CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

Part 1

Introduction

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

1 Introduction: trade unions and industrial relations

One of the major resources of any trade union movement is the cadre of full-time officers employed to service its membership. British trade unions currrently employ about 3000 full-time officers (FTOs) to represent the interests of members both collectively, through negotiations and consultation, and individually, through procedures and at tribunals. Full-time officers can play a key role in shaping the responses of union members to management initiatives; they can have an impact on workplace union organization; and they have often been seen as key recruiting agents for unions in unorganized companies. The salary costs of the officer workforce now make up the single largest item of total union expenditure. Yet despite their importance little is known about union full-time officers, and in the past 30 years they have been the subject of only three major studies: *Trade Union Officers* (Clegg, Killick and Adams, 1961); *Workplace and Union* (Boraston, Clegg and Rimmer, 1975); and *Managers of Discontent* (Watson, 1988). Industrial relations research in this period concentrated on a variety of other actors: shop stewards in the 1960s and 1970s, government incomes and legal policies from the early 1970s, and employers from the 1980s. The present study aims to fill this serious gap in our knowledge by presenting a wide range of data on the numbers, organization, activities and values of full-time union officers. To this end we used a variety of research methods – interviews, questionnaires and non-participant observation – in a cross-section of unions and employment sectors.

Our second aim was to contribute to theoretical debates about union organization in which the concept of 'bureaucracy' has played a prominent role. Whilst trade unions clearly do have bureaucratic organizational features they also have non-bureaucratic elements, and it is important to understand these two faces of union organization. Exaggeration of the bureaucratic elements of unionism is likely to produce misleading accounts of officer power and officer–member conflict. There are other theoretical approaches in the literature (discussed in chapter 2) and wherever possible we have tried to relate our findings to the analyses or hypotheses derived from theory.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

Thirdly we also use the evidence from this study to contribute to broader debates in industrial relations. The decline of trade union membership in the 1980s, the loss of power experienced by many shop steward organizations and the adoption of 'new' management techniques by more assertive employers have led to fundamental questions being asked about the future trajectory of British industrial relations. Some foresee a slow steady decline of unionism whilst others see it being confined to the shrinking ghettos of private industry and the public sector. Union–management relations have been the subject of equally wide-ranging and intense discussion with some writers claiming to have discerned a new, more cooperative pattern of industrial relations amongst workers, unions and employers particularly, but not exclusively, in greenfield sites. Others by contrast have held fast to the view that compliance is a more accurate description of events and that labour's apparent acquiescence and 'cooperation' is a product of high unemployment and adverse product markets. We return to these issues in the concluding chapter (chapter 10) of the book.

The research

Our research began in 1985 and was completed in 1991. Full details of the various phases and methods can be found in the Appendix (p. 208), and copies of the questionnaires and observation schedules can be obtained from the authors on request, but briefly we proceeded as follows. After pilot interviews with local full-time officers in four unions – ASTMS, AUEW, GMB and T&GWU – we then embarked on a period of intense observation of officers at work. After careful consultation with 27 officers we selected a number of companies from amongst the bargaining units they serviced and wherever possible tried to accompany them to all of the meetings dealing with a particular issue, whether it was pay, hours of work, equal opportunities or whatever. In other words, we tried to follow through the whole process of formulating a claim, negotiating it with the employers and reaching a final settlement. We tried to cover a wide range of issues, companies, sectors and officers rather than concentrating on particular issues or a particular sector. We also conducted a series of questionnaire surveys: of union Head Offices in 1986 and 1991, of individual full-time officers in 1987 and of women full-time officers in the same year. We used multiple methods as a way of cross-checking data collected in different ways, but mainly as a way of addressing different types of issues.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

