

There is Power in the Union: negotiating the. employment relationship at two manufacturing plants

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There is Power in the Union: negotiating the employment relationship at two manufacturing plants

Introduction

"...it is at the level of the work place strategies.. that the contours of contemporary unionism have been shaped"

(Ackers, Smith & Smith, 1996 p. 23)

In previous papers, we have challenged stereotyped policy responses, particularly those which posit the end of ideology and the demise of the age of trade unionism (Black, Greene & Ackers, 1997). Recent research has allowed a comparative approach, between two companies with similar historical and industrial backgrounds, exploring the ways in which the work place union organisation has adapted and responded to the specific changes and challenges which they have confronted. Longitudinal case study research has allowed us to qualify claims of either a dramatic or uniform change in the nature of work place unionism in response to the "Thatcherite" environment prevailing since 1979. This paper seeks to qualify and supplement the larger macro surveys which tend to obscure both the qualitative changes in the work place as well as the relationship between these changes and the local context (c.f. McCarthy 1994, Morris and Wood 1991). We place an emphasis on the way in which work place union organisation is constantly remade in accordance with local circumstances; absorbing local traditions, customs, and styles (Ackers et al 1996; Fairbrother, 1989). Consistent with the above quote from Ackers et al (1996), the pattern of employment relations, we argue, is worked out in the particular organisational milieu. Work place relations develop and change in response to the wider economic, political, legislative, and ideological environment, and are mediated by the nature of the particular workplace. Of particular interest in this paper are the issues of the interplay between union leadership style and the way in which the union/management relationship is viewed by the lay membership.

We begin by introducing our two case studies. This is done in some depth, in order to provide the contextual background which is central to our analysis of the situation found at each firm. Our methodology is then briefly presented, before introducing the context of theoretical debates on union leadership. In the main body of the paper, we discuss the various aspects of the two case studies, drawing on analysis of workers' opinions of their union organisation, and exploring possible explanations for our findings.

The local context

This paper is based around research in two highly unionised manufacturing companies within the lock industry situated in Britain's heartland of the West Midlands. LockCo employs around 950 people and KeyCo employs around 450 people (both have faced significant reductions in the workforce since 1979). The companies share very similar historical traditions, being founded in the mid 19th century and still bearing the name of their founding families. Both officially severed the family links and became public limited companies in the 1930s, however, family members retained senior positions on the board of directors. The companies are both centred on the original industrial town which has been the centre of the industry for more than four centuries (Ackers, 1988). Ninety percent of firms and seventy percent of the industry's employment continues to be concentrated in this small area of the West Midlands. More than forty five percent of UK production is accounted for by these two firms and their subsidiaries (DTI, 1996). Respectively as the two largest employers in the industry, these two firms have dominated local employment since their beginnings and they are based on a tightly knit, localised work force. Most employees still live in the industrial town, and many within walking distance of the factories, reinforcing the sense of occupational community. In many respects, the companies fit into an anatomy of paternalism (Ackers and Black, 1991), with traditions of family firm atmosphere, community role, paternalist management style and occupational community.

The industrial union is similarly locally based and also has a long history, having been founded in 1889. It has remained a very small union; at its peak in 1979, having only 6843 members (Stenner, 1989). The membership now stands at about 3500, representing around 80% of the total workforce of the lock industry, with the majority of that membership located within a five mile radius of the headquarters in the industrial town. Even in

the absence of a formal arrangement, de facto closed shops exist at both of the research firms where union density is near 100%. Matching the 'family' atmosphere of the companies, there is a large degree of social familiarity between members and full time officials, perhaps fostered by the very low ratio of full time officers to members of only 1:1250 compared to 1:30,000 at a large union such as Unison (Unison, 1996). There is also a close integration of workplace structure and national structure through the executive committee (EC). The compact nature of the industry means that most employees will know and can contact an EC member at their workplace. The industrial relations atmosphere at both plants has historically been characterised by co-operative relations between union and management within a tradition of pluralism, centred on the industrial union. In the 1930s, the family owners actively encouraged union membership among their workers (Stenner, 1989) and this has continued through to the present day. Both employers provide facilities for union business; time off for convenors and stewards; and actively encourage membership by inviting union representatives to company induction days, confirming that the industrial union is the only union recognised for collective bargaining and supporting methods of union subscription through check-off. The industrial union has always been moderate in its stance towards the employers and has used the tactic of strike action infrequently. The union has a history of close links with the employers, which has been a long standing tradition among the Midlands small metal trades since around the time that the union was formed (Stenner, 1989).

With regard to the nature of work organisation and managerial responses to economic and market pressures, until the late 1980s, both companies had demonstrated a high degree of continuity. Indeed they were seen as resembling "*ocean-liners...rich.. in cultural constraints and [with] inertias embedded at every level of the organisation*" (Ackers, 1989), which meant that employers and managers usually preferred to manage change by developing tried and trusted strategies and relationships. The basic production process has not changed qualitatively from that which existed in the nineteenth century. The firms were both organised on large scale factory lines of a labour and materials intensive nature. Some of this continuity can be explained by the comparatively limited impact of the first of the major recessions over the period. The electronics multi-national that had taken over LockCo in 1984 did not seem inclined to take any strategic control and the company was left pretty much alone to be governed by the incumbent managers. Similarly, while KeyCo was taken over by five different firms over the 1980s, the company was acquired as part of a package, with the new owners taking a very similar 'laissez-faire' approach to that at LockCo. The situation in the period of the second recession (late 1980s-early 1990s) is quite different. Employment in the industry fell severely by around 40% and now stands at a total workforce of only 4000 (DTI, 1996), compared to 10750 in 1979 (Ackers, 1988). The group of which LockCo is part, has suffered a £10 million downturn in world-wide sales from 1989 (DTI, 1996). The employer's responses at each of the companies has differed significantly. Following a take-over by a UK based Security multi-national in 1988, KeyCo has seen the introduction of new technology coupled with the cellular organisation of work, the abolition of piecework and its replacement by cash-less measured day work and a bonus scheme. In addition, it has implemented extensive rationalisation of labour, which has seen the workforce cut from 1500 in 1984 to only 480 by 1986. The company has also attempted to introduce company communication devices including, team briefings and direct communication between managers and employees on the shop floor. There is evidence in the discourse of managers at KeyCo, of a desire to get the company working as a team, and to break down the traditional 'them and us' attitudes (Kelly and Kelly, 1991). At LockCo however, the 'laissez faire' policy remained, with the general downturn in product sales being counteracted by the continued maintenance of a modest turnover (DTI, 1996). Strategy has changed significantly since the take-over and merger in February 1997, when the Security multi-national brought both firms under one ownership. LockCo now faces plans for similar rationalisation and dramatic restructuring of work organisation as has been put in place at KeyCo. Redundancies of around 250 have been proposed over 1998, and the company is set to abolish piecework by April 1998. The stage is thus set for an interesting study of the impact of these changes on workplace relations and the role of the workplace union. The attitudes of employees described must be set against the ideological traditions of the industry, the specific product and labour market pressures, and resultant management strategies motivating change or non-change in industrial relations (Black and Ackers, 1988).

