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Focusing or Fragmenting Representation at Work? Specialist Trade Union Representation in the United Kingdom

EDITED BY

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and

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Reshaping of Workplace Representation in the United Kingdom and the Development of Focused Trade Union Roles

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Abstract

The chapter introduces the book, reviews some of the historical context of workplace representation and discusses change and renewal in relation to more focused representatives. The chapter locates these general shifts in worker representation in terms of the broader economic, social, political, and structural changes that are framing them. The chapter focuses on these imperatives for change by engaging with the more explicit drivers behind new forms of workplace representation, considers how deliberate, or conscious, these developments are, and whether they represent a new form or pattern of trade unionism. The final and concluding part of the chapter introduces the contributions to the edited volume and brings together some of the findings and reflections of the empirical chapters on different types of worker representatives.

Keywords: Worker representation; shop stewards; UK industrial relations; union learning representatives; green representatives; youth representatives; health and safety representatives; equality representatives; trade unions

Introduction

This book is about the changing nature of workplace representation in the United Kingdom (UK). Having observed the evolution of a range of focused and specific trade union roles since the turn to organising in the mid-1990s (Simms and Holgate, 2010), we wanted to reflect on the changing nature of these representative positions, and consider the role they play in interest representation in the contemporary world of work. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the debates around the forms of representation discussed in the book. Trade union and worker representation, defined quite broadly, have always taken different shapes and have been organised for different purposes. At a basic level, unions are ‘primarily organizations that exist for the representation of members’ interests, both individual and collective’ (Hodder and Edwards, 2015: 844–845). Trade unions are therefore very clearly membership organisations, which heavily rely on the work of volunteers to undertake union business and activities. Workplace union representatives, are volunteers that operate primarily at the level of the workplace, usually elected by members of the same workplace. These individuals perform union duties on an unpaid basis alongside their paid employment, and in some circumstances receive ‘facilities time’ – that is paid time off work to undertake union duties. Workplace union representatives are often supported by paid union officials who work to support the activities of both members and representatives. Yet, union activity is not limited to the workplace. Unions rely on a network of workplace representatives embedded in formal and informal union structures and hierarchies to advance member interests at a range of different levels. Kaine (2014) identified four levels at which worker representation takes place: the individual level (where unions deal with individual grievances and personal case work), the level at which collective bargaining is conducted (which can be a combination of the workplace, company and industry level), the national level (where unions engage in political lobbying and engage in pressure group tactics), and the international level (where unions engage with employers and bodies such as the International Labour Organisation in an attempt to counter negative impacts of globalization). These levels ‘operate in different ways at different times’ (Martínez Lucio and Mustchin, 2019: 147), and unions have to structure their systems of representation to be able to act accordingly.

The way that trade unions have structured their organisations both generally and within workplaces has been the subject of extensive reflection (Undy et al., 1981; Terry, 1983; Virdee and Grint, 1994; Hyman, 1997; Parker, 2002; Behrens et al., 2004; Charlwood and Terry, 2007; Simms, 2007; Martínez Lucio and Mustchin, 2019). The nature and orientation of workplace representatives – normally termed shop stewards – has been seen as pivotal to the effectiveness of trade unionism and worker action generally (Batstone, 1986). Yet, there remains ‘an ambivalence and variability in worker representation as to the purpose of its engagement, the tangible and intangible effects of its activity, and the changeability and different combinations of the roles that it has’ (Martínez Lucio and Mustchin, 2019: 144). The forms of worker representation have varied, according to workplace and sectoral context, from a hierarchical or bureaucratic style

to a more direct and mobilisation-based type. The politics and overall purpose of workplace representation also vary and change over time, depending on the networking and coordination within and across workplaces (Darlington, 2002; Darlington and Upchurch, 2012).

However, for some time, the number of union representatives has been declining in the UK (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Whilst there are no exact figures for the UK as a whole, we know that trade union membership has been falling since the 1980s. Moreover, the coverage of collective bargaining has declined due to both political and organisational factors, with the emergence of employer strategies challenging the nature of worker representation and in many cases attempting to remove, marginalise, or replace it (Bacon and Storey, 2000; Simms, 2024). Yet attempts at replacing union organisation with non-union forms of voice have not taken hold in the UK (Dobbins and Dundon, 2014). Unions still represent over 6 million workers in the UK (which is approximately 22% of all working people), although estimates of collective bargaining coverage range between 29% and 39% (see Simms, 2024: 54), suggesting the representation gap identified long ago has not gone away (Towers, 1997; Heery, 2009).