The context

One of the questions that is always raised about empirical research is how far the findings are situation- or period-specific. This is a particularly acute problem in industrial relations because of the many political, social, economic and legal changes that have taken place in the past 20 years or so. In addition, there is an important theoretical reason for reflecting on the context of the present research. Some of the theories that we review in chapter 2, particularly theories of union bureaucracy, have identified powerful external pressures on unions that allegedly contribute to goal displacement and goal moderation. Insofar as unions are secondary organizations whose existence depends on the survival of companies and other employing organizations, they have an unavoidable interest in the objectives of employers. Full-time union officers have often been seen as peculiarly susceptible to pressures towards collaboration with or incorporation by employers (and the State) because their own interests are tied so heavily to the survival of union organization. Other formulations of bureaucracy theory emphasize the officer's intermediary role, caught between rank and file pressures on the one hand and incorporationist pressures from employers on the other. The context of our research has an important bearing on these arguments. Throughout the 1980s unions steadily lost members, particularly but not exclusively in the two recessions. The level of strike activity fell sharply and the balance of power shifted towards employers. Union officers found themselves having to work in an extremely inhospitable environment dominated by mass unemployment, adverse product markets, restrictive labour laws and pronounced State hostility to trade unionism. Membership pressures towards militancy were therefore weakened at the same time as external pressures for cooperation with employers were strengthened. The context of our research was therefore one in which the bureaucratic tendencies of unions and their officers were given their freest rein for some time. If such tendencies are as pervasive as has sometimes been claimed, then the 1980s was an ideal period in which to observe them. But this argument has an important corollary. If we failed to confirm or strongly support the predictions and analyses of bureaucracy theory under such ideal conditions then we could be confident that the theory was indeed seriously flawed and our findings could not be explained away as situationally-specific.

The account of our research is organized as follows. In chapter 2 we review the different theories of union organization, from the Webbs onwards, and examine the concepts of bureaucracy, oligarchy and polyarchy. In different ways these theories all attempt to derive a model of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

officer goals and interests from their structural location in the union hierarchy. Contingency studies, such as Boraston *et al.* (1975) have at least recognized variation amongst officers, but have also tried to explain this in terms of the structures of union organization and collective bargaining. We argue that structural properties of unions and bargaining systems are important in explaining many facets of officer organization, but are very much less useful when it comes to officer actions. Whilst recognizing structural constraints on officers, we stress the values of union officers themselves in determining their objectives and actions in particular settings, a perspective that owes much to the 'social action' approach in sociology. In part 2 (chapters 3, 4 and 5), we look at the organization of full-time officers within the union. Chapter 3 presents basic data on the numbers of union full-time officers and more importantly on their backgrounds and their route into the job. We trace the rather different routes of men and women, and of manual and non-manual officers, and also provide information on the terms and conditions of employment of officers. This data, the most complete available since 1961, is also analyzed as a function of union type and union size in order to try and explain the dramatic variations in officer salaries. Chapter 4 concentrates on the workloads of officers and presents data on officer–member ratios and on specialization and hierarchy in union organization. We examine variations between unions, and try to interpret shifts over time. Chapter 5 looks at a question that is critical for any organization: how do senior officers monitor, control and reward the activities of their subordinates? We present a wealth of detail on the control systems of trade unions and demonstrate the severe problems faced by the national officers of a democratic organization in exercising day-to-day control over full-time union officers in the field. Conversely, we also examine the degree to which field officers have an input into their union's policy-making process and we consider the links between officer involvement in policy formation and officer commitment to policy implementation.

Part 3 of the book focuses on the officer at work and looks in turn at organizing, bargaining and relations with management. Chapter 6 shows the critical role played by officers in maintaining and building strong workplace union organization. Officers were extremely anxious to encourage steward organization, independence from management, strong links with members and a high level of density. The main relationship between stewards and officers was one of inter-dependence, with stewards dependent on officers for their expertise and officers dependent on stewards for both information and for the implementation of union policy in areas like recruitment, a topic we explore in some depth. In chapter 7 we

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

look at the process of formulating objectives in collective bargaining and assess the relative power of officers and stewards in placing items on the agenda. We also examine the important role of officers' own ideologies in shaping the objectives they seek to pursue and the criteria they use to decide on objectives in the first place. Chapter 8 looks at the bargaining process itself, and reveals the dominant role exercised by officers, a role for the most part fully accepted by stewards. We found a large measure of agreement between officers and stewards on the arguments used in bargaining and in their willingness to resist management arguments. However, we also found that the officers' own ideologies again played a key role in shaping their willingness to resist or comply with management pressure, and to moderate or to maintain stewards' own objectives. The chapter therefore explores the sources and variations in officer ideologies. In chapter 9 we look at relations with management and at the generally negative views of management promulgated by officers to their stewards. Part 4, and chapter 10, recapitulates our main conclusions and returns to the major debates about British trade unions and industrial relations through the 1980s and early 1990s.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