Methodology

To place the paper in its research context, this particular study has evolved out of a substantial ongoing project at LockCo. Following interviews with a group of managers in the early 1980s, interviews were conducted in 1983 with sixty shop floor employees on a wide range of issues pertaining to their attitudes to their work, the work place, management, and the trade union, including its role both at plant and at a wider political level. The interviewees were randomly selected as far as possible and stratified to include a representative spread of gender, job grade and department. A second set of interviews was conducted in 1987/88 with ten shop stewards and managers. A third series of interviews was conducted in 1995/6 with 15 shop floor employees and all union

officers. Finally, a fourth round of interviews has just been completed in 1996/7 involving eighteen shop floor employees, who in eleven cases, had been interviewed in 1983. Where this continuity was not possible, interviewees were randomly selected from company lists and stratified to include only long service employees (at least fifteen years service). In addition, three recent retirees who were part of the original study in 1983 were re-interviewed. The nature of the industry with its high proportion of long service employees has thus been an important aspect of our work, allowing us to re-interview many people who were interviewed in 1983 providing an opportunity to make direct comparisons across a fourteen year period. An inter-firm comparative element is now part of the research. The original project has yielded some interesting findings (Black, et al, 1997) which we wanted to compare with another company in the same local context. A further interview set has therefore been completed at KeyCo, in order to provide cross comparison within the industrial sector. The sample of employees was randomly selected, but stratified to include a selection of employees as similar as possible to that of the original research (i.e. long service employees and similar characteristics in terms of gender, skill level and department). The works Convenors at both firms were interviewed, plus all full time officers of the union. This paper presents our initial analysis of the situation found at the two firms. Fieldwork is still continuing and new analysis may support or qualify our findings in the future.

Our interest in the meaning of language, shared symbols, rituals, traditions and attitudes lends itself to a methodology set within a broad ethnographic paradigm (Hammersley, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). However, the research has been undertaken with a clear agenda of theoretical issues with which to investigate and compare with our past data. The overall intention of the interview process has been to “*let the respondents talk*” (Ackers & Black, 1992b), thematic perimeters. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Our findings are presented, supported by verbatim quotes from the interviews including local accents and colloquialisms. To complement the interviews, there have been numerous periods of observation at shop floor meetings, shop stewards committee meetings and union events; plus numerous informal chats with union representatives both on the telephone and face to face. Full use has been made of documentary material from the union, management, company, local press, and also national economic organisations.

Union leadership and participation in context

Reiterating our earlier emphasis, it is at the workplace level that unions organise, sustain and renew themselves. It follows therefore that changes in the wider economic, political, legislative and ideological context are mediated by the nature of specific workplace unionism. The extent to which unions are affected by wider changes depends on the nature of members' attitudes towards the union. One influence on the members' attitudes to the union, is the nature of the leadership style adopted by officials and representatives. The literature and theoretical debates surrounding these issues warrant more extended discussion here as the nature of the union leadership was found to have a significant influence on views, opinion, and attitudes towards the union at each of the firms. (Here, the term ‘union leader’ refers to the workplace union organisation, as distinct from the national union organisation, and primarily to the Convenors and shop stewards, rather than the lay membership or ‘rank and file’).

The style and character of leadership can exert a critical influence on the way in which the union organisation is responsive to general membership aspirations and the way in which collective awareness and activism of the mass of workers is stimulated (Hyman, 1979). Fosh (1993) identified how the varying patterns of surges and troughs in membership participation were partly related to leadership style. A highlighted aspect of leadership style is how participatory and collectivist the leader is (Fosh, 1993; Darlington, 1994; Fairbrother, 1989). A participatory style stresses the importance of communications, consultation and the involvement of members in decision-making. A collectivist outlook is where issues are seen by local leaders as relating to a shared situation of work rather than as individual grievances. Fosh's (1993) research suggested that local leaders, by their ability to lead in a way that encourages members to become involved and see the collective implications of issues that arise, can build upon surges of membership participation and interest. This increases the strength of workplace unionism, particularly if one sees the willingness of members to act on behalf of the union as a necessary foundation of effective trade unionism (Offe, 1985). This¹ brings into focus, issues of union democracy in the workplace measured in terms of representativeness accountability, and involvement (Fosh, 1993).

This discussion also involves questions about the nature of the engagement between unions and management in the workplace. It is too simplistic to see the interests of officials and members as in full and total alignment. The tendency for the interests of members and union leaders to diverge is well established (Lane & Roberts, 1971; Hyman, 1979). More recently, this is linked to the development by which many workplace unions became increasingly bureaucratised, routinised and centralised during the 1970s (Terry, 1993; Fairbrother, 1989; Fosh

and Heery, 1990). This development carries with it, the danger that the stronger and more professional a union's apparatus becomes, the greater the likelihood is of a disparity between the outlook of the leader and the rank and file (Lane and Roberts, 1971; Fairbrother, 1989). At both of the manufacturing plants that Fairbrother studied (1989), separation could be identified, not only between union leaders and rank and file, but also between the convenors/full time officials and shop stewards. The scenario which thus evolved was that the terrain of issues bargained over by the union was increasingly defined by the company. The recommendations for improvement within these workplace union organisations focused around issues of participatory and collectivist leadership style and an emphasis on the workings of union democracy in the workplace. A qualification to this tendency of separation, is that while leaders retain a degree of autonomy from the rank and file, the very existence of this lay membership ensures that the leadership of the union does not become isolated. Lay members can play a vital role in defining both substantive issues relevant to the union, and the styles of behaviour that union representatives can adopt (Beynon, 1973; Darlington, 1994; Batstone, Boraston & Frenkel, 1977). In other words, the relationship between union leaders and rank and file is perhaps best seen as a two way process, where the lay membership are considered as an important constraint on leader activity.

Another approach is to see the separation of interests or viewpoints between union leaders and rank and file as a positive aspect of the workings of unionism in the workplace. Batstone et al (1977) identified two types of union leaders in their study. The 'delegate' has the mandate by members to do no more than carry out their wishes. Fletcher (1972) sees the fundamental basis for union democracy as resting with the attitudes of members and so feels that the union leader should be a 'delegate'; what he terms a 'servant of the membership'. The alternative view is that the union leader can be a 'representative', where a leadership role is adopted, and policies are not only executed according to the wishes of membership, but initiatives are taken and policies made autonomously. Those leaders who took the 'representative' role were considered to be more successful in Batstone et al's study. On two dimensions of power, the initiation of issues and their control in procedural terms, and the maintenance of an ideology and set of institutions in the workplace, it was those 'representative' leaders who were demonstrably more effective. Thus, in this view, while leaders should encourage the participation of rank and file, and should have a collectivist outlook, they should not just be 'servants of the membership', but need to take on a leadership role over the rank and file, to be successful.

This links to debates about the nature of engagement between unions and management and incorporation. The debate seems to be polarised around whether or not unions should be aiming to highlight the shared interests that exist between management and union rather than basing relations on adversarialism (Darlington, 1994; Kelly, 1996; Bacon and Storey, 1996). Should the union position on engagement with management be one of moderation or militancy, conflict or 'social partnership'? Incorporation can be seen as the process by which the world views of union leaders are transformed to that of management (Black and McCabe, 1998; Rollinson, 1991). In terms of attitude, this involves a situation where representatives of the union "*become more favourably disposed to those who they nominally oppose and at the same time become less favourably disposed towards those that they represent*" (Rollinson, 1991, p 82). In terms of action, where union leaders choose to opt for management strategies which undermine employee interests, this can be considered to be evidence of incorporation. The question is then whether attitudinal change leads to incorporation in the form of action. Rollinson (1991) did not find any evidence to suggest that incorporation had occurred because there was no clear pay-off for such behaviour. Similarly, WIRS3 findings (Millward, Stevens, Smart & Hawes, 1992) also indicate little evidence for the incorporation of union 'elites' although they do indicate that a greater potential for incorporated unions may exist in the 'new' climate surrounding British trade unionism. The litmus test resides at the workplace level and highlights the need for in-depth case study research.

