practice that distinguishes the union form of organization and operation [and the] realization of this objective is not and easy task".

6.0 Discussion and Conclusions

In the UK gas industry Fairbrother identifies the reorganisation of local union structures within Transco as indicative of the movement towards union renewal (2000: 317). The results of this research indicate that the process of local union reorganisation referred to represents at best a conscious attempt to re-establish the character of worker-union relations that existed before the industry was reorganised and not the beginnings of movement towards union renewal. Although workers in both workplaces complained about a lack of consultation over recent changes in their conditions the empirical evidence does not support the interpretation

that this also represents the birth pangs of interest in participative forms (union renewal) of union organisation. Rather the results indicate that:

1) The present movement in the character of worker-union relations represents at least (typically in Transco) a halt in movement towards participative democracy and largely (typically in Centrica) a reversal in the direction of movement in the characteristics of union organisation from the situation pre de-nationalisation.

2) The present conditions in both Transco and Centrica are supporting the development of individualised, representative, bureaucratic and hierarchical worker-union relations, and undermining the development of collective, participative democracy and more egalitarian forms of organisation.

3) Trade union organisation in the workplace is supported by increased tensions between conflict and co-operation but the collective nature of that organisation is undermined by a lack of collective reflection[7].

The initial conditions of "changes in management structures, the organisation of work, different negotiating and bargaining arrangements and a disaffection with past union forms" (Fairbrother 1996a: 112) supporting union renewal are all evident in the workplaces studied. However these conditions have in the UK gas industry supported the strengthening of union bureaucracy not undermined it. A consequence of this movement is that workers in Transco and Centrica perceive the present not past union practice as problematic.

In addition the sectionalism Fairbrother (1996a) warns is injurious to union renewal has been strengthened as a result of union reorganisation based on the industry bargaining arrangements. This is a process that is increasing as the disaggregation of the industry continues.

Whilst there was no lack of interest in discussing trade union organisation and practice shown by the majority of workers interviewed and a great deal of interest shown by some[8], interviewees often commented that they and their colleagues had struggled to discuss issues *not previously* considered in any depth. The *only* decision that workers, in both workplaces, usually contemplated was whether or not to be a union member. Thus, direct engagement and consideration of the politics of trade unionism –a prerequisite for the successful implementation of union renewal (Fairbrother 2000: 331-337) - is not taking place.

Workers' subjective understanding of their objective interests and their relation to trade union organisation thus takes centre stage and is highlighted by this research as a particular and potentially generalised barrier to the actuality of union renewal. In this instance workers' interests are narrowly focused on individual representation, underpinned by a fear of individual sanction, and a lack of opportunity and stimuli to discuss the nature and purpose of trade union organisation. Although Fairbrother (2000) lays out the choices faced by workers, he fails to articulate how the choices become known or countenanced as viable by workers in such situations.

Thus *the* problem at the centre of Fairbrother's (1996a) union renewal argument is not the inability of old forms of unionism to adapt to organisational change in response to membership, managerial and other contextual demands, but *where, how and under what*

conditions ideological change in favour of 'dialogical' forms of workplace union democracy

are probable. Although Fairbrother is clear that changing objective conditions impact upon

the subjective perspectives of workers with respect to the nature of trade union organisation

and government, the underlying mechanisms and or their determinants are not identified in his

thesis. This problem is recognised by Fairbrother:

> [I]t is not at all obvious how and under what circumstances members can begin to
> review their unionism, and decide on the different alternatives they now face (1996a:
> 114).

As a consequence the movement from emergence to actual renewal is simply asserted as

being the only alternative through which "the promise of more outward-looking and engaged

forms of unionism will be built" (ibid: 143).

The results of this study concur with the results of other work that suggest that work and

employment relations currently existing in the majority of workplaces are more likely to

undermine the active identification of collective interests rather than support their promotion

(Hyman 1989; Michels 1962). In view of the present movement towards increased

bureaucracy, the possibility of union renewal far from becoming a reality is concluded to be

an unlikely future for worker-union relations in the industry.

Simultaneously union membership, contra union decay, is reported to be widely valued by old

and new workers in the industry, albeit at levels below that in the nationalised industry.

Furthermore workers' *collective* understanding of the value of trade union organisation is

observed to be increasingly dominated by the idea and practice of trade union purpose serving

individual rather than collective interests. Thus union decay is observed not only to *not* be

taking place as a consequence of individualisation, *but union organisation is supported by and supportive of individualised interests and needs.* Thus the relationships between new individualised employee relations practices and the abandonment of joint regulation and union representation (Millward *et al* 2000) are not obvious, a finding supported by other researchers (Geary 2003).

Whilst these finding do not in themselves negate the possibility of union renewal they nonetheless raise fundamental doubts about the process becoming a generalised reality. In particular these doubts are predicated upon the lack of workers' acknowledgement and articulation of their collective interests, let alone the 'outward-looking and engaged forms of union activity needed to support the union renewal process. Thus whilst the union renewal thesis helpfully focuses attention on the impact of the objective environment on workers' ability to influence trade union democratic practice and collective interaction, it neglects the importance of the impact of workers' subjective understanding of trade union organisation. On the other hand the decay perspective focuses attention on individual workers' subjective understanding of their situation whilst downplaying the impact of objective conditions on their thinking. Both approaches therefore present a partial (simplified) view of the relationship and are consequently unable to adequately account for the apparently paradoxical situations found in the workplaces studied.

Whilst the conceptual framework developed facilitated this research the arguments and concepts used have not in themselves been subject to critical theoretical or empirical examination as part of the study. Such work represents an additional line of enquiry aimed at reducing our lack of knowledge of the "factors influencing the susceptibility of workers to

individualistic and collectivist definitions of interests and strategies for their achievement"

Kelly (1998: 9).

Notes

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[1] The UK gas industry was de-nationalised in 1986.

[2] Lattice Group plc merged with National Grid to form National Grid Transco plc in2002.

[3] The GMB union has 11 members in the Lattice site and 4 members in the Centrica site.

[4] This aspect of the fieldwork design was not systematically examined although the researcher is aware that some cross group discussions took place as a result of ad hoc and unsolicited comments made by individual workers.

[5] The organisation and government of trade unions involves the balancing of several contradictory elements that are continually reassessed and accommodated as the environment within which trade unions operate changes (Allen 1954; Turner 1962; Hughes 1968; Hyman 1975; Blackwell 1990; Smith 2001). Perceived as competing alternatives, these elements provide the concepts commonly used in the literature to characterise particular trade unions and their approach to achieving their purpose (Fig.1). However, perceived as dialectical contradictions they do not represent either or choices between competing alternatives but delineate contradictory aspects reflecting the contradictory nature of trade union organisation and government in capitalist society.

[6] Bureaucracy is here conceptualised using the definition provided by Hyman (1989: 181) and used by Fairbrother (2000) in his analysis of the impact of restructuring on union organisations.

[7] Other researchers have highlighted the role of political activists (Darlington 2002) and leadership (Fosh 1993) in generating such reflection.

[8] It was not uncommon for workers to proffer, outside the interview situation, unsolicited opinions and solutions to the issues I had raised and in one instance my presence and the issues raised prompted a member in Transco to finally take on the role of shop steward.

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