2 Theoretical analysis and empirical studies of trade union officers

Chapter 1 explained why an analysis of the role, behaviour and values of full-time officers is integral to many of the debates about contemporary British industrial relations. In the present chapter we therefore set out to look at the theoretical and empirical literature on union officers with three aims in mind. First, we want to outline and evaluate the major theoretical approaches that have been used to understand trade union organization, and the role of the officer within the union. Secondly, we want to summarize the current state of knowledge about union full-time officers in Britain, though from time to time we shall also refer to comparative material. Finally, we shall outline the main features of our own approach to the explanation of union officer organization and behaviour.

Some of the most contentious issues in the study of trade union organization were first highlighted by the Webbs in their classic studies *Industrial Democracy* (1902) and *The History of Trade Unionism* (1920). The local craft societies of the early nineteenth century became transformed into large, national organizations, and with the change in size came a change in structure. The 'primitive democracy' of mass membership meetings gave way to the delegate conference, the elected executive committee and the full-time salaried officer with an increasingly sophisticated division of labour between them. This separation of functions between rank and file members, delegate conference, executive committee and full-time officers led the Webbs to raise two critical questions about trade union organization. What were the relations of power between these different groups within a trade union? And if it was the case, as the Webbs argued, that power was becoming concentrated in the hands of trade union officers, then to what ends would this power be used? Or to put it another way, had the division of functions inside trade unions also created a division of interests? The Webbs conceptualized these issues in terms of a potential conflict between the demands of democracy and efficiency, or what Child *et al.* (1973) later described as representative and administrative rationalities. We prefer to examine

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

these issues by looking at the behaviour of union officers and the networks of relationships within which they operate. This entails a focus on their objectives as officers, such as bargaining goals for example, and on the means used to attain them. And it also means focusing on the key industrial relations actors with whom they most frequently interact: shop stewards, management, and fellow officers within their own union.

Our knowledge of trade union officers is still insufficient to permit highly rigorous testing of precise hypotheses about their behaviour, and there are many gaps in our knowledge that must first be filled with basic descriptive data. But we also believe that social scientific inquiry must try to proceed beyond description towards the development and elaboration of theory and hypotheses, and towards the testing of hypotheses. In the following account of previous research we have therefore tried wherever possible to draw out the predictions and hypotheses that follow from a particular theoretical approach, so that we can then confront these propositions with empirical evidence.

Theories of bureaucracy and oligarchy

The concepts of bureaucracy and oligarchy have frequently been deployed in analyses of trade union officers, though not always with a clear or consistent meaning (cf. Albrow, 1970, Heery and Fosh, 1990 on bureaucracy; Edelstein and Warner, 1979, chapter 2 on oligarchy). Modern usage derives from Weber who identified several features of an ideal–typical bureaucratic organization: appointment of officials on merit; precise definition of jobs; arrangement of jobs in a hierarchy of authority; regulation of officials' behaviour by rules (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980). In the field of trade union organization Heery and Fosh (1990, and see below) were able to identify five distinct approaches to the concept of bureaucracy.

For the Webbs, a separate stratum of full-time salaried officers, a bureaucracy, was a necessity for two reasons: first, because of the growth in size and complexity of trade unions and their administration; but second, and more importantly, because of the tendency of rank and file trade unionists to engage in 'short-sighted' and 'irresponsible' actions. The Webbs' *History* is replete with examples of workers who went out on strike until their union was bankrupt; or meetings that voted for more union services but refused to raise subscriptions. For the Webbs workers were their own worst enemies, and they welcomed trade union officers as a means by which unions could make more 'rational' decisions about worker and union interests. By protecting union organization and the union's procedural rights in collective bargaining the officers were