One can go further however, and unpack the premises on which theories of incorporation are based. This reflects a rejection of the simplistic model of the conflict relationship between capital and labour (Black and McCabe, 1998; Knights and Willmott, 1990; Cressey and McInnes, 1980). The view which finds incorporation to be the inevitable product of co-operative relations is based on a simplistic view of the role of union representatives which places them in strict opposition to management. This neglects how union leaders are engaged in a contradictory relationship with management that comprises different roles involving both resistance and accommodation (Black and McCabe, 1998; Darlington, 1994; Ackers & Black, 1992a). Union representatives understand their role as arbiters between workers and management but theirs is not necessarily a neutral stance (Ackers & Black, 1992a). This relates to a sense of 'ambivalent consciousness' (Parkin, 1971) in reference to certain shared interests with management while also remaining in fundamental opposition to them. Most union leaders adopt complex and shifting frames of reference depending on the issue. Our study builds on this debate, exploring how the employment relationship can be characterised as much by co-operation as it is by conflict. Union leaders and representatives have to make a realistic assessment of the alternatives available to

them, thus management and union have a long tradition of working together. The involvement of the trade unionist with management processes does not necessarily have to be seen as resulting in an inability to either frame or organise resistance. This approach offers a more positive outlook for the ideas of 'social partnership' currently espoused by the TUC and a number of British unions (Ackers and Payne, 1996).

Connected to an assessment of incorporation, is the idea of a 'strong bargaining relationship' between union and management, originally discussed by Brown (1972) and revived by Batstone et al (1977). This involves the development of a relationship between union leader and manager that goes beyond the minimum formal relationship. Negotiating becomes particularistic and affectively positive, confidential information is exchanged, 'off the record' discussions occur, and each party is, to an extent, concerned with protecting the relationship and therefore the position of the other party. This rests upon a broad balance of power between the two parties, a relationship of trust and a large risk investment. This may be seen to hold characteristics of a simplistic view of incorporation as the basic opposition of interests is mediated by a personal relationship of co-operation. However, this 'strong bargaining relationship' also facilitates the constructive resolution of problems and therefore, brings benefits to the membership. Batstone et al (1977) found a 'strong bargaining relationship' to be a component of the success of the union in the workplace, leading to the union holding a central institutional position in the organisation, and therefore encouraging membership commitment to the union. Collective bargaining can generate common interests between the union and management based on the survival and growth of the enterprise, which need not deny the structural conflict of interests between management and labour.

We thus discuss the views of the union from workers at each of the firms within this theoretical framework. The analysis is situated within the particular in-plant contexts, focusing on the influence of the union leadership style and nature of union democracy in the workplace on the views, opinions and actions of the lay membership at each firm. Initial analysis of the interviews has uncovered a difference in attitudes towards the workplace union at the two companies. This divergence in attitudes with regard to the union was noticeable, as compared to views concerning other issues (such as towards the company, work, management), and highlights a general situation where the union is viewed consistently more unfavourably over a variety of issues at KeyCo than at LockCo. This divergence in attitudes fits into three broad sections relating to the salience of the union, workplace democracy, and discussions about the terms of engagement between union and management.

Salience of the union

Here, we explore member's expectations of the union and views of the ability of the union to strategically intervene and have some demonstrable effect in the workplace. Longitudinal analysis of interviews at LockCo has led to the tentative conclusion that the union is seen as more salient in 1996/7 compared to 1983 (Black et al, 1997; Black, Greene & Ackers, 1996). In an increasingly unfavourable context, the union is seen as more relevant and necessary to members now, supporting other evidence that the patterns of change in workplace employment and work relations have reinforced the importance and necessity of workplace unionism (Fairbrother, 1989). In addition, members also saw their union as continuing to be demonstrably effective. The comparative research has led allowed us the opportunity to qualify some of these claims.

The most striking difference, was the degree of negativity towards the union experienced at KeyCo. Workers at both companies were asked the same questions regarding the reasons why unions existed. At KeyCo, almost two thirds of workers had negative things to say about their own union and unions in general. A quarter of employees even went so far as to state that they did not know why they bothered continuing to be union members. As one shopfloor worker commented:- *"I sometimes wonder why myself. I don't think I do derive any benefit from it to tell you the truth"*, while another added: *"Well I don't know why anyone bothers, they've never done anything for we"*. This is in contrast to LockCo, where most saw their union as relevant and necessary. One worker felt *"I think it's the only thing the working class people have got. I think it's a very good thing. You can't really be without one"* while another commented similarly that: *"That's the only form of protection you've got today"*. In looking at the comments more closely, the dissatisfaction about the union at KeyCo appears to focus around views that the union is powerless to help them, with a quarter commenting that they felt that the union had lost power over the period from the early 1980s. A third of the workers at LockCo saw their union as powerful, and a third as not powerful, compared to one-fifth at KeyCo who saw their union as powerful, but where almost half stated that their union was not powerful. Issues that were specifically mentioned as demonstrating this lack of power included the inadequacy of union influence over the recent pay settlement (where a new bonus scheme was introduced which significantly reduced many employees' wages), and over redundancies (KeyCo has experienced about 1000 redundancies over the past ten years). Indeed, one

worker had decided not to become a member of the lock union when he joined the company because of the lack of job protection the union could offer:- *“I think it’s a waste of time.. I mean what can they do? If they sack me tomorrow, they’ll not get me my job back... so ever since then I’ve thought sod it. I mean you’re paying one pound whatever it is a week, it’s a waste of time”*.

We also asked questions about the success of the union over a variety of other activities in the workplace, notably over pay, conditions, work organisation, job satisfaction and the provision of an employee voice. A general overview of responses reveals that only one worker at KeyCo saw the union as ‘very effective’ over any area of activity. Using response cards as an aid for comparison, more people saw the union as ‘not effective’ or ‘quite effective’ at company KeyCo than at LockCo. The two areas where the most significant differences in attitude were noted were in areas of protecting jobs and in terms of giving a voice to employees. Very few people at KeyCo rated their union as ‘effective’ or ‘very effective’ with regard to these two issues compared to half of workers at LockCo. Most workers at LockCo were as pessimistic about the ability of the union to protect their jobs as they were at KeyCo, but most indicated that they recognised the difficulty the union faced, with two-fifths stating that the union did what it could to protect jobs in the circumstances. This was in contrast to views from employees at KeyCo where only two people thought the union did all that it could. One worker at KeyCo commented typically:- *“At one time, the union used to fight for redundancies, now the company says ‘Ten people are being made redundant’ and the next week they’re out the door, never see the union step in now.”*

Discussion of the general salience of union membership also connects to views about a wider cause of unionism, such as for the union to have a social and political role outside of the workplace. Again, divergence between the two companies was clear. Whereas three quarters of workers at LockCo supported the right for a union to have a wider political role, less than half of those at KeyCo voiced support. Reasons given for why the union should not have a wider role however, were similar at each company, with views focusing around the need for the union to concentrate on workplace issues. While one worker at KeyCo commented:- *“When I vote the government in, they should run the country, not the union”*, this was matched by a worker at LockCo: *“I just don’t see where they come into the running of the country, unions”*. A similar unwillingness for the union to have a wider political role is seen in that while two fifths at LockCo voiced their support, only one person at KeyCo felt that unions should affiliate to political parties. Thus, not only do workers at KeyCo find union membership of little benefit to them in terms of demonstrable effectiveness in the workplace, but they also do not feel that the union has a salient role to play outside of the workplace.

