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Post-privatised shop steward organisation and union renewal at Girobank

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Abstract

Using an ethnographic case study approach this article provides empirical evidence concerning the response of local union stewards to managerial-led change during and after the process of privatisation. Evidence supports the workplace union renewal thesis. It is suggested that the key mediating factors of a decisive ideological purpose and local leadership style provide the ingredients for union renewal. A number of wider implications are noted, in particular a gap between national trade union policies and workplace industrial relations practices.

Introduction

Although trade union membership in Britain has been characterised by consecutive decline[1], academic analysis is now turning its attention to the possibility of union renewal and prognosis for growth in two broad ways. One is that the potential for revitalisation is pushed from above. This was more than evident at the 1997 TUC conference in its adoption of a 'new unionism' policy, suggesting a change of direction from older, more traditional adversarial relations to one based around moderation, social partnership and a new organising culture [2]. Allied to the motives for 'new unionism' is the implication that trade unions are becoming much more co-operative with employers [3] while adopting a strategic servicing member relationship through individual rather collective forms of representation and bargaining [4].

The second area of potential renewal is located within a much more cyclical framework concerned with the dynamics of power and control between labour and capital. The primary *locus* is renewal not from above but at workplace level. Underlying this argument is a realignment of social relations, most notably linked to privatisation, deregulation and neo-liberal market forces as the source of membership engagement in response to an increasingly self-confident managerial prerogative [5]. At a deeper level is the analytical framework to assess the contradictory pressures shop stewards face representing membership interests (i.e. accommodation vs. resistance, democracy vs. bureaucracy, and independence vs. dependence) [6].

The aim of this article is to draw on a number of themes central to this workplace union renewal perspective. It does so by adopting an ethnographic case study approach in one organisation, Girobank, to illustrate the relevance of local union responses to managerial-led change both before and after the process of privatisation. In particular, whether renewal activity is based on a resurgence of older, more traditional forms of unionism or a new method of union organising? The product of such analysis is to gain a greater understanding of key factors which appear to influence shop steward behaviour and union organisation. The article begins with a review of three central themes within the renewal debate. These are: the motives for particular styles of shop steward activism as well as the changing nature of local organisation; a consideration of the dilemmas between national policy objectives and workplace union practices; and finally the dynamics of a supervisory-steward relationship at shop floor level to the prospect of union organising. An outline of the relevance for using Girobank as a case study is followed by an analysis of empirical evidence in sections four and five. A number of wider implications for local union organisation and workplace industrial relations are discussed in the final section.

The evidence presented below is based on three complementary research methods. First, extensive use of documentary material was obtained from both the company and trade unions, including detailed agreements, minutes, in-house journals and various memoranda. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were arranged with the main bargaining actors at both a national and local level. In total 18 participants were involved in the interview process, mainly single one-to-one interviews although a few group discussions took place. These included the two most senior personnel managers for Girobank, three line managers based at Bootle, three national union officials [7], two principle branch officers and eight lay representatives from the Bootle branch. Finally, there was the opportunity to observe a number of strategic national and local union discussions,

complemented by the author's former position as a CWU Branch Officer in the company. In addition to branch meetings these included the national advisory committee, annual conference debates, the organisation of the first strike in the company's history for over 20 years, and subsequent membership meetings concerning industrial action and pay recommendations. Unfortunately, direct union-management negotiations were not part of the research agenda. By far the greatest proportion of material came from the largest union branch at the time, the CWU Bootle branch.

Some Issues for Union Renewal

Notwithstanding the risk of oversimplification, the general argument is that devolved management systems, pressures from increasing market competition, employment reorganisation and work intensification have been traced to a resurgence of union activism. As management become increasingly self-confident, demanding greater employee flexibility, there is evidence of a revitalised union response in defence of members' terms and conditions:

> "The paradox is that the privatisation of these corporations, and the accompanying restructuring of work and employment relations, provided the conditions for union renewal" [8].

Significantly, the factors which appear to lead to potential renewal also suggest a number of opportunities for unions to redefine their role at a local level. One particular theme is the emphasis between the 'motives for' and 'forms of' local organising activity. For Fosh (1993) the "careful choice of leadership style" [9] around a collective ideology is considered favourable to possible renewal activities, while Fairbrother (1996) suggests

that what is "critical is the emergence of participative forms of unionism where there has been a long history of remote, centralised and hierarchical" organisation [10].