Despite this, however, both external economic and social factors, and internal concerns and issues, have generated not only reorganisation but also a degree of resilience within workplace union institutions. Much of the discussion has focused on the role of union strategies generally, on the rise of new forms of independent or autonomous worker representation in the wake of the weaknesses of established unions (Alberti and Però, 2018), and on whether these new entities are capable of engendering more innovative and inclusive forms of trade unionism and worker representation (Atzeni, 2009). Issues of broader union identity and culture have tended to overshadow discussion on the *nature* and *focus* of the representation in new or different sets of workplaces, and on organisational and societal issues (Moore, 2011; Daniels and McIlroy, 2009). That said, it is clear that unions have needed to evolve and engage with what some have termed a ‘fragmentation of worker interests’ (Heery et al., 2004: 6).

Hence, research and publication within industrial relations has tended to focus principally on *vertical* internal relations within union structures or on external relations between unions and other organisations and spheres. While the debate on these issues has been robust and highly innovative, it does not always include how workplace representation has been evolving and reorganising itself in quite functional ways at a local level, and the emergence of a differentiated set of issues and challenges. It could be argued that this was always the case, as racism, sexism, and ecological factors, for example, have long affected the nature and experience of work and employment (see Davis, 1993 on issues of race and class during the 20th century). However, different dimensions and factors that shape the way we work and the challenges we confront have been gaining increased attention. Interest in mapping these developments in terms of specialist trade union representation began to emerge during the later periods of the 1997–2010 Labour governments (CBI, TUC, BERR, 2009).¹ Social and economic changes were increasingly reflected within the workplace and in turn have been reshaping – in various ways – the character of worker representation in what we would consider

horizontal terms. To understand the causes of these shifts and their impact on the UK's industrial relations system we need to bring together the different dimensions of these changes.

Firstly, the chapter briefly reviews some of the historical context of workplace representation and this leads, secondly, onto a section that deals with the debate regarding union change and renewal and how we can understand shifting workplace priorities. Thirdly, the chapter locates these general shifts in worker representation in terms of the broader economic, social, political, and structural changes that are framing them. Many of the changes in representation discussed in the book are occurring due to the pressures on workplaces and organisations emerging from broader social and economic changes. Fourthly, the chapter then outlines the specific drivers of institutional, cultural, and informational developments in terms of new and specialist forms of representation in the UK. This section focuses more clearly on these imperatives for change by engaging with the more explicit drivers behind new forms of workplace representation and considers how deliberate, or conscious, these developments are and whether they fit into a new form or pattern of trade unionism: something the final concluding chapter to the book will develop further. This final and concluding part of the chapter introduces the contributions to this volume and brings together some of the findings and reflections of the empirical chapters on different types of worker representatives.

There are five chapters that focus on different types of worker representative – green-related issues, health and safety, young workers, equality, and diversity, and learning related. The book attempts to locate these discussions in a range of industrial relations literature regarding the historical nature and tensions related to worker representation. However, its main focus is on such forms of worker representation in the context of change within work and its relations to society more broadly, and the debates on whether such changes in worker representation can be seen as some form of significant transformation in terms of the nature of worker's voice in the workplace.

Background and Development of Worker Representation Across Time

Within the study of UK industrial relations, there has always been a focus on the role of shop stewards from the first shop stewards movement (Hinton, 1973), to the Donovan era (McCarthy, 1966), and beyond (Hyman, 1997; Charlwood and Terry, 2007). In the earlier literature, many questions were dealt with through these forms of representation at the micro level of industrial relations (see for example, Nicholson, 1976; Brown et al., 1978; Terry, 1983; Terry, 1986; Blyton and Turnbull, 1998: 150). The economic context and the impact of full employment led to shop stewards in various sectors acquiring an important set of power resources based not simply on their negotiating skills but also on the labour shortages faced by employers. The role of shop stewards varied, depending not only on the tightness of labour markets but also on socio-technical systems within workplaces, the level at which company and union decision-making took place, and the nature of

payment systems (such as the advantages presented to organised workplaces and shop stewards by piece-rate pay) (McCarthy, 1966: 58–64). The actions of shop stewards were also shaped by the scope and level of collective agreements and the attitude of management (McCarthy, 1966: 64–7).

These localised and informal systems of industrial relations, which were often subject to isolated and frequently unofficial collective action in a range of workplaces, generated concerns for employers and the state. Concerns were sometimes generated for trade unions too, due to the impact on their senior leadership's authority (see Lerner, 1962). In response, by the mid-1960s, the government convened a Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations in an attempt to improve the decentered, conflictual system of shop floor and shop steward-oriented industrial relations (Brown, 2016). Workplace-level worker representation was regarded as a significant dimension of employment regulation that was not systematically controlled or coordinated by the state.