The salience of union membership also involves questions regarding members’ opinions about ‘traditional’ union rights to strike. Are people willing to mobilise support behind the union, and is industrial action seen as a salient weapon of union membership? This relates to the view that a union cannot be demonstrably effective without being able to mobilise membership support (Fosh, 1993; Offe, 1985). At LockCo, every person indicated their support for the principle of a right to strike. In comparison, at KeyCo, there was not such unequivocal support. While over half of the members voiced their support, a quarter did not support the right to strike. The views against industrial action stemmed primarily from feelings that striking does not accomplish anything for the workers; indeed many gave examples of where they had lost out when they had gone on strike:- *“Striking, I don’t think it accomplishes anything.... in the end, it’s the workers who suffer”*... and... *“It’s no good striking these days, everybody is in the same boat and the strike will not do anyone any good”*. Two people voiced a unitarist view that striking was unfair to the company, as one commented:- *“what right have we got to say ‘Lay tools down’? They’re paying your money, they’re doing you a favour really”*. In addition, over a third of people at KeyCo thought that people would not show support for industrial action (albeit as a last resort) compared to only one person at LockCo. The reasons offered for this lack of support included the barriers of legislation, the predominantly female workforce (who were seen as less militant), fear of losing jobs and lack of collective feeling. Two workers related a recent demonstration of the lack of support for the union, when industrial action was proposed over the pay settlement:- *“The union man, he got everyone together and he says ‘Right, before I can do anything at all, what I want is a show of hands to see who would be willing to take industrial action’.... I reckon a quarter of hands went up.... I’m afraid the old people power for the union wasn’t there”*... while the other commented similarly.... *“We had a meeting about them taking the money off these people and the union came down, they had us all outside to talk about it, but they hadn’t got a hundred percent backing so of course they couldn’t do anything about it. A union is only as good as its members”*.

Union democracy at the workplace

This section involves opinions of communication channels within the union and views of how accountable and representative the union is (Fosh, 1993; Fairbrother, 1989). Once again, a significant divergence in attitudes between the companies was identified. In general, members at KeyCo are not satisfied with the level of communication that they have with their union representatives and officials and the amount of information they receive about union business. There appears to be a common experience indicated by workers at KeyCo, with many people commenting on how they feel that shop stewards “*fobbed them off*”, alluding to a feeling that union business is kept secret from members. As members related:- “*They have their monthly meetings, but nine times out of ten, you hear things through hearsay... you go and ask the union and they say ‘Oh we don’t know’*”, ...and... “*If I didn’t go out of my way to ask, I’d never know... I’d say ‘Well tell me all about it’, ‘Er can’t. It’s still secret’... or... ‘I’d like to have more, tell you what’s going on, you know, you ask them and they say ‘Well we don’t know’*”. This is in comparison to more than three quarters of workers at LockCo who had positive things to say about the communication process within the lock union. Looking more closely at the substantive content of comments about the communication process within the union, complaints from members at LockCo do not focus around the same kinds of issues as at KeyCo. At LockCo, the quarter of employees who are not satisfied, complained about individual shop stewards or the fact that their own stewards do not go out of their way to come and tell them things. At KeyCo, the substance of dissatisfaction is different. Here members complain that even if they go to their stewards themselves and ask specifically for information, they do not receive it; they feel shut out from the process. A similar situation exists with regard to the issue of how accountable the union is to members. Again, the balance of opinion is much more negative at KeyCo than at LockCo. Over half of the members at KeyCo do not feel that their views are reflected in union action, compared to only one member at LockCo. Many at KeyCo felt that union representatives and officials have their own opinions and make decisions without regard to members’ views, as one person commented: “*In times gone past... the union used to come back and say to the shopfloor, ‘We’ve received a proposal from the management and we put it to you on the shopfloor’, it was up to the shopfloor to accept that or reject it. But they seem to forget that now, it’s already decided*”, while another added:- “*I don’t know where they get their ideas from.... it was something they’d thought off the top of their heads, they want it, asked for it, and got it, but nobody’s asked for it. I think that’s a lack of co-ordination between the union and the workforce*”.

Connected to a view of how accountable and representative the union is seen to be, are feelings of trust in the union. The issue of trust connects both to instrumental views concerning the ability and effectiveness of the union and to espoused sentiments of loyalty to, pride in, and shared values with the union. We asked for opinions on the level of trust felt to exist between workers and the union at each company. In parallel with the negativity of other views, the level of trust is seen as much lower at KeyCo than at LockCo. While four fifths of workers at LockCo felt that the level of trust within the union was ‘good’, more than half of workers at KeyCo felt that the level of trust was ‘pretty poor’ or ‘very poor’. As one assembly worker at KeyCo commented:- “*I think that’s gone down a lot.. the union is the workers. So because they don’t look after everyone else’s back... nobody trusts anybody else*”. Even the union Convenor at KeyCo commented on the lack of trust that existed between her and the members and felt that this was due to the amount of restructuring and change that the company had undergone over the last five years. Furthermore, almost three quarters of workers at LockCo said they were proud to be members of the union compared to only one person at KeyCo, while almost half of workers at KeyCo said they were not proud compared to only one person at LockCo. In addition, while almost all workers at LockCo agreed that they shared similar values to those of union representatives, only one third at KeyCo felt similarly. Finally, while at LockCo, almost all workers agreed strongly with the view that employees would have been far worse off without their union, views at KeyCo were far less unequivocal, with only two thirds sharing this view, and one fifth of people claiming that their union had made very little difference to their working environment over the period.

Members thus indicate very negative views of the structures and processes of union democracy at KeyCo compared to LockCo. At KeyCo, this has involved the existence of a situation where there appears to be significant divergence between the values and goals of the union leaders and the lay membership, and where members feel very little trust in their union.

Union-management relationship

Here, we explore members’ views of the relationship between the union and management and members’ expectations of the union’s involvement with management. Perhaps the most damning views of the union at

company KeyCo are those which see the union as supporting management rather than the workers. Indeed, over a third of workers at KeyCo stated that they felt the union was on management's side. Common views included:- *"I've always thought this union was in the hands of management"... and... "Before the union was behind the workers but now the union seems to be something more management"*. Another commented:- *"The union, especially here, is being run by the company... the union bend the rules to suit the company, not the workers"*.. and finally:- *"I mean they're in their pockets"*. One member at KeyCo even thought that the union had been bribed by management with shop stewards having been given higher paying jobs:- *"most of... the shop stewards here, for some reason, they all got put on a grade two, to keep them quiet, so they can say 'Your pay's higher than everyone else's'. Well they've got them over a barrel"*. Relating back to the theoretical debates, here, the workers at KeyCo appear to have an impression that their union leaders and representatives are incorporated into the management world view (Rollinson, 1991; Black and McCabe, 1998), and have demonstrated this through agreeing to policies which they see as undermining their interests. There are thus, clear differences between the workers at each company with regard to attitudes about the nature of the union/management relationship.

On all of the issues relating to opinions of the union, the workplace union organisation at KeyCo was viewed consistently more unfavourably than at LockCo. This divergence in attitudes was somewhat unexpected, as one might anticipate that views would be similar bearing in mind the small size and community-based nature of the union, and the historical and sociological similarities between the firms. The task now is to try and make sense of the divergence, by exploring the following propositions. Firstly, that the divergence in attitudes was due to the particular local and historical traditions of union organisation at each firm. Secondly, that while in-plant structures of the union organisation are similar at each firm, the nature and quality of union leadership has an impact upon the terms of engagement between the union and management, and the way in which these terms are viewed by members.

The local and historical traditions of union organisation

Is the divergence in attitudes today, rooted in the historical differences in the strength of the union at each workplace? We might expect to find differing attitudes to the union based on historical experience. This reflects Fosh's (1993) research, highlighting the way that commitment and attitudes towards the union will ultimately be influenced by members' experience of the union structure and processes. Historical comparison between the two firms is tentative as the longitudinal research at KeyCo is limited and because the fieldwork is still in progress. However, we did have the opportunity to interview an ex-convenor at KeyCo who held the position from 1970-1981. He was able to fill in some of the gaps in the historical development of the union organisation at KeyCo allowing comparison with LockCo.