This distinction between 'participative forms' as well as 'ideological motives' toward a new basis of union organisation is of central significance. Arguably, there has been an over-emphasis placed on the structural barriers to membership engagement rather than a deeper understanding of the motives, goals and objectives of the respective parties [11]. Thus to assume that a system of consultations, surveys or delegate conferences between members, stewards and full-time officers will satisfy (and stimulate) a demand for greater participation [12] lacks a clear distinction between 'direct' and 'indirect' organising activity at workplace level, especially as large and multi-occupational workplaces have historically relied on bureaucratic forms of union organisation rather than direct membership participation.

An alternative approach is to explore membership participation and commitment to union organising in a much more multi-dimensional way, covering both formal and informal agents which shape membership values [13]. The analytical advantage here is that a preoccupation with measures of direct participation (such as membership meetings) arguably neglects the diversity and variation of attitudinal orientations toward unionism, such as the impact of union literature on member perceptions and a willingness to participate. Equally important is the historical and political influences in assessing the deeper motives which may shape future steward activism and the potential for combative as well as participative relations at workplace level [14]. Yet where class-based solidarity and collective resistance has been evident, there is a tendency to concentrate on

predominantly manual and male-dominated occupations, with little consideration for potentially recast social and class relations among diverse occupational/white collar groups [15].

A second theme is that revitalisation and union organising can be influenced from above as much as below. More recently the analysis has traced a typology of union phases [16] to a servicing rather than mobilising dimension of participation. In essence, that union organisation has passed from a participatory stage to one in which members are treated as active consumers. Significant is the debate concerning a 'fracturing of collectivism' as new managerial strategies imply a redefinition of trade union priorities because workers share different (i.e. individual) interests within their enterprise [17].

However, there has been less research at a micro level concerning the contradictions between labour and capital which inform and shape social mobilisation. One less developed theme in the literature is that while bargaining processes will inevitably combine compromise with resistance, the motives behind social partnership allied to an increasingly individualistic membership orientation as the basis for renewal may erode the capacity for unions to resist management in the long-term [18]. Thus should the forms of 'new unionism' provide the ingredients to renewal and growth, the crucial dilemma is whether unions become too compliant with employers, eventually finding it extremely difficult to resist should relations turn sour [19]. Significantly, the key question is whether local shop stewards are themselves supportive at workplace level of national union policies which, by definition, imply a closer relationship with management?

A third issue lacking in the renewal debate is a greater understanding of the contradictory pressures facing supervisory management, and how the dynamics of a steward-supervisory relationship can influence workplace organising activity. There is certainly evidence that employers would prefer to manage without unions *per se* [20]. The revisited Fawley case presented by Ahlstrand (1990) shows how management adopted a long-term non-union strategy as early as 1970 [21], despite the acceptance of Fawley's productivity agreements as a model for pluralist industrial relations less than a decade earlier [22]. Yet for supervisory management is the added pressure to ensure organisational production which embodies a degree of industrial relations informality. The point is that the actions of line managers may actually run against the grain of a corporate, more hierarchical employment strategy aimed at collective marginalisation, to which a redefined shop stewards role can readily exploit conditions favourable to union members [23]. In many ways there is an important need to understand how and why, in the face of a militant union challenge, managers are prepared to accommodate labour. The view that a hard-line managerial prerogative is transposed upon a traditional orthodoxy following privatisation fails to illustrate why managers and union representatives are still making deals while simultaneously seeking to advance their respective 'frontiers of control' [24].

Following a case study overview, it is to a deeper assessment of these three central themes that the evidence is concerned. These are summarised as: (a), the ideological motives which underpin particular styles of shop steward activism, membership participation and emerging nature of local unionism; (b), the dilemmas between national policy objectives and workplace bargaining practice; and (c), an understanding of the dynamic relationships among supervisory management and shop stewards to the prospect of union renewal and revitalisation The

issues are presented in two ways. First by exploring work reorganisation and subsequent collective marginalisation in the run-up to privatisation during the latter part of the 1980's, and secondly by assessing the challenges to and subsequent response of local unionism to managerial-led change post-privatisation. A later section reviews a number of limitations to these developments and potential for union renewal.