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

preserving the indispensable prerequisite for workers to improve the conditions of their working lives (Webb and Webb, 1920: 1). The preservation of organization was therefore a common interest of both officers and rank and file trade unionists. Nevertheless, the Webbs also recognized the possibility that officers could, and sometimes did, develop an entirely different set of interests and outlooks. The officers' income and working conditions removed them from the worst privations of manual labour, particularly once unions became consolidated and accepted by employers for collective bargaining (cf. also van Tine, 1973, on US union officials of the early twentieth century). The work of the officials brought them frequently into contact with employers and government functionaries, allegedly giving them less time for contact with rank and file members of their unions. It was claimed that their bargaining function, and their good relations with employers, led them increasingly to regard compromise as the essence of negotiations, and to view with impatience the ambitious and militant demands of their members. And their command over power resources, particularly their own expertise, facilitated the periodic imposition of their own views against rank and file dissent. The union officer had to walk a very finely balanced tightrope, taking care not to become too distant from the rank and file, whilst at the same time not being afraid to oppose the members and assert authority over them. Many of the Webbs' ideas were carried over into pluralist analyses of trade union organization and collective bargaining. Clegg (1979) and Flanders (1970) both wrote about the 'institutional needs' of trade unions and readily accepted that these would inevitably give rise to compromises in collective bargaining. Part of the role of the union officer was therefore to secure workers' acceptance of such agreements as being in their own long-term interests.

In all essential respects the Marxist theory of trade union bureaucracy is identical with that of the Webbs, a claim supported by the fact that several Marxist accounts of union bureaucracy have relied almost entirely on their work (e.g. Pearce, 1959; Cliff, 1971; and see also Kelly, 1988, chapter 7). What is distinctive about the Marxist theory of union bureaucracy is its value orientation. The rank and file militancy which struck the Webbs as irresponsible and short-sighted appeared to Marxists as the most exemplary manifestation of class struggle. Because of their position as exploited wage-labourers in the capitalist system of production, workers had a vested interest in combining together, at first to protect and advance their immediate economic interests, but ultimately to overthrow by revolution the system of exploitation and oppression which was the root cause of their problems and grievances. Given this expectation of working-class militancy it was perfectly reasonable for the classical Marx-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-11540-7 - Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers
John Kelly and Edmund Heery
Excerpt
More information

ists to seek out an explanation for its absence, and in the figures of the trade union official and the 'labour aristocrat' they believed they had found it. Having satisfied their own ambitions for material privileges, job security, power and status, these leaders of the early trade unions were thought to have made their peace with capitalism, and their primary role was henceforth to secure accommodations and compromises between labour and capital.

Marxists have always differed amongst themselves as to the precise determinants of the behaviour of union officials (Kelly, 1988, chapter 7). Marx, Engels and Lenin emphasized the material privileges of office; Trotsky laid more stress on the incorporation of union leaders into the social networks of employers, State agencies and the middle classes; whilst Gramsci argued that the bargaining function of the union official led to him acting as an intermediary between labour and capital despite his formal employment by, and accountability to, workers. Finally, where the Webbs retained a relatively open mind about the outcome of the many different influences, both radical and conservative, on the behaviour and outlooks of union officials, the classical Marxists had no such doubts, and were convinced of the inexorable conservatism of union leaders.

With the growing involvement of the State in postwar economic growth a number of Marxist and radical analysts turned their attention to the implications of this trend for trade union organization (Heery and Fosh, 1990). According to one line of argument union officers were becoming increasingly involved in a process of 'political exchange' with the State in which they ensured wage restraint in collective bargaining in return for far-reaching procedural and substantive rights for the working class as a whole. These trade-offs eventually gave rise to internal conflict between union officers (particularly at national level) and their rank and file members and thus exacerbated some of the existing internal divisions in unions identified by Marxists and others (Kelly, 1988, chapter 9). For some contemporary Marxists the actions of the full-time officer are less stable and predictable than the classical Marxists supposed, because the officer is thought to play an intermediary role, caught between the conflicting pressures from union members on the one hand and from employers and the State on the other. Under conditions of worker militancy and strong shopfloor organization, union officers can be pressured to act in a more representative capacity and pursue the interests of their members (Bramble 1991, 1992; Callinicos, 1982). This formulation makes the theory somewhat more flexible and also generates an interesting prediction. During periods of labour quiescence, such as the 1980s, the conservatism of the officials will go largely unchecked by rank and file pressure and should therefore be at its most visible. Our own

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org