Initial analysis indicates historical similarities between the workplace organisations, at least until recent years and does not demonstrate any relative weakness of the union organisation at KeyCo. The ex-convenor commented on the strength of the union at KeyCo, with a full time convenor's position, shop stewards for each department (amounting to an organisation of fourteen), weekly shop stewards' meetings, and departmental works council arrangements where employee representatives would meet with management. The ex-convenor also indicated his successful personal working relationship with the Personnel Director:- *"I had a very good contact with management, I used to deal with the Personnel Director.. and I had a very good working relationship with him."* This led to advances such as the introduction of a new piecework system, the introduction of a bumper system to reduce the amount of redundancies:- *"we used to call it a bumper situation. If somebody was being made redundant in one department, we should look around.. to see if there was a job in another department we could move him to. And we saved quite a few jobs like that"*, and the introduction of a company wide wage negotiation to replace the existing departmental wage negotiations:- *"a new system, with better holidays, better sick pay and various things"*. This matches the historical background of the union at LockCo, which saw the evolution of the full time Convenor's role in the 1970s and a similarly strong shop steward network. The union occupied a central position in both companies, recognised by the company for traditional collective bargaining of wages and terms and conditions. Both workplace organisations appeared to rest on highly informal relations with management. Other than wage bargaining and a 'bare bones' four stage agreement for disciplinary procedures, little was committed to paper and most negotiation appeared to be carried out through informal chats and a high trust, personal relationship between the Convenor and Personnel Managers. This reflects the situation of strong bargaining relationships (Batstone et al, 1977).

Today, the industrial relations culture at both firms is still informal in character and there is little formal documentation, with much of the negotiation resting on the personal working relationships between convenors

and personnel managers. However, the present situation does differ from that which existed until the late 1980s. The personal working relationship between convenor and Personnel Director at KeyCo was felt to have deteriorated, explained by the series of short lived take-overs of the company (five in the 1980s). As the ex-Convenor commented:- “*Who do you negotiate with, who do you go and see, with all these different managements?*”. In comparison to the demonstrable effectiveness of the union in achieving improvements in wages and terms and conditions, members in 1996-7 (as demonstrated above) appear to see their union as largely ineffective across a wide variety of activities in the workplace. In terms of representation, at KeyCo, the shop steward network has depleted significantly. There are now only five shop stewards servicing the four hundred strong workforce. At LockCo, there is still a shop steward organisation of sixteen, broadly representing one steward for each department or work group area. Taking into account the significant reduction of the workforce at KeyCo, the union at LockCo still has three times as many representatives per employee than at KeyCo. While the Convenor continues to hold a full time position at LockCo, the convenor at KeyCo now works full time on the shop floor, although management agree to the taking of time off for union duties as and when is necessary. Batstone et al (1977) highlight the personal nature of union leadership resources. New incumbents to positions of influence can gain advantages from traditions built up by their predecessors. We would add that union leaders may also suffer disadvantages, and may find themselves constrained by the traditions of the previous incumbent. At KeyCo, the convenor is female, and one might anticipate problems, in an industry and union organisation traditionally dominated by men. She has indicated that she does face some opposition as a woman holding the convenor’s position, especially in the toolroom, the founding area of the union and that seen historically to be the most militant. However, her position has never been openly challenged and she did not face any opposition to her nomination, being elected unopposed. Also, she had resigned in the past and was persuaded to stay on by an overwhelming show of support through a shopfloor petition. Women have also played a major role in the national union organisation since the early 1970s, with a female President elected in 1974. The workforce in the industry has come to include far more women over the period since the 1970s too, with the gender ratio at both the companies standing at about 50:50.

The union at KeyCo has thus come to occupy a less central and weakened position in the company in recent years. However, while views and opinions of the union are doubtlessly influenced by the weakness of the union’s current situation, this appears to be a relatively recent development and does not appear to derive from historical experience. There is little reason to suggest that the organisation at KeyCo was historically any weaker than at LockCo and that the attitudes of members would reflect an experience of a weak and ineffective union organisation. Other possible explanations must therefore be explored which look at the particular recent circumstances, and the leadership styles of the convenor which may explain the relative weakness of the union at KeyCo, and the negative attitudes of members towards a union that has historically been demonstrably effective and being of central importance in KeyCo’s employee relations.

The terms of engagement between union and management

The structures and processes of the union organisation stand separate (although not unconnected) from the structures and processes of industrial relations of each firm. The informal in-plant structures of the union at each of the firms, as established above, are similar. At both companies, there is a convenor who holds the primary leadership role. There is then a network of shop stewards who form the first point of contact for the convenors for communication with the rank and file, and through whom the convenors can gauge general membership opinion. A formal structure also exists whereby the shop stewards meet as a committee once a month, for which they are allowed time off by the company. The shop stewards will procedurally be the ordinary members’ first point of contact with the union. The small size of the national union and of the firms mean that in reality, any member has frequent contact with and easy access to the convenors. There is no official procedure or arrangements at either firm for consultation between employees and managers. While the structures are similar, the way in which the key actors (convenor, stewards and members) interpret their roles and perform within those structures, differ between the two firms. The proposition here is that the divergence in attitudes towards the workplace union can be explained in part by variations in the processes of union organisation; most notably, communication within the union, involvement and participation of members in union business, and the degree of separation between union leaders and rank and file. This in turn influences the way in which the union meets (or engages) with management and the way in which this engagement is viewed by members.

Degree of separation between union leader and rank and file

The degree of separation (Lane and Roberts, 1971; Hyman, 1979) between the views of the convenor at KeyCo and those of the rank and file at KeyCo is evident. The convenor has different views about the restructuring that

has taken place from the general membership. The convenor supports the changes, feeling that they will yield significant gains for employees. As she comments: *"I want to change, I like the changes and I think we're changing for the right. Whereas the shopfloor want stopping with the piece work and are quite happy how we used to be. I think they see me in management's purse at the minute.. because I'm convinced we're going the right way... I'll stick it out and prove it to them that I'm right"*. In contrast, her members feel that the union has *"sold us down the river"* and is reflected in their opinions of the union as being *'on management's side'*. They have experienced over a 1000 redundancies over the last five years, the abolition of piecework and the reduction of some employees' earnings which accompanied that, plus the introduction of a bonus scheme linked to output, which has only triggered a bonus (at the lowest level) six times in the twenty months it has been in place. This relates to the feelings voiced by members that the union is powerless to help them and has had little demonstrable effect in the workplace. The convenor remains convinced however that the restructuring was necessary for the firm's survival and that it will yield benefits if employees support the changes. Moreover, there are also indications of the convenor's frustration with the rank and file's opposition to the re-structuring, and the derogatory way in which membership opinion is viewed by her:- *"all they'm interested in is gloom and doom"..... "I lose patience with them, they talk so much rot most of the time. It's not that they've got a genuine reason for not wanting the move, it's just cos' they want to do their job"..... "There's no pleasing them to be honest"*. These attitudes are complemented by her views regarding the abilities of her shop stewards. Most of them have held the positions for over ten years and are all nearing retirement age. She noted the difficulty in encouraging younger people to take up shop stewardships. She is particularly disappointed with the way in which they carry out their roles, and does not feel confident in delegating duties to her shop stewards, relating past experiences where, according to her, they were unable to carry out fairly simple duties which led to the convenor having to take them on herself. Examples included the failure of stewards to carry out adequate monitoring of job grading in each area when the new grading structure was introduced, and the inability of a steward to research the relevant book of EU legislation in order to make a case to management for the need for safety glasses. This experience is the basis of her unwillingness to delegate duties. The convenor at LockCo also noted the lack of delegation to shop stewards by his compatriot at KeyCo, commenting that full time officer's reports indicated that a lot of their time is taken up by dealing with domestic issues at KeyCo which would should have been passed onto shop stewards to deal with. Furthermore, the convenor at KeyCo appears unwilling to use her shop stewards for the purposes of information dissemination, indeed when asked about the communication process within the union, she stated:- *"We do Photostat the minutes but any major issues I prefer to announce them myself because I just can't trust them to get the message across in the right way"*. It would appear then, that members systematically have information filtered by the convenor.