Case Study Background

National Girobank was established in 1968 under the general auspices of the Post Office Corporation. In historical terms the roots of the British giro system are quite unique given a long tradition of labour and trade union support for a state owned transfer payment system to widen banking services [25]. While Girobank operate on a national basis with offices throughout the country, the main site is located in Bootle on Merseyside, with a smaller contingency centre for cheque processing in Wigan. Since privatisation the workforce has reduced from a peak of over 6000 in the mid-1980's to just over 3000 by 1995.

Girobank was sold as a nationalised bank in 1990 to the Alliance and Leicester Building Society (A&L); itself a non-unionised employer. Despite the A&L's own branch network, Girobank continue to focus its business activities through the Post Office counters. In contemporary terms, Girobank occupy a central role as Britain's sixth largest bank with over 70% of the country's top retailers among its corporate customers, handling over £80 billion in cash and cheque deposits. This is equivalent to £1 in every £4 passed through UK retail outlets [26]. Girobank also process around £200 million state transfer payments every week. It is thus surprising that Girobank has been a neglected industry within the industrial relations literature [27] given the significant

contribution to the banking system, and the fact that most westernised economies have comparable processing operations for benefit payments.

Further is an appreciation of the financial service industry itself. The paternalistic ethos among traditional banks [28] was never evident at Girobank, in the main insulated through a Whitley-type model of consultation. Ironically, a highly bureaucratic internal labour market and joint regulatory approach symbolised strong unitary values with a relatively stable industrial relations system similarly noted in adjoining parts of the public sector [29]. However privatisation, market deregulated and competitive pressures have intensified job insecurity and labour-management relations within the company. The '1993 Alliance & Leicester Act' provided the legal requisite to dovetail both bank and building society products, effectively posing threats to employment where areas of work converged between Girobank and the A&L. An interestingly named human resource strategy (*Proteus**) sought to alter social, cultural and work relations with distinct business units separating core and periphery trading activities [30]. More recently, and despite large scale capital investment giving Girobank the leading edge in computer and cheque processing technologies, the operational side of the company has been sold again to a specialist market provider, Unisys, although the majority of employees remain based at the Bootle site and represented by the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

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* The name *Proteus* was chosen by the company after a Greek mythical sea god who could allegedly change appearance according to the circumstances. The analogy is that so too could the employee relations strategy be altered - at least in appearance. Interestingly, the local PTC union branch renamed their members magazine *Menalaus*, after another Greek sea god who believed *Proteus* sought to deceive his opponents (see Homers Odyssey - book 4 - 351cf VAR.TRANS).

The labour process at Bootle is divided between both occupational and business activities. For operational employees the work method is reminiscent to a factory regime with Taylorist production methods for cheque processing. Data processing operatives are typically required to reach specific targets of between 16-22,000 keyboard depressions per hour. In contrast, clerical grades deal with accounts in an office/clerical work environment, responding to customer queries on a 24-hour/365-day shift pattern. The principal method of employee-customer contact is either direct over the telephone or by written communication.

The relevance of Girobank as a case to assess potential union renewal is evident in the changing nature of work and employment relations within the company both before and after privatisation, drawing on a predominately white collar, large part-time and female workforce. In comparative terms, pre-privatised workplace unionism largely facilitated individual case work through national forms of joint regulation. However, during the process of privatisation the long-standing reliance on effective bureaucratisation raised a number of tensions not only between workers and management, but among local and national union approaches to the employment relationship. On the one hand national union-management relations relied on a high degree of intra-organisational bargaining which consolidated opponent's constituent demands [31]; the relationship was based on 'high trust and co-operation which established mutual rights and obligations'. On the other hand workplace union-management relations are often conducted in a more open 'conflict based manner of mutual suspicion and mistrust, with the behaviour of one party seen as irrational and unpredictable by the other' [32]. Arguably, it is the factors which influence such a

dramatic swing in shop stewards' attitudes to management and members, from almost wholesale passivity to one of participation, resistance and mobilisation which lie at the heart of a deeper understanding of union renewal.