In many workplaces, shop stewards were part of internal stewards' committees with specific leadership structures (Batstone et al., 1977: 77–98). Internal networks have always been an important feature of shop steward activity, although much depends on their general orientation – 'leadership' or 'populist' (Batstone et al., 1977). Shop stewards were just as capable of being bureaucratic and hierarchical as officers and leaders of trade unions at higher levels (see Hyman, 1971; Batstone, 1986; Heery and Kelly, 1990). Alongside these internal networks were, in some cases, strong external networks of combined committees between workplaces and companies which could provide an alternative and sometimes competitive counterpoint to formal trade union structures. These broader, and at times politically oriented, networks of shop stewards represented an important dimension of workplace politics and were part of the power resources used to pressurise management and even the state on a range of issues (Darlington, 2002; Cohen, 2006; McBride and Sterling, 2014). The shop steward mobilisation and extensive negotiation that were significant in the 1970s play an important role in the UK's industrial relations system to this day, although there are far fewer of them due to the decline in trade union membership and coverage, the collapse of unofficial action, and the decline in collective bargaining coverage that has occurred since the 1980s (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Much depends on the individual shop stewards and their orientation towards members and managers, and in specific sectors they continue to play an important negotiation and mobilisation role around their union branches and formal as well as informal networks (Cohen, 2006; McBride and Sterling, 2014).

Of Change and Renewal: Refocusing the Lens of the Debate

In response to over a decade of union membership decline, unions sought to reassess their agenda in order to survive. Consequently, the debate on trade union renewal and revitalisation – two concepts that do not always mean the same thing – as well as their changing relations with other actors and spaces, has been a dominant feature of industrial relations research and practice since the late 1980s (Murray, 2017). As unions have tried to adapt to hard times and

hard choices (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2018), unions have engaged in a range of activities to rebuild levels of power and influence at work. In terms of renewal, discussion has focused on relations between trade unions and employers (e.g. through social partnership), the broader politics of class interests (e.g. through contemporary organising strategies), and relations with different civil society actors (e.g. through links with community bodies or social movements) (see Hyman, 2001). Whilst a range of strategies for union renewal and revitalisation were proposed and adopted to varying degrees of success (Murray, 2017), union organising has been central to these debates. In the UK, this was initially as a result of a strategic reorientation of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to promote increased levels of workplace activism (Simms et al., 2019). Whilst the term union organising is itself not without debate, it is accepted as a term that ‘brings together a set of ideas that unions should encourage workers, and especially members, to take responsibility for working collectively to pursue their interests’ (Simms, 2024: 58). Central to union organising therefore have been attempts to rebuild membership levels; increase their ‘demographic representativeness’ (Martínez Lucio et al., 2017: 38) to ensure they were truly reflecting the interests of the contemporary workforce, and more broadly increase member participation and activism in union affairs. As part of the organising agenda, the role of the workplace activist became crucial to union renewal although how these activists or representatives link organising into a broader narrative of change is not straightforward (Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2009). Indeed, as one commentator reflected, ‘their efforts (without pay and often in their own time) are the single most important factor in reaching out to non-members, promoting participation and mobilizing workers in the quest for collective demands against employer attacks’ (Daniels, 2009: 268). As such, many studies then examined workplace organising campaigns as vehicles for increasing levels of representation at work (see the various contributions to Gall, 2003 for example), and as unions placed more emphasis on participation and activism, more routes for this developed.²

In addition to the more traditional roles of worker representation (discussed above in relation to debates on shop stewards), a range of new representative positions began to emerge in the UK throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 2009, these ‘specialist union representative’ roles were said to be ‘increasingly appearing on the scene’ (CBI et al., 2009: 4). However, several of these were sufficiently new to warrant explanation in a glossary that formed part of a joint Department for Business Enterprise & Regulatory Reform, Confederation of British Industry and TUC pamphlet on the role of union representatives in the modern workplace (CBI et al., 2009). In addition to the traditional role of the shop steward, four additional roles were identified – Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), health and safety representatives, environmental representatives and equality representatives (ERs). To be clear, health and safety representatives had existed in the UK for several years, but the other three roles reflected union attempts to increase levels of activism and participation by creating more specialist roles. Much research then followed, particularly examining ULRs (see, for example, Moore and Ross, 2010) and ERs (Bacon and Hoque, 2012). Yet there was a debate as to the extent to which these roles could really lead to increased levels of activism and ultimately union renewal. On the one

hand, the separation out of union representative portfolios through the creation of specialist roles may mean that there is less chance of employer fragmentation of worker interest, and the undermining of workplace union organisation. On the other hand, however, these roles were often very narrowly defined. Potentially, this presents a problem to unions: by separating out general industrial relations matters from the issues of the environment or learning, it increases the likelihood that some representatives may focus solely on, or overemphasise the narrow, specific remit of their role to the neglect of the more traditional function of a union representative. Taking the example of ULRs, [Moore and Ross \(2010\)](#) noted that some members engaged with the role of the ULR and took it on as it was not seen to be based on confronting management in any significant manner.