At LockCo, by contrast, there appears to be a lot of mutual support between the convenor, the stewards and the members, reflected in the expressions of trust which they voiced. Despite the scale of the changes proposed by the management at LockCo, (particularly bearing in mind the restructuring that had already occurred at KeyCo), the general atmosphere at the shop stewards' committee meeting immediately following the announcement of changes was cheery and optimistic. This did not appear to be because people were any happier about the changes at LockCo than they were at KeyCo. Indeed stewards were very concerned about the scale of redundancies proposed and the impact of the abolition of piecework on earnings. It was because there appeared to be confidence that the union, particularly in the form of the convenor, would fight for the best interests of the workers. As one female shop steward remarked: *"So the situation is, we're not going to let [the multi-national] come into LockCo like they did at KeyCo, we're not going to let them roll over the union"*. The Convenor does not seem convinced that the restructuring will yield benefits for members and in this, he demonstrates a different view to that of the Convenor at KeyCo. While she is convinced that the changes are for the good of members, the LockCo Convenor feels that the union at KeyCo *"missed a golden opportunity"*, in being able to demand positive gains such as education, training, and invigoration of the apprenticeship scheme, in parallel to restructuring. The convenor at LockCo is concerned that the opinion of the general workforce is canvassed, such that he remains up to date with their concerns which he does by walking around the shopfloor and talking to people. In return, the support that the convenor receives from the membership gives him confidence in his ability to stand up to management. He is thus confident that the company will not *"roll over the union"* and that he can fight against any equalisation of terms and conditions across the two firms which may negatively affect his own members at LockCo. The convenor at LockCo appears to have a far more participatory and collectivist style than the Convenor at KeyCo (Fosh, 1993; Fairbrother, 1989). He has deliberately aimed to increase the flow of information to members. One of the senior shop stewards 'hand-writes' what have come to be known as 'John's unofficial minutes' of the shop stewards' committee meeting, which are pinned up on the company notice board as soon as the meeting ends, preceding distribution of the official minutes later in the week. The convenor is concerned that union representatives are seen as accountable to membership and are not seen to be hiding information from members. At committee meetings, the convenor specifically stated that shop stewards

should never say 'No comment' to a member; *"We are not a secret society, we will not say 'No comment', but whenever we can, we will give as much information as we are able to and if any members have any queries beyond that, they should come and speak to me"*. There is a recognition that members are likely to be anxious about the proposed changes, and worried for their jobs. The message that the convenor was trying to get across, was the need for them to provide a united front, to instil confidence in the members:- *"We must remain upbeat and optimistic about things, if you all have a depressed attitude, it will not achieve anything for the members"*. The confidence and optimism did appear to be quite infectious at the meetings and lead to a rallying round of support behind the union. When discussing the tactics for opposing any other redundancy scheme than LIFO (Last In, First Out), the shop stewards engaged in some morale boosting, with one shop steward proclaiming their support for the convenor shouting:- *"We'll follow you to the end of the road"* which was followed by clapping and cheering across the room. The business proceedings at the committee meetings are also full of comments, inquiries and questions from the rank and file membership, indicating how the opinions of ordinary members are filtered through to the representative bodies (Cohen and Fosh, 1988). Sometimes, shop stewards specifically commented that they did not agree with this particular person's view, but felt that the committee should hear what they had to say. The convenor also makes a point of delegating important issues to the shop stewards. One example is the formation of a sub-committee to negotiate new holiday arrangements. Moreover, the shop stewards are a check on the convenor taking on too much by himself. At one committee meeting, a shop steward commented that he thought the convenor was overworked and should set up a sub-committee to deal with the redundancy negotiations; the setting up of which has since occurred. The lay membership and shop stewards thus do appear to have some kind of defining role on policy and place limitations on the autonomy of the convenor and so more of a 'two-way' relationship exists (Darlington, 1994).

Members are willing to rally around in support of the union, and seem willing to make a stand against management which is consistent with Fosh's (1993) view of the way in which a participatory style can build on surges of membership participation. The overwhelming acceptance by the workforce of the proposal for changes including abolition of piecework, introduction of cash less pay, abolition of shut downs and the 3% pay rise, was given at a mass meeting which clearly indicated the support of members behind their union in its negotiations with the new management. Recently, when management unilaterally changed the piecework values on a line without consulting the union first, the employees in that area refused to work to the new values, suffering a drop in earnings by reverting to unmeasured pay. The success of this united action was demonstrated when the company completely reversed their policy and re-instated the old values. The same support and enthusiasm is demonstrated by shop stewards. Encouraging people to stand as shop stewards is not easy as demonstrated by the similar amounts of people at both companies who stated that they would not want to stand as a shop steward. However, the shops stewards' elections at LockCo are rarely uncontested, compared to the difficulty that the convenor has at KeyCo in getting new shop stewards.

Union/management relations

We now turn to a discussion of the way in which the union engages with management, and more importantly, the way in which this engagement is viewed by members. At neither firm, does an official apparatus exist for shop stewards and management to meet. As discussed earlier, much of the negotiation rests on the informal personal relationship between the Convenor and the personnel manager. There is thus the possible danger at both firms of this relationship being viewed by members as incorporated (Rollinson, 1991; Black and McCabe, 1998). The convenor at KeyCo, comments on the close and co-operative relationship that she has with managers:- *"I'm more involved than any other convenor has been... it's taken me a few years to get where I am with management, but we do avoid a lot of situations because they do sit down and talk to me now"*. Further, she hinted at the kind of informal negotiation that goes on between her and the personnel manager before the official negotiations begin:- *"We'll talk about it first and then we'll start the official negotiations"*. The convenor at LockCo also appears to have characteristics of what might be seen as a strong bargaining relationship with the personnel director (Batstone et al, 1977). An indication of this being how the convenor met secretly, outside of the workplace, with the personnel director to thrash out the terms of the agreement, whilst the official pay negotiations were continuing.

At both firms, market difficulties have led to demands for restructuring which affect the workforce. The union has chosen to co-operate in this process of change, recognising the need for change if the company is to survive. The important point is that the terms of this co-operation with management have to be carefully formulated if the support of members is to be maintained. The convenor at LockCo notes that:- *"a lot of my role and interaction is theatre"*, which links to how the terms of engagement between management and union can be seen as drama. The convenor believes that presentation of issues to membership is important: *"Image is all*

important, [the new owner] is testimony to that, they say a lot but mean very little, it's all about rhetoric, presentation. The TUC school of thought says you have to tell the truth and that is right, but the way you present that truth is important, you have to present it in a way that will yield confidence". If the union can persuade the membership that it has done all it can to protect the interests of employees, and has made some demonstrable advances, the membership will be more likely to stick behind the union even if the company still faces sweeping work re-organisation and unavoidable redundancies. LockCo does face similar restructuring to that which has gone on at KeyCo, however the shop stewards and members feel that the company has not 'rolled over them'. The convenor at LockCo is very aware that he has to retain at least the impression, of being in opposition with management. We were not able to interview any managers at LockCo in the most recent phases of the research, but the relationship between the union and management appears far from amiable. This is demonstrated in the 'notice board wars' with letters posted publicly between the convenor and the personnel manager, sometimes involving quite personal attacks, and illustrating their inability to talk face-to-face. The convenor and stewards have a generally sceptical view of management integrity, illustrated in their demands that all agreements and proposals be formally written rather than being based on oral "*gentlemen's agreements*". They also indicated their dissatisfaction with the company communication forums to employees seeing them as occurring too late in the process of change to afford employees any opportunity to participate or make useful comments. The convenor was particularly critical of "*the charade of question papers*", where pieces of paper were handed out to employees after official company briefings on the restructuring proposals, in order for questions to be written down and handed to managers. So far nearly two hundred questions had been handed in, the majority of which had not been answered. This only seemed to increase the need for the union to act as the official channel of communication in the views of the shop stewards' committee. The existence of conflict between managers and the union appears to be seen as a positive aspect of the relationship, indeed the convenor related how a member had praised him for "*having a good old go*" at the Operations Manager on the shopfloor. The convenor however, reported that they were just having a heated discussion about an issue, but that this was typical of the views of most of the members. Similarly, while the meeting that he had held with the personnel director over the pay negotiation had brought gains for the members and the union, the convenor had felt obliged keep it secret so as to avoid arousing the suspicions of members.