Workplace Union Marginalisation: the 1980's.
Significant developments in the run-up to privatisation essentially paved the way for a more assertive, self-confident managerial prerogative which fundamentally altered the stable, institutional and bureaucratically effective employment relationship at Girobank's main site in Bootle. These can be broadly categorised on two fronts.

i) Restructuring and New Technology
To being with the 1980's witnessed a breakdown in formal Taylorist production and control methods across the whole organisation. A series of re-grading exercises effectively reduced the number of occupational categories from seventeen to four. Among cheque processing operatives a new Integrated Production Method (IPM) focused on multiple team-working both between and across previous demarcated boundaries. The whole process sought to increase the skills of employees to work on more than one operational task. Among clerical employees new technology designed to speed-up direct customer contact fundamentally altered both the social and structural fabric of the labour process. Moreover, technology allowed management to switch customer telephone queries to regional offices at the prospect of industrial action.

Similarly, the contingency centre at Wigan diluted cohesive workplace relations amidst a growing 'core-periphery' labour strategy. Initially driven by Bank of England guidelines, the Wigan facility was designed to 'duplicate' processing functions already performed at Bootle. For the trade unions, and in particular the

Bootle branch who secured representational rights at the new site, the agreement was regarded as a major success. Yet what emerged was a further gulf between employees in the company. New recruits based at Wigan were eventually employed on inferior terms and conditions than existing workers at Bootle. Moreover, the 'core-periphery' divide further diluted effective workplace union organisation and the ability to mobilise a coherent response. As one branch officer recalled:

> "It [Wigan] was mistakenly viewed at the time as no more and no less a threat than the setting up of regional offices. We couldn't stop them then and we couldn't stop Wigan...to say it's difficult to resolve the mountain of problems particular to our members' their [Wigan] is an understatement"

ii) Collective Marginalisation

The second factor which worked against local unionism was a direct attack on collective bargaining arrangements at both a local and intermediary level. Facilities for a strong cohort of six senior representatives on site was cut to three; two for the CWU with a branch membership of around 3000 covering Bootle, Wigan, Belfast, Edinburgh and London; and one for the managerial union PTC. Furthermore, in the run-up to privatisation management unilaterally de-recognised the Post Office equivalent Whitley-type model of joint regulation to which Girobank was a participant; the Post Office Unions Council (POUC). Locally, further blows came with a number of nationally negotiated (and member-accepted) pay deals which strengthened management's hand given a variety of 'strings' to implement both numerical and functional flexibility. Moreover, the *locus* of union-management relations was engineered around distinctive forms of

bureaucratisation aimed at securing employee compliance and co-operation.

Arguably, however, the shift towards national bureaucratisation was not without advantage. Significantly, growing concern about the government's decision to sell Girobank put increasing pressure on national union officers to resist rather than support an ideological status quo. Interestingly, a sophisticated union political machine, still well-oiled and greased from the privatisation of British Telecom, secured a number of important safeguards written into the sale questionnaire for prospective buyers. Through a combination of pragmatism and lobbying, interested parties had to reveal the likely location of processing sites, a commitment to maintain existing pension rights and, arguably more significant, support existing collective bargaining arrangements during the sale of Girobank [33].

The Revitalisation of Workplace Unionism: The 1990's

The safeguards mentioned above were clearly regarded a major success for union representation, but in no way counter-balanced the systematic marginalisation of workplace unionism. Significantly, the change in ownership intensified the pace of restructuring, new managerial techniques and decentralised business units. However while privatisation, managerial restructuring and workplace tensions represent the sort of paradoxical effect suggested by Fairbrother [34], the ability of local union organisation to respond was far from homogenous. Arguably, the crucial factor appeared to be a distinctive local style which fuelled a mutual member-steward dependency capable and willing to exploit favourable conditions.

i) Leadership Style and Participatory Processes

Against increasing workplace tension emerged a much stronger member-steward identity sympathetic of alternative organising methods given the apparent shortcoming of national bureaucratisation to address local concerns. Evidence would tend to support the analysis offered by Fosh (1993) in placing leadership style as a determinant factor in the renewal thesis: "Key local leaders with a participatory and collectivist style are able to build upon the surges of participation in their workplace and encourage members to take part to a greater extent than they did previously"[35].

The argument of 'newer' forms of local organising is evident along the multi-dimensional framework suggested by Kelly (1996), specifically well defined 'goals, methods and ideological' orientations [36]. To begin with, stewards increasingly occupied strategic bargaining forums previously reserved for the branch officer corp. Positions of annual conference delegate, seats on the national union advisory committee and