The Changing Context of Workplace Issues: Explaining the Broader Environment of Workplace Representation

Any discussion on the changing nature of worker representatives needs to be located in their different social and economic contexts and how they are changing ([Frege and Kelly, 2003](#)). For example, [Rubery \(2015\)](#) has argued that a range of social and economic factors has fundamentally altered the way people enter employment and subsequently work. The development of a globalised economy and its more mobile employer class and the parallel – although not directly related – evolution of a more financialised context have created new challenges for work and the workforce, leading to deregulation of the economy and the labour market, and greater pressure on worker rights and solidarity ([Dundon and Rafferty, 2018](#); [Baccaro and Howell 2017](#); [Grady and Simms, 2019](#)). This has been accompanied by a qualitative change in work due to an extensive feminisation of the workforce and a greater tendency towards labour market fragmentation, for example, in the use of short-term contracts and subcontracting ([Rubery, 2015](#)). Whilst such economic and social ruptures are never quite complete and many issues that we deem to be current have been present for some time (see [Nolan and Wood, 2003](#)), contextual and external shifts in the work environment have challenged established structures of worker representation and brought to the fore a new set of issues.

Alongside these external pressures, internal political changes in management and worker relations have also been occurring ([Martínez Lucio, 2006](#)). For example, an increase in unitary management styles has led to increased attempts to negotiate directly with workers, bypassing traditional or established forms of collective representation and bargaining processes ([Bacon and Storey, 2000](#); [Hann and Nash, 2020](#)). These challenges, together with the new spaces for discussing work-related issues opened up by social media, require a rethink within trade unions with regard to how they relate to and communicate with members and workers more generally ([Hodder and Houghton, 2015](#); [Thorntwaite et al., 2020](#)). Thus, external and internal factors have combined to unsettle established forms of representation and regulation of issues at work. A broader set of issues and themes seem to be emerging that are contested by management and worker representations (some of which have been evident for some time but not clearly reflected in established industrial relations agendas, such as gender and race issues).

Thus, there is emerging interest in the reorientation of not only the form but also the content of formal and informal worker representation, and in how the external pressures we have discussed, together with the changing interests and experiences of workers, are refracted internally and responded to. A range of reframing processes have refocused the attention of trade unions and worker representatives around specific concerns (Heery and Conley, 2007), with new representation strategies developing (Connolly et al., 2019). Issues of gender, age, and race equality require response, but more radical agendas have also arisen due to social transformations within the workforce and a ‘new politics of production’ (Martínez Lucio & Stewart, 1997; Edwards, 2009). These may include health and safety issues, general ergonomic and ecological issues more recently, and the very capacities and capabilities of workers themselves. Key questions and themes such as these are increasingly intruding on workplace politics and representation in a changing context of work and regulation.

While unions continue to provide information and membership support, a new set of narratives with regard to workplace issues that go beyond basic working conditions and remuneration is also emerging. These changes and shifts in worker representation point to a countercurrent of pressures and trends within industrial relations. On the one hand, the external socio-economic and political environment seems to question the stability of established forms of regulation and representation based on management and trade union stakeholders. On the other hand, the nature of representation within the workplace is widening to include a range of social and organisational questions. To understand these changes, we need to look at how worker representation in the UK has been structured historically and how it is being steadily changed in relation to such issues and interests.

Of Changing Strategies and Roles: The Specific Drivers Behind New Forms of Worker Representation

We have outlined a range of socio-economic drivers behind the changes in worker representation and the increasing orientation towards specialist roles and types. Workers face many challenges such as the need to constantly develop their skills and capabilities and to deal with ever-changing physical risks and mental health challenges in the workplace. The alarming rise in disparities in working conditions has generated discussion on fairness and equality issues (see for example, Gallie et al., 2021). These broader shifts are steadily transforming the experience and understanding of the workplace. However, other factors are reshaping worker representation and generating more specific and focused new roles.

First, the role of the state has been important. Despite the deregulation of industrial relations, we have seen some curiously countervailing state strategies that have contributed to the reshaping of worker representation; for example, the Labour governments of 1964–1970 and 1997–2010 supported worker representation innovations, albeit in a constrained manner. The extent of the 1997–2010 government’s support of the trade union movement is debatable, given its ambivalence with regard to the removal of the anti-trade union legislation introduced by the previous Conservative administrations (Smith and Morton, 2006).