This dual strategy of agreeing to co-operate with management while still presenting an oppositional stance appears to have had success so far. The union has been kept informed by management at most stages along the change process (and where they have not been, the company met united action from employees such as the refusal to work to new values outlined above). The convenor has also been able to demand the addition of employee training and education clauses within the work re-organisation proposals, and the addition of a clause establishing the need for the company to meaningfully consult with the union. This communication has become so embedded that in many cases the union has heard about a proposal or initiative before middle managers, and sometimes, the senior managers have used the convenor as the sole communication channel to the employees, bypassing management levels. While the convenor has a very informal relationship with the management, this does not mean that managers have the power to dictate to the convenor. The convenor has been able to control the timing of meetings with management, demanding that representatives of the shop steward committee be present, resisting unreasonable demands from management to meet them at an inconvenient time and place or when the given notice has been too short. This has led to managers agreeing to reorganise such meetings. The union thus does not appear to engage with management in a way which suggests a one-sided relationship or where the union could be said to be incorporated by members.

In contrast, the convenor at KeyCo does not appear to have the same degree of influence with management. She commented that while they did communicate easily when they were in meetings and negotiations, it was very difficult for her to get hold of managers to talk to them. Often, she felt that managers would use her to deliberately undermine other managers, giving her information before other managers in order to embarrass them. It is interesting that the convenor at LockCo saw this as evidence of the strength of the union as a communication channel whereas at KeyCo, the convenor feels that this undermines her position in the eyes of managers. Interviews with KeyCo managers revealed the ways in which they viewed the union. There does appear to be a perception that the union is 'on their side'. The Engineering Manager stated that the relationship was: "*one of those lovely pictures where they're all holding hands, the union's loyalty is with the company*". The Operations Director alluded similarly to a unitarist view of the company and union's interests: "*Our union is very progressive.. and understands what is required.. the union agenda is the same as the company agenda*". While the convenor is adamant that her loyalties are with the union and the working class movement and would have problems with the appellation of "*our union*" by management, the Operations Director's words reflect her own views of the restructuring process. She is also positive about the attempts that the company made to inform and consult with the employees about the changes.: "*They'd [the workforce] say they weren't involved, but the*

company.. did their best to inform.. the management did try and get people fully involved". The separation between the views of the convenor and the rank and file is emphasised in that the managers themselves were not convinced of the two-way process of involvement between the company and employees. As the Operations Director stated, there was, *"very little leeway for a two way process. The communication process... has been very much.. one way.."*, while the Engineering Manager commented similarly that *"oh absolutely, they are imposed from above.. because at the end of the day, we hope that what we're .. doing are good common sense ideas"*. Finally, the Chief Accountant evoked a view of authoritarian paternalism (Ackers and Black, 1991) when he stated, *"It has to be imposed, there has to be a certain degree of contempt... but having said that it's good for them, you don't realise what's good for you until it's happened"*.

Tradition versus innovation

The convenor at LockCo has been determined to lead the union organisation at his workplace in a new direction which is seen as being at odds with the traditional way in which the national union leaders have acted in the past, and ways in which the national union has engaged with management. Firstly, he has set out deliberately to present an image of professionalism of the union organisation to management. This has been demonstrated through symbols such as the production of professionally typed and bound written material and the convenor wearing a shirt and tie. While some may see this as tokenism, with reference to the need to avoid criticisms of incorporation, the convenor feels that it is very important that while he wears a shirt and tie, he also wears a denim jacket and work boots. The shop stewards' committee meetings illustrate the care with which issues are discussed so that they can all enter negotiation situations fully informed, prepared and with a united view. As the Convenor commented, *"a modern trade union will only function with people who are professional.. education is the key"*. To this end, shop stewards' attendance at TUC courses is encouraged and the convenor himself has just completed a distance learning social science degree. In contrast, he finds the lack of professionalism of the national union, extremely frustrating. Their mould of the union leader is seen by him, as very much connected to *"the baggage of socialism"*. He feels that the traditional view is that people should join the union out of principle, not because of the attraction of the benefits that the union can offer them. This view seems to be shared by the convenor at KeyCo; compare her view on why trade unions should exist, *"everybody needs trade unions.. supporting the working class"*, with that of the convenor at LockCo, *"We can't continue being about unionism on a traditional basis, it's about helping individuals with their problems"*. The LockCo Convenor, is also President of the union and so has had the opportunity to put forward many ideas and innovations for future development of the union. He is disappointed that his views about modernising the union are not shared by others. One example is the possibility of recruiting temporary workers, which the companies have been hiring in increasing numbers over the last five years. This was opposed by the Executive Committee because agency workers were seen to threaten the jobs of their full time members. In comparison, the LockCo Convenor felt that as they had had little success in persuading the company not to use agency workers, they could recruit them and provide a service for them. Similar ideas about expanding recruitment to non-traditional areas such as the unemployed were also opposed.

There is also a link between leadership style and traditions of the occupational community. The convenor at KeyCo, matches the traditional background of people in the national union who had worked on the shopfloor in the lock industry all their lives; indeed the General Secretary had been a polisher at LockCo. The General Secretary and the Convenor at KeyCo, are seen as reaching their positions, in part through the build up of patronage over the years. The LockCo Convenor however, is not originally from the industrial town, and he feels therefore he does not have a large body of patronage and has got to his position through success in negotiations on the shopfloor. This has led to a feeling of detachment between the national union and the in-plant union organisation at LockCo today. The national union were heavily involved with negotiations at KeyCo, indeed many of the early negotiations were a team effort of the Convenor and three full time officials, as she commented, *"I think they're with me on the way things are working here...I work well with them"*. This is complemented by the support that the General Secretary indicated for the restructuring at KeyCo, when he attended the shop steward's committee meeting at LockCo soon after their own proposals for change were announced. As he stated, *"There are going to be some losers, but the change in the long term will be better. The system at [KeyCo] is.. better"*. In comparison, the convenor at LockCo remains unconvinced that the restructuring will yield all the benefits foreseen and he commented on how he feels quite isolated from the national union in his negotiations with the company. He believes that his approach is different to that of the other convenors and officials of the national union, and more significantly is different to that expected by management. He related an incident where the Managing Director had been astonished when he had commented that their strategic plans for the restructuring of the company were, *"basically Fordist with a bit of re-jigging"*, which led to an in depth discussion between them. The company owners also seem to differentiate between the

national union and that of KeyCo, and the union organisation at LockCo. An example is the recent discussions about the different Christmas bonuses given to both firms, when the company refused to give the same bonus to KeyCo until the convenor at LockCo had agreed, bypassing the overarching organisation of the national union. The union organisation at KeyCo is thus more closely attached to that of the national union, whereas, at LockCo, the union has taken a much more independent direction. The convenor at LockCo, perhaps can be seen as reflecting a situation of 'popular bossdom' (Turner, 1962). As he commented, "*My popularity inside [LockCo] far outweighs my popularity outside*". There are also indications of the difficulty of collaboration between the union organisations at both firms, perhaps due to the different ways in which union process is carried out at each firm. Both convenors spoke of the traditional company rivalry that existed, with families remaining loyal to particular firms and the difficulty that the two convenors would have in coming to joint decisions. As the convenor at KeyCo commented: "*It's got to be done, but I know it's going to lead to a lot of falling out*". The divergence in attitudes between members at the two companies might thus be explained by the difference between the personal leadership styles at the two firms.

