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Unitarism and Employer Resistance to Trade Unionism

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Abstract

Active employer resistance to trade union recognition is often explained through the rubric of the unitary ideology. Yet little attention has been devoted to an examination of unitarism as an explanatory construct for active employer hostility. This paper contributes to current knowledge and understanding on contemporary ideological opposition to unions, by placing unitarism under analytical scrutiny. Using empirical data from the Republic of Ireland, the article applies a conceptual framework to a sample of non-union employers who actively resisted unionisation. The paper concludes by examining the ideological commitments uncovered and relevant implications.

Keywords: unitarism, ideology, employer resistance to unions

1. Introduction

In liberal-market economies formal recognition of trade unions by employers is perceived as one of the central building blocks of trade unionism (Gall, 2007). Yet in the present historical juncture, where non-recognition and employer opposition appear in the ascendancy, the issue of anti-unionism has become pronounced as scholars seek to identify its antecedents and content. Operating within such narratives has been a sociological strain of interpretation, locating active employer anti-unionism to the concept of *unitarism*. Existing studies of active employer resistance have all typically cited unitarism as an explanatory factor (Bacon, 1999; Dundon, 2002; Simms, 2003; Gall, 2004; Moore, 2004). The continued growth of non-recognition for example, has led Dundon and Gollan (2007: 1194) to propose that unitarism has become a "ubiquitous managerial ideology", while Flood and Toner (1997) have argued that union avoidance amongst employers stems not so much from economic advantage as an attachment to ideological unitarism. Such recurrence in the literature begs the question as to what unitarism precisely entails. In doing so, one might return to the contributions of the industrial sociologist Alan Fox and his seminal research paper to the Donovan Commission (Fox, 1966a). Here Fox proposed a distinctive account of an employer ideology which characterised the firm as a homogenous community united by shared interests; where conflict was deviant and trade unionists were 'troublemakers' competing with employers for the loyalty of employees.

Yet two gaps subsequently arise when deploying unitarism to explain active employer resistance to trade union recognition. First, such exercises have suffered from an excess of deduction and a paucity of empirically-based data on the make-up of employer ideology. Whilst there have been broad studies of contemporary management attitudes suggestive of a

unitary bent (Poole *et al*. 2005; Geare *et al*. 2006), unitarism per se has rarely been examined in the context of resistance and there has been little research into the extent to which its characteristics inform the ideologies of employers who actively oppose union recognition. Few studies have had empirical access to union-resistant employers, with analysis of unitarism, as a consequence, based on conjecture and inference of a presumed intent (c.f. Gall and McKay, 2001; Dundon, 2002; Peetz, 2002; Simms, 2003; Gall, 2004; Moore, 2004). Whilst reasonable, this hardly suffices in exploring the strength or intensity of union-resistant employer support for the particulars of the unitary ideology empirically. The second gap relates to the point that unitarism is likely to manifest different degrees of emphasis (Fox, 1974: 297-313). Variations of unitarism can be discerned between those which are essentially apologetics for brute authoritarianism and those which emphasise, more benignly, the value of employee loyalty and commitment in a union-free milieu (Walton, 1985; Kessler and Purcell, 2003; Legge, 2005). Yet such variation is not adequately accounted for either in the aforementioned studies of anti-unionism or in broader analysis of unitarism which has focused exclusively on its 'soft' rendering in the form of sophisticated human resource management (HRM) (Provis, 1996; Geare *et al*. 2006; Budd and Bhave, 2008).

In light of such gaps, this paper specifically examines variations of unitarism among employers who actively oppose union recognition claims. It achieves this by examining 43 empirical cases of employer resistance in Ireland, a typical liberal-market economy with a largely voluntarist or collective *laissez-faire* employment relations tradition. Given the literature's acknowledgement that one of the more difficult hurdles for union recognition is overcoming the anti-union sentiments of employers (Bryson *et al*. 2004; Heery and Simms, 2011), enquiry into ideological antipathy is of value. The article proceeds as follows: In Sections Two and Three, unitarism as a conceptual construct is reviewed, leading to an

analytical framework with operational indicators for subsequent empirical application. Section Four provides an outline and justification of the empirical research setting. Section Five explains the methodology deployed. Section Six reports the results, whilst Section Seven concludes with a review of the main findings and their implications.

2. Unitarism and employer ideology

Whilst reference to 'unitarism' in employment relations appears first in the work of Ross (1958), it is with Alan Fox that the concept is predominately associated. Fox treated unitarism as an employer ideology: a phenomenon he perceived as an 'instrument of legitimisation' justifying employer rule by seeking to evoke loyalty and commitment from other social classes (Fox, 1966b: 372; Fox, 1971: 124). This is similar to contemporary formulations of ideology which see it as directed towards public persuasion or how one wants others to see the world (Honderich, 2005; Geare *et al*. 2006; Budd and Bhave, 2008: 94). This is of a different calibre to a 'frame of reference', a term occasionally used in a similar manner to describe unitarism (Fox, 1966a). For Budd and Bhave (2008), frames of reference describe an epistemic device to guide one's action and evaluation. Therefore whilst an ideology and frame of reference can easily coalesce, viewing ideology as value-loaded public exposition, enables the possibility that individuals speak with one set of assumptions, but practice from another.

In any case, Fox's treatment of unitarism as an ideology is tacitly organised around three conceptual dimensions, reflecting distinct themes of employer authority, workplace conflict and trade unionism.

Employer Authority

Fox (1966a: 3) proposes that a unitarist ideology portrays the firm as holding "one source of authority and one focus of loyalty". Employers' prerogative is "legitimate, rational and accepted" and employees are assumed to identify unreservedly with the aims of the firm and its method of operating (p.3). Team-like metaphors abound, with the parties to the organisation viewed as joint partners striving towards mutually-shared goals. This stands in marked contrast to 'pluralist' interpretations where the sphere of employer authority is conceived as limited, given the legitimate existence of competing interest groups and inevitable points of tension in the wage effort bargain (p.14).

Workplace conflict

Under unitarism, opposition to employers is treated as "unnecessary and exceptional", "irrational", "deviant" and even a "pathological social condition" (Fox, 1966a: 13). The harmonious treatment of employment relations necessitates that where conflict occurs, it is purely frictional, caused by miscommunications, misunderstandings or "the work of agitators inciting the supine majority" (p.12). Opposition lacks legitimacy and winning consent through negotiation is not only regarded as time-consuming, but objectionable in principle (p. 54). This is in marked antithesis to pluralism which views conflict as an inevitable feature of the employment relationship. Pluralists legitimise conflict as evidence that employees' aspirations are being neither sapped by despondency nor suppressed by coercive power.

Trade unionism

Unitarism has little sympathy for trade unionism. Unions are treated as "invaders of a private realm", wilfully disrupting the "natural pursuit of common purpose" and "rational managerial authority" (Fox, 1966a: 33). Keeping the union out is thought to strengthen employees' loyalty to the employer. Indeed, unions are seen as competitors: vying malevolently for the commitment of employees. Again this stands in contrast to pluralism, where unions are seen to reflect inherent antagonisms within the employment relationship, offering a legitimate medium through which such problems might be resolved and the interests of employees can be represented.

Within each of these conceptual themes of unitarism, a number of subtle blends can be discerned between autocratic variants on one hand and benevolent dispositions on the other. Echoes of this distinction are often found in considering the soft and hard variants of HRM (Fombrun *et al*. 1984; Thompson, 2011) and in expositions on partnership (Ackers and Payne, 1999; Guest and Peccei, 2001; Martinez-Lucio and Stewart, 2004). Specific to unitarism, Fox (1974: 297-313) made numerous references to exploitative and paternalistic assumptions underscoring various unitary ideologies, a theme subsequently developed in the 'management style' literature. Whilst there appears to be some distinction between ideology and 'style' (c.f Purcell and Sisson, 1983; Purcell, 1987: 534; Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1993), there is much overlap. Relevant material can therefore be derived from the style literature in further building upon the conceptualisation of employer ideology. In doing so it is possible to locate different variants of unitarism. These are *Traditional* (c.f. Fox, 1974; Purcell and Sisson, 1983), *Paternalist* (c.f. Fox, 1974; Purcell, 1987; Kessler and Purcell, 2003) and *Human Relations* (c.f. Fox, 1966b; Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1993) variants of the unitary ideology. Whilst these classifications reflect standard literature attempts, in what follows the paper synthesises these basic distinctions to add a more detailed level of conceptual

elaboration by augmenting them with the conceptual themes of employer authority, workplace conflict and trade unionism.

Traditional

Although Fox's (1974: 297) 'Traditional' unitarism sought to capture an ideology varying "between the extremes of benevolent paternalist and crudely exploitative", we follow Purcell and Sisson's (1983) re-conceptualisation of 'Traditional' unitarism as entrenched in the latter mode of emphasis. This unitarism is likely to see employment relations in terms of the "constantly asserted and enforced right of the master to demand unquestioning obedience from his servants" (Fox, 1974: 297). Employer authority is conceived in a strongly *autocratic* fashion, whilst employee opposition is deemed *illegitimate* on the grounds that "in entering into the contract of employment, the employee legitimises the employer directing and controlling his activities, especially in relation to time, place, content and method of work and legitimises, too, the employer's use of sanctions necessary to maintain this obedience" (Fox, 1971: 40). Obstinacy towards trade union recognition is likely to rest upon notions of *non-interference in property or managerial rights*.

Paternalism

'Paternalist' unitarism emphasises avuncular care and responsibility for employee welfare as a means of legitimising employer control (Heery and Noon, 2001: 255). Whilst Purcell (1987) notes that it retains the Traditional autocratic approach to employer authority, this is distilled with more *benevolent* inclinations. In handling conflict, Paternalists may be able to "to rationalise that they need be cruel to be kind by overriding purely short-term preoccupations or limited perspectives produced by employee ignorance or folly" (Fox, 1974: 241). Where employees contest employer decisions this is attributed to *misunderstandings* on

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their part (Purcell, 1987). Hostility to trade unions appears to be reasoned on the grounds that they are *unnecessary* given the employer can, or will, articulate an enlightened approach to managing employee welfare. As Fox (1974: 249) notes, "mistrust of collective bargaining is sometimes expressed precisely because it is said to encourage the 'two sides' mentality". Such divisions would ultimately be incongruent with the *familial* metaphor that pervades paternalist sentiments.

Human Relations

The Human Relations variant of unitarism emphasises the engineering of a cooperative employment climate, based on sophisticated labour management practices, to legitimise employer authority. Indeed it appears as a form of *sophisticated manipulation* in its bolstering of employer authority (Purcell and Sisson, 1983: 114). Conflict between management and workers is viewed as "unnecessary and exceptional" (Fox, 1966a: 12). Developed human resource policies seek to remove any conflict of interest between management and employees. By implication, where conflict occurs it is attributed to *managerial failures in implementing the 'right' policies* (Purcell, 1987). Indeed this shade of unitarism will reason that opposition to unions is based on the grounds that they can be made *unnecessary because of in-house human resource practices* which can, and should, supplant the union role.

Table 1 summarises each of these variants of unitarism against the individual dimensions of *employer authority*, *workplace conflict* and *trade unionism*, as captured by terms highlighted in the preceding discussion.

TABLE 1 HERE

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Similar to unitarism, pluralism is likely to have its own comparable variants of emphasis. In order to avoid blurring the conceptual focus of this paper, which is unitarism, it is not the intention to explore or compare specifically elements of pluralism. Nonetheless it suffices to say that discussion of pluralist ideology in employment relations appears to emphasise two variants: *Standard-Modern* and a more *Sophisticated-Modern* position (Fox, 1974; Purcell and Sisson, 1983). The former is pragmatically cognisant of pluralist tendencies within the diffusion of authority relations and in the existence of workplace conflict, but assumes employment relations are "non-problematic until events prove otherwise" (Purcell and Sisson, 1983: 116). Its approach to unionism will be of an opportunistic or fire-fighting calibre: the union will be afforded a role, but it will not be enthusiastically integrated into the daily life of the enterprise. That is in keeping with the sophisticated modern variant, which is broadly more encouraging of trade unionism and may seek to integrate the institution into numerous facets of workplace authority relations and conflict management.

Whilst the above owes a heavy debt to the constructs of Fox and later additions by management style scholars, the principal contribution from the framework lies in seeking to elaborate and build upon these classifications into a more specified set. As noted above, the paper addresses what type of unitarism, if any, do actively resistant employers effuse in accounting for their opposition to union recognition claims? More specifically, do employers who actively resist trade union recognition requests accept the variant types of unitarism offered? If so, what variant sets do these employers favour, and why? The manner in which these questions are answered is through empirical application of the analytical framework outlined above.

3. The research setting

Given the particular and rather specialised nature of the target population - employers who have actively opposed trade union recognition campaigns - purposive sampling was deployed. This kind of sampling may be used where an enquiry seeks to study unique groups or processes that are especially informative or are part of a difficult to reach, specialised population (Yin, 2008). The study used a sample of non-union employers who were known to have recently opposed, or be in the process of opposing, trade union requests for recognition. The sample enabled the research to ascertain whether the concept of unitarism could then account for employer rationales in actively resisting recognition campaigns. The research setting was based in the Republic of Ireland, which, institutionally, resembles other liberal-market economies such as the UK, New Zealand, Australia and the US. Parallel to these countries, Ireland has experienced a similar downward trajectory in union density levels and the issue of employer hostility has featured prominently in explanations of this trend (D'Art and Turner, 2003; 2005; Gall, 2010). Such difficulties spurred Irish unions in the late 1990s to secure a strengthened procedure for union recognition. This resulted in the *Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act (IRAA) 2001*. The Act allows the Labour Court to issue legally binding recommendations compelling non-union employers to bargain with unionised employees on particular matters where the employer refuses to engage in collective bargaining at local-level. Since 2007 however, the impact of this Act has been significantly debilitated by employers setting up non-union staff associations: a Supreme Court ruling has allowed employers to claim that where non-union staff associations are in place, they represent bodies which may be legally interpreted to engage in collective bargaining. Such interpretation has obstructed the legislative route of the IRAA 2001 in establishing union bargaining rights (c.f. O'Sullivan and Gunnigle, 2009).

The specific sample in this instance is taken from the national Labour Court record which provides the only known and publicly available population of cases wherein non-union employers oppose union bargaining rights. The empirical research, conducted in 2007, attempted to access all reported incidents of non-union firms who opposed union recognition. The potential target population from the Labour Court record was 98 firms. The known characteristics of this population are given in Table 2. They are predominately Irish-owned firms and small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs). There is a considerable degree of variability in terms of sectors in the population: retail, transport, waste management, packaging, concrete production, pharmaceutical manufacturing and medical device technologies. The target within each firm was the senior executive director, chosen because they were expected to be either solely or significantly responsible for deciding upon the non-union status of the firm (Kelly and Gennard, 2007).

4. Research method

Data collection comprised two methods – a questionnaire and follow-up interview programme.

The questionnaire was principally made up of three thematic sections: 'employer authority', 'workplace conflict' and 'trade unionism' respectively. Within each thematic section, five statements were provided, each one reflecting a different ideological variant: either a Traditional, Paternalist or Human Relations variant, and to extend choices, Standard-Modern Pluralist and Sophisticated-Modern Pluralist variants (Appendix 1). These statements were taken directly from the literatures of unitarism and pluralism to ensure they were valid representations of the constructs under investigation. Respondents were asked to pick one preferred statement in each thematic section. However should none of the five statements in

any thematic section reflect a respondent's preference, a "none of the above" option could be taken. Part of the questionnaire also sought demographic characteristics which were expected to have possible contextual significance. These included statements on market competition; product market demand; skill profile of workforce and the extent to which the firm was under pressure for short-term profit maximisation at the expense of long-term investment (c.f. Osterman, 1994). This section also asked respondents to identify the source of their ideas on managing employees, offering a list of alternatives derived from the relevant literatures (Fidler, 1981). The questionnaire was sent to the 98 firms identified via the Court's record, with a return from 43 firms; a 44% response rate. A point of caution vis-à-vis any claims to representativeness is that the number of manufacturing firms is over-represented in the achieved sample. However the characteristics of respondents by firm size and national ownership broadly reflect population trends.

Given the small sample size, it was deemed necessary to augment the questionnaire findings with deeper qualitative study and thus further examine respondents' ideological preferences, to explain in greater depth why particular preferences were opted for. Follow-up, semi-structured interviews with respondents were therefore pursued, using indicated preferences from the questionnaire to frame discussion. Access for interviews proved relatively difficult with 18 senior executive directors eventually consenting to participate. Where respondents participated in the follow-up interviews, further qualitative data was collected on those 18 employers and their response to the union organising campaign: from the trade union organisers involved and from secondary documentary evidence like newspaper coverage or Labour Court reports. Such sources were intended to provide an additional means by which to understand employer ideological preferences within an account of their behavioural responses to union requests for bargaining rights.

The data was subsequently analysed in several ways. Questionnaire responses were analysed through frequency distributions and, where relevant, measures of association. Given that the interview stage produced a sizeable amount of open-ended qualitative data, the raw data was organised and coded into conceptual categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These coded conceptual categories were then aggregated into frequencies to identify dominant and recurring themes. Given the objective of seeking to explain respondent ideological preferences, greater analysis in this paper is devoted to the interview data over the statistical association and inference. This minimises some of the limitations of a statistically small sample size by focusing on the qualitative data which enabled more expanded detail on respondent choices.

5. Findings

Re-mapping ideological unitarism

Considering the basic distributions of ideological preferences from the questionnaire, the findings demonstrated that a majority of the respondents favoured statements that accorded with the Traditional unitary posture [1]. In total, 73 (56%) of the possible 129 choices (43 respondents with three choices each) selected statements from this ideological set. This was a significant majority given that of the remaining two unitary sets, Paternalism and Human Relations, only 19 (14%) and 16 (12%) were made respectively. Notably, Standard-Modern Pluralism scored just above the Human Relations ideology – with 17 (13%) from a possible 129 choices being made. Also of note is that only four (3%) of 126 choices were made in the Sophisticated-Modern Pluralist group of responses.

TABLE 3 HERE

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An analysis of responses indicates a bias towards the Traditional unitarist variant across employer authority, workplace conflict and trade unionism. Twenty-three respondents (53%) opted for Traditional construal of authority compared to just five (12%) who favoured the Paternalist and seven (16%) who favoured the Human Relations interpretations. In fact, Standard-Modern Pluralism scored marginally higher on authority relations than Paternalism and equalled the ideological orientation of a Human Relations bent, accounting for seven of the 43 respondents (17%). Similarly, in relation to workplace conflict, the Traditional set dominates and is followed by the Paternalist. However, it is on trade unionism that the Traditional set is most prevalent. Here, 32 out of 43 (74%) favoured the Traditional statement on trade unionism.

It is notable that Paternalism as an aggregate measure scored relatively poorly. Arguably this is an unusual finding given that the SME firms dominating the sample are often perceived to be conducive to such sentiments (Marlow, 2002). The low-take up of Human Relations may be attributable to the nature of the market context and appears to conform to interpretations that SMEs pursue cost-minimisation strategies in relation to human resources (Barrat and Rainne, 2003). Sophisticated-Modern Pluralism scored poorly across all dimensions – unsurprising given that respondents had already indicated their predisposition to oppose union recognition. The distribution indicates a substantial preference amongst firms who have resisted trade union recognition in the sample to opt for a hard-headed ideological posture on employment relations.

The results in Table 4 show the relationship between demographic variables and the dependent ideological choices, once collapsed. Given the caveat of sample size, in most

instances, these were not statistically significant except for the independent variables union recognition and the source of ideas on managing employment relations. Here employers eschewed nearly all options in favour of 'experience' as the principal influence on their ideas.

TABLE 4 HERE

The aforementioned variable of union recognition is worthy of explanatory comment. As evident from Table 2, six firms subsequently recognised a trade union following the unions' campaign and Labour Court ruling. Significantly, two of these firms still opted for the Traditional unitary ideology on the trade union dimension. A further two gravitated towards Standard-Modern Pluralism while the remaining two displayed a Sophisticated-Modern Pluralist bent. This raises the problem of causality: did union recognition lead to the 'adoption' of a pluralist posture, or was the 'prior existence' of pluralism conducive to union recognition?[2] The presence of a staff association was less conducive to pluralist sentiments among respondents. Of the five firms where a staff association was recognised, all opted for the Traditional unitary statements along the trade union dimension. Whilst employers did not acknowledge this, the existence of staff associations may have been sponsored by the Supreme Court ruling noted earlier. Respondent commentary from the later interview stage on internal staff associations were simply that they were in-house substitutes to trade unions and preferable to 'outside influence'. In the interviews, respondents cast such bodies as information and consultative bodies and remained unreceptive to any notion that they might involve *bargaining* over terms and conditions of employment.

The survey responses made by the sub-sample of the 18 company directors participating in the interview programme reflected the broader trend in ideological choice: 13 Traditional,

three Paternalist, one Human Relations and one Standard-Modern Pluralist. This enabled the qualitative data to explore the dominance of the Traditional ideological value set in greater contextual detail.

Resisting union recognition campaigns

It may be useful to contextualise the ideological dominance of Traditional unitarism in terms of how these 18 firms responded to union recognition campaigns. In this context the principal trajectory was one of sustained obstinacy characterised by the use of (not unlawful) obstacles which appeared 'legitimate'; such as stonewalling and refusing access to 'private premises' (Table 5). Union efforts to engage at local-level were almost entirely fruitless, with employers ignoring requests. Even in those minority instances where a response was forthcoming from employers, it was typically a request to see a list of union members under the guise of ascertaining union representativeness; something which the unions involved were unwilling to entertain. Incidences of intimidation and suppression were recorded in only two firms – with union activists sacked - whilst acts of substitution to obviate the perceived need for union membership and representation were evident in just six of the 18 firms. Examples included the creation of 'consultative forums' and/or improvements in shift premiums. As the campaign for bargaining rights advanced through the latter stages of third-party mediation and arbitration, employers largely maintained their obstructive postures to the union. Voluntary conciliation meetings were either eschewed or subject to employer delay; invariably on the premise that the company was frequently 'unavailable' on a particular date. However union informants perceived this as a tactic designed to frustrate the campaign. Even in cases where the employer did attend, organisers often reported that employers would refuse to enter into meaningful dialogue with union officials present.

This apparent recalcitrance did not relent as disputes advanced to the echelon of Labour Court adjudication. Whilst all employers, bar two, attended Court hearings, the crux of their statements cast scorn on the representativeness of the union and/or the validity of union claims on pay and conditions. Legal technicalities were habitually raised by employer representatives over the authority of the Court to intervene on the matter. Employer compliance with Court recommendations was marginal, with unions reporting that 13 of the rulings from the Court were ignored. In seven instances further legal determinations were sought by unions on behalf of workers in those organisations. Three firms raised further legal challenges in the civil courts, seeking to overturn decisions favouring employees and unions. In none of the 18 cases was a formal bargaining relationship secured by the union.

TABLE 5 HERE

Advancing Traditional unitarism

It is against the tactics to resist union organising drives that the penchant for Traditional ideology might be more fully appreciated. From interview responses with the directors of these firms, content analysis, whereupon responses were categorised and their frequency scored, isolated the dominance of the Traditional unitary ideology by virtue of two explanatory factors: the perceived irrelevance of alternative unitary variants, and secondly ideological support for the chosen Traditional set. The former referred to other statements lacking relevance to the particular business context. For example the financial investment emphasis of Human Relations was deemed too costly, whilst the 'Paternalistic care of employee welfare' was viewed as over-bearing, even archaic and inappropriate to a contemporary business. Distaste of Human Relations was reducible to the claimed market context, as also indicated by survey preferences. However, respondents' avoidance of

Paternalism did not in itself suggest a rejection of notions of creating good social relations between management and workers:

> We try to maintain a convivial atmosphere. But that's not to say that in some respects strong management is needed to ensure demands on the company are met.
>
> (Director, Waste Management Services)

Rarely did employers express hostility to Standard-Modern Pluralism. Rather avoidance appeared to be based on caution over the perceived extensiveness of concessions or the constraints of entering into a bargaining relationship on substantive matters. Where receptiveness to concession was articulated it was in areas of operational expediency and immediate matters of production. But employers interviewed expressed an unwillingness to extend the value of concessionary principles to the substantive regulation of terms and conditions of employment:

> The really important decisions are the preserve of management. And to be honest, [they] are never challenged by employees, because they don't know about them.
>
> (Director, Steel Manufacturer)

The second rationale advanced in support for Traditional unitarism was reducible to an ideological commitment to its precepts, itself revolving around two sub-factors of explanation. Again these were derived from categorising responses into frequency scores. The first, and most dominant, explained ideological commitment to Traditional unitarism in terms of a legal-contractual interpretation of the employment relationship. An economistic interpretation of the relations between buyers and sellers of labour abounded, with the

purchasing and subsequent ownership of labour power and time, producing an expectation of an unproblematic authority structure. As the Director of a Concrete Manufacturer advanced:

> If you're paid the going rate, you're treated well, you work to contract. From a business point of view, what's the problem? If I hire an engineer to look at grading processes in the crushing plant, I don't expect him to come back to me and go, 'sorry I'm not doing this or that', I now want you to pay me this rate'. Why can't it be the same principle in employing a man in the yard?

The second sub-factor explaining the ideological support for Traditional unitarism was that employer authority must prevail because of the negative business consequences emanating from employee resistance to company decision-making. Challenging employer decision-making, it was proposed, threatened the firm's relationship with one or more of its environmental or market constraints, with negative implications for all organisational members. Where employees might oppose measures perceived as antagonistic to their interests, respondents argued that they were succumbing to short-term momentary interests, at the expense of long-term benefit and security. For example:

> We're about profits and if we're left alone to do that, then everything else falls into place. Shareholders do well, customers do well. The exchequer does well, we grow our businesses and we employ more people.
>
> (Director, IT Distributor)

The proclivity to view the employment relationship in a legal-contractual light sat alongside a an economistic view of workers. This cast workers as financially motivated and as being

unconcerned with the strategic direction of the company. To some extent a pronounced cleavage of interests in the employment relationship was tolerated, but was considered improper where this might manifest itself in terms of active employee opposition to managerial initiatives. Whatever differing interests might exist over the wage-effort bargain, employers subsumed these under the authority granted to them through the purchase of labour power or that employee acquiescence to company decision-making would in the long-run reap dividends in the form of a successful firm with benefits for all.

The hostility to trade unionism as articulated in the Traditional set was supported on the grounds of a perception that unions would negatively impact on the firm's cost structure and managerial regulation. Trade unions were conceived as almost entirely anti-business, encroaching on 'organisational flexibility' and advancing wage demands insensitive to budgetary requirements. Respondents also evinced a recurring tendency to refer to the employer's legal or constitutional position under existing legislative provisions on trade union recognition in Ireland:

> While I recognise the right of our workers to join a trade union, the law is such that I'm not obliged to negotiate with any of them.
>
> (Director, Security Services)

Significant, was the directorial emphasis on unions' conflictual roles. Curiously absent from the interviews was any recognition of the potential for accommodative union-management relations. Rather unions were customarily cast in a malign role, as the Director of a plastic manufacturer illustratively put it, "trade unionism is like a scorpion, it always stings". Directors often underscored their view by adding that unions had been "targeting" particular

non-union firms to bolster union growth, increase recruitment and establish a new precedent for recognition in particular industries. Many of the directors argued that trade unions artificially fabricated claims over pay and conditions so as to manufacture a situation whereby the firm was 'coerced' into engagement under the legislative procedures. Indeed, there was consequently marked hostility not just to the trade union, but also third-party intervention in the form of the national Labour Court which was perceived as ill-informed "interference from civil servants". Employers interviewed saw Court rulings as diluted with "anti-business sentiment", "insensitive to local circumstance", and, in one case, "totalitarian" in its application. The effect of unions using state legislation and referring their claims to state bodies, seems to have heightened employer antipathy:

> Employers should be left alone to fix our own rates of pay, according to our own individual circumstances. Whether it's from unions or from the state, I'm opposed to blanket rates being imposed.
>
> (Director, Furniture Manufacturer)

Notably hostility to unionism was not articulated on general unitary assumptions wherein unions cut across the pursuit of 'common purpose' or vie for the affections of employees to their employer. Rather the unitary hostility evidenced here was based upon resistance to interference in an assumed 'right to manage'.

6. Discussion

This paper began by raising existing limitations in contemporary applications of unitarism, focusing on the realm of active employer resistance to trade union recognition. As noted, employer ideological choices were seen as significant in shaping outcomes (Bryson *et al*.

2003; Heery and Simms, 2011) with unitarism being prominently cited as an explanatory factor. To advance understandings of unitarism in this context, a conceptual framework was synthesised, drawing upon prior contributions in the literature to pinpoint varieties of unitarism. In the subsequent fieldwork, a persistent attachment to a Traditional form of unitarism was found. Employers across the firms sampled predominately sought to retain absolute control over the company's operations. Worker resistance was seen as unacceptable or, in a number of instances, unnecessary. Opposition to trade unionism did not seem to be based on employers fearing that recognition would split the 'familial spirit' nor on a belief that unions had been adequately substituted by non-union forms of representation. Rather unions were regarded as an outside intrusion into private company affairs. Such a viewpoint largely coalesces with what Budd and Bhave (2008) have termed the 'eogist' ideology of employment relations which eulogises employers' (presumed) rights to pursue individual self-interest in the market, free from union and government regulation. In a context where some of the discourse on HRM and employment relations has treated declining unionisation as largely derived from the choices of market savvy employees (Emmot, 2006: 5), the findings presented in this paper would indicate that reservoirs of adversarial employer unitarism still flourish in obstructing workplace voice. Far from being a passive spectator of change in employment relations, employers, as Sisson (2006) has indicated, have been profoundly influential in creating barriers to union recognition.

It could be advanced that the preference for Traditional-unitarism in the sample is unsurprising: the nature of the firms sampled might suggest that ideologies associated with sophisticated HRM would be unlikely in these cases (Forth *et al*. 2006). Yet concluding as such would be insensitive to understanding the role of ideology. Ideology, as noted earlier, is an instrument of persuasion directed at employees and the public at large. The extent to

which employers can make their 'message' convincing, as both Bendix (1956) and Fox (1974) have argued, secures their authority. Give this function of legitimisation one might have expected employers to opt for the (arguably) more 'socially acceptable' tenets of the alternative variants. It is not clear that the non-union ideology found here is palatable with the expectations of alternative stakeholders in liberal-democratic societies (Ackers, 2002). As a vehicle of ideological legitimisation, one suspects that its success in securing wider normative consensus might be inadequate. Furthermore, the findings are unusual in that one might have expected employers, from a sample of predominately SMEs, to have opted for a paternalist posture. It is commonly asserted that a paternalism of sorts, with its familial type emphasis, is the mainstay of employment relations in SME firms (Dundon *et al*. 1999; Grugulis *et al*. 2000; Bacon and Hoque, 2005). Paternalism might have been a more 'socially acceptable' employer ideology, given its benign resonances in contrast to the tough market determinism of the Traditional variant. Its absence may be due to the high number of firms reporting unstable demand for their products and services or tight labour market conditions which prevailed in Ireland at the time of the research. Both factors, as Scase (2003) notes, appear to work against the prevalence of Paternalism in the employment relationship.

The implications of the predominant anti-unionism uncovered in this study for the matter of union recognition are important. Above all, the insistence on prerogatives and freedom from 'outside' interference appeared to represent to the employers in the study, points of principle. In such instances, the type of compromise which resolves many trade disputes will be much more difficult to secure in the circumstances of a struggle for bargaining rights. This resonates with Brown *et al*.'s (2001) argument that legislative regimes enabling union recognition are no panacea. It might be further added that operating in national systems marked by minimal state intervention in employment relations, such legislative regimes are

typically too weak to adequately circumvent employer unitarism. As Gall (2010: 10-12) argues such regimes may paradoxically accentuate employer opposition. Indeed in this study, a perception existed that the relevant legislation was manipulated and prolonged by 'outside' trade unions with the aid of state employment bodies insensitive to the private sector. This incursion on prerogative served to heighten the employer sense of injustice and doggedness to remain non-union. It would seem that in Anglo-Saxon countries, legislative regimes to facilitate bargaining rights within the non-union terrain will in many instances face a significant hurdle of an ideology which has its origins far back in the historical grain of class, status and power of market liberalism. The core of this ideology emphasises notions of negative freedom; that is freedom from external interference and obstruction by others (Berlin, 2002: 169). Whilst of course such ideological antipathy is not in itself a sufficient condition for ensuring an employer's union-free status, it is likely to be significant in shaping the character of their responses. The flavour of the ideology will colour the extent of cooperation offered, fundamentally determining the potentialities for a meaningful bargaining relationship.

Finally, unions and advocates of pluralist values might, as Bryson *et al*. (2004: 142-144) suggest, counter this ideology by appealing to some non-union employers on the workplace benefits of organised (unionised) voice or, more instrumentally, through coaxing employers towards recognition by engendering a 'critical mass' of members in the relevant workplace. However these strategies may only be feasible in a context where employers are *indifferent*, rather than *actively hostile,* to trade unionism. In terms of the latter, building high membership density in workplaces overseen by hostile employers is often not feasible, as potential members are only willing to join after their employer has granted 'approval' of the union (D'Art and Turner, 2005; Heery and Simms, 2008). Those attempts at 'attitudinal

restructuring' of employer hostility through rational persuasion, whilst not entirely implausible, may be difficult to secure in the absence of wider institutional or structural change.

Footnotes

 [1] For purpose of analysis, respondent choices were collapsed into a homogenous set if either three from three or two from three choices were made from one variant. This gave, 22 Traditional, six Paternalist, six Human Relations, seven Standard-Modern Pluralist, one Sophisticated-Modern Pluralist. One respondent who could not be classified was excluded, having made three choices across all three sets.

[2] In this instance, one might be inclined towards the latter interpretation, although without being ignorant of other factors, besides ideology, which may play an important role in determining an employer's decision to concede recognition. Counter-factual evidence is provided in the results; showing that the existence of Traditional unitarism even in the context of formally conceding recognition. The simple act of conceding recognition is unlikely to lead to the neat causal adoption of pluralist sentiments per se.

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Table 1: *Summary characteristics of unitary ideology variants*

	Traditional	**Paternalist**	**Human Relations**
Employer Authority	Autocratic	Benevolent Autocracy	Sophisticated Manipulation
Workplace Conflict	Illegitimate due to terms of contract	Arise from Employee Misunderstandings	Arise from Managerial Failures
Trade Unionism	Interferes with Managerial Prerogative	Disruptive of familial culture	Unnecessary because of In-house policies

Table 2: *Characteristics of firms opposing union recognition**

	Characteristic features	Known Population	Survey Respondents	Interview Respondents
Sector	*Agriculture, forestry & fishing*	3	-	-
	Manufacturing	29	22	10
	Construction	1	-	-
	Wholesale & retail trade	17	4	3
	Hotels & restaurants	2	1	-
	Transport, storage & communication	16	8	2
	Financial & business services	8	3	2
	Health & social work	4	-	-
	Other services	17	5	1
	Total	**98**	**43**	**18**
Organisational Size				
	Small	43	19	7
	Medium	39	18	9
	Large	16	6	2
	Total	**98**	**43**	**18**
Nationality				
	Irish	76	33	13
	UK	3	1	1
	European	8	4	2
	US	10	5	1
	Other	1	0	-
	Total	**98**	**43**	**18**
Union Recognition				
	Yes		6	-
	No		37	18
	Total		**43**	**18**
Staff Association Recognition				
	Yes		5	2
	No		38	16
	Total		**43**	**18**
Environmental Characteristics: Market demand for product/service is relatively stable				
	Yes		17	7
	No		25	11
	Total		**43**	**18**
Substantial competition in main product/service market				
	Yes		37	16
	No		6	2
	Total		**43**	**18**
Organisation under substantial pressure to attain short-term profits at expense of long-term investment				
	Yes		35	16
	No		8	1
	Total		**43**	**18**
Work carried out in firm requires majority of staff to be highly skilled				
	Yes		29	12
	No		14	6
	Total		**43**	**18**
Main source of ideas on managing employment relations				
	Managers in network		0	0
	Management experience		31	16
	Management books		2	0
	Management training		1	0
	Religious beliefs		0	0
	Political affiliations		0	0

News/media coverage	0	0
Industry association advice	9	2
Government publications	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	**43**	**18**

Note: The classifications of sector, size and nationality used to categorise the demographic characteristics of firms in Table 2 are used for the following reasons. First, it was feasible to determine these characteristics in the known population by researching company profiles in public databases, specifically Kompass Business Directory and Solocheck Business Directory. Secondly, focusing on the demographics of sector, size and nationality have a theoretical justification: the literature specifies that non-unionism, and union avoidance, tends to be strongly associated with variations in each of these (McLoughlin and Gourlay, 1994; Ram and Edwards, 2003).

Table 3: *Distributions on unitary ideological sets by 'authority relations', 'workplace conflict' and 'trade unionism'*

	Traditional	**Paternalist**	**Human Relations**	**Standard-Modern Pluralism**	**Sophisticated-Modern Pluralism**
Authority Relations	23 (53%)	5 (12%)	7 (16%)	7 (16%)	1 (2%)
Workplace Conflict	18 (42%)	13(30%)	4 (9%)	7 (16%)	1 (2%)
Trade Unionism	32 (74%)	1 (2%)	5 (12%)	3 (7%)	2 (5%)
	73 (56%)	19 (14%)	16 (12%)	17 (13%)	4 (3%)

N=129

Table 4: *Ideological orientation by demographics*

	x^2	*df*	*p*
Nationality	9.366	16	.89
Sector	3.941	4	.41
Size	14.676	**8**	.06
Source of Ideas	**24.73**	**12**	**.016**
Staff Association	1.006	4	.909
Trade Union Recognition	**17.5**	**4**	**.002**
Market Demand	19.537	12	.07
Market competition	13.072	12	.364
Short-term profits/long-term investment	2.428	8	.09
Skilled staff	16.732	12	.16

Table 5: Ideological orientation by reported employer responses to union recognition campaign

	Traditional (n=13)	Paternalist (n=3)	Human Relations (n=1)	Standard-Modern Pluralist (n=1)
Reported employer responses				
Ignoring union requests to meet at local-level	11	3	1	1
Union activists sacked	2	-	-	-
Resolving non-pay grievances	1	1	-	-
Improving pay and financial benefits	3	1	-	1
Setting up non-union forum	3	-	1	-
Employer petition	1	-	-	-
Refusing to attend third-party interventions/hearings	6	1	-	-
Refusing to implement third party recommendations	12	1	1	-
Taking legal action in civil courts against Court ruling	3	-	-	-

Sources: Trade union organisers interviewed; Labour Court Documentation; Industrial Relations News Reports

Appendix 1: *Ideological dimensions and operational indicators*

Dimensions/Set	Operational Indicator
Traditional	
Authority Relations	As management is responsible for the successful operation of the company, it must retain absolute authority over all aspects of business operations.
Workplace Conflict	Efforts by employees to actively resist important company decisions are unacceptable and must be countered by firm management action.
Trade Unionism	Trade union intrusion into private company affairs is opposed as it would result in unwarranted interferences into managements' right to run the business as it sees fit.
Paternalist	
Authority Relations	Management responsibilities extend not just to the successful financial performance of the company but also to the paternalistic care of employees' welfare.
Workplace Conflict	Conflict at work arises from a lack of employee understanding that management decisions are made with the welfare of all in mind; employees should therefore place their trust in management.
Trade Unionism	Trade union involvement in this firm is opposed as it would split the strong family spirit which management has striven to foster.
Human Relations	
Authority Relations	Considerable financial resources must be invested into employee relations to ensure that management authority is fully supported by staff.
Workplace Conflict	Failures by management to financially invest in meeting employees' need at work are the most significant cause of workplace unrest.
Trade Unionism	Any role that a trade union might play in this company has been rendered unnecessary through management's financial investment in good employee relations policies and practices.
Standard-Modern Pluralism	
Authority Relations	As employees have some interests which differ from management, certain aspects of employee relations will have to be subject to a process of negotiation, compromise and consent.
Workplace Conflict	Inevitable conflicts of interest between management and employees are best resolved through a process of negotiation, compromise and consent.
Trade Unionism	Where an individual employee has disciplinary and/or grievance issues, it is acceptable for him/her to involve their trade union representative.
Sophisticated-Modern Pluralism	
Authority Relations	Joint decision-making with a trade union is conducive to maintaining greater order and stability at work.
Workplace Conflict	Trade unions are useful in helping management to resolve conflicts in the workplace.
Trade Unionism	Collective bargaining with a trade union is a useful way for settling differences between management and employees.

Sources: Statements derived from existing accounts of unitarism-pluralism as found in Fox (1966a; b; 1971; 1974); Purcell and Sisson (1983); Salamon (2002); Rose (2004).