Conclusions and implications

We now turn to look at what the previous analysis means for our initial questions about the divergence of attitudes found at the firms. Four main points can be raised:

1. *This research has broader sociological implications, highlighting the interplay between structure and consciousness where the person is both a creator and object of their situation.*
2. *What is important in these two cases is the way in which union leaders interpret and fill their roles in different circumstances. This has implications for the wider membership views towards and commitment to their union.*

It is important to consider questions concerning the degree of choice that the convenor faced at KeyCo. Where the union gets involved in a change process where there are few formalised institutional supports for involvement, will the relationship tend to be conducted on management's terms? Were the convenor's actions firmly situated in her own circumstances? (Wright-Mills, 1963). Faced with a tradition of industrial relations based on informal negotiation and personal relationships, a depleted and apathetic shop steward organisation, and a long period of take-overs of impersonal, uninterested managements, how much choice did she have about the nature of the engagement? Is the convenor at KeyCo an object, rather than the creator of her situation? Certainly, the experience of the scale of restructuring was new at company KeyCo, whereas the convenor at LockCo has the advantage of being able to learn from the example already set by the convenor at KeyCo. The changes in work re-organisation will also differ between the companies. Such large scale change in terms of the introduction of cellular production is more difficult at LockCo because of the vast catalogue of products which they have. At KeyCo, they were able to rationalise the product lines so that there were different cells for each product, whereas the complexity of the product range at LockCo is such that this rationalisation into cells will be far more problematic. However, while they are still constraining and contingent factors, the introduction of team working and flexibility of labour are not issues that have aroused much worker opposition at either firm. The main bones of contention between members and their union at KeyCo, revolved around the pay scheme and the level of redundancies, both of which are issues currently high on the agenda of LockCo. In contrast then, the impact of the proposed changes might be anticipated to be similar at both firms. To what extent is the convenor at KeyCo purely a victim of her situation? The shop steward organisation at KeyCo is far less enthusiastic, supportive, effective and able than at LockCo. However, we have indicated how the personal leadership style of the convenor at LockCo has encouraged the participation of stewards and members and succeeded in generating the active support of rank and file on a number of occasions. The leadership style of the convenor at KeyCo could be seen to engender the apathy of both her stewards and members as they become increasingly excluded from union processes. Perhaps, more significantly, the convenor at KeyCo has become detached from the views and concerns of her members, and has increasingly come to see the terrain of issues bargained over by herself on behalf of her members as defined by the company. This is similar to the situation analysed by Fairbrother (1989) as due to the lack of a participatory and collectivist leadership style. The point of interest here is that at KeyCo we find the Convenor is creating and reinforcing a situation which simultaneously, she feels a victim of. Both Convenors can be seen as 'representative', rather than 'delegate' union leaders (Batstone et al, 1977). Both take initiatives and make policies autonomously. However, they are different kinds of representatives. At KeyCo, a situation has arisen where there is a 'vicious circle', where members have become apathetic about their union organisation and while complaining about the lack of accountability of their Convenor, they do little to ensure there is more union democracy. In the end, they effectively allow the Convenor to act in the way that she

does, largely through lack of action. In turn, the Convenor reinforces this situation, building on her experience of the apathy of the membership. At LockCo, the Convenor has in practice, a similar level of autonomous control. However, there is more evidence perhaps of a 'virtuous circle', where the Convenor effectively has the mandate of membership, where their experience has led them to trust that he will act in their best interests.

Bearing in mind the negativity of views towards the union at KeyCo, one might ask why workers continue to be union members there. One explanation rests with the traditional position of the union within the company, and wider industry, where union membership has been actively encouraged by employers. Indeed, the recent 'signing up' campaign at KeyCo was successful. However, getting members to 'sign up' does not translate automatically into membership support for, or commitment to the union. Members' views of their union are situated in their particular context. Tradition is not enough per se, nor is a traditional approach desired, if it is not seen as appropriate to the current situation. In a hostile environment, the union can still be perceived as salient (as it is at LockCo), if it improves the worker's situation at work, and if it is seen to have a demonstrable effect in the workplace. In addition, they still value the 'traditional' aspects of union process such as collectivism, participation and democracy. These are not threatened by the innovation that has been put in place by the Convenor at LockCo, which is seen as appropriate for the particular situation that they face.

- 3. This study has pointed out that in order for the union to maintain credibility, the way in which the union engages with management has to be carefully negotiated. It complements the literature on this issue, emphasising that any practice of 'social partnership' cannot only be on management's terms.*

It is certain that management at both companies were adamant that the changes they proposed would take place, and unions find themselves with limited room for manoeuvre when the changes are seen as necessary for the survival of the company. However, 'necessity' can be seen as socially defined, where the world views of management and unions are developed in their interactions with each other. It is this that defines what is possible or desirable in which particular circumstances. As Kelly (1996) points out, advocates of moderation as a policy for unions rarely deny that there are conflicts of interest in employment. The issue is the way in which union leaders manage the contradictions of their relationship with management. Co-operation with management may be a pre-requisite, if the union is to have any influence on the way in which change is brought about (Black and Ackers, 1995; Black and McCabe, 1998). However, most workers still feel that there is a conflict of interests between workers and management, which the union must be seen to recognise, if they are not to be seen as incorporated. In this regard, the argument differs from that of proponents of union moderation (Monks, 1993; Storey and Sisson, 1993), in that they claim that there is a set of issues on which workers, unions and employers have common interests, around which they can build more co-operative relations. The Convenor does not see a unity of interest with management, even though he recognises that they need to be able to co-operate with one another: *"the traditional trade unionist cannot function in modern industrial situations. It's not about confrontation now, it's not adversarialism. We'll never be corporate partners, we'll always have conflict, but we need to be able to know how these companies operate, we need to be able to understand and talk in their language"*. The convenor at LockCo therefore appears to fit in more with the 'militant' stance in Kelly's typology (1996: 80), where there is a strong reliance on the mobilisation of union membership, an underlying ideology of conflicting interests and the ability to threaten industrial action. Kelly (1996) raises the point that a militant stance towards management may exacerbate the desire of employers to marginalise unions. Alternatively, successful membership mobilisation based on an adversarial ideology may inhibit the capacity of employers to act on this desire. Certainly, at LockCo, the unions' oppositional stance does not appear to have weakened their position but has led to management being more careful about consulting and involving the union and appears to have led to significant bargaining gains for members. Certainly, it is early days in the negotiation process at LockCo, but so far the convenor has appeared to have negotiated a relationship which while accepting co-operation, does not deny the existence of a basic conflict of interest.

- 4. This study has highlighted the importance of case study research to complement the wider macro-level surveys.*

In this study, we were surprised to find the striking divergence in attitudes between workers at the two companies bearing in mind the considerable similarity between them. With similar historical backgrounds, product markets, management style and union traditions, we might have expected similar attitudes. Here, it was found to be important to study at the specific workplace level, in order to understand and interpret the attitudes towards the union.

Notes

1. Fosh (1993:581) Representativeness, (extent to which leaders' policies and perspectives demonstrate commitment to the interests which members express); Accountability, ((the extent of consultation of and reporting back to membership and adherence to membership decisions); Involvement, (the extent to which members are drawn into workplace decision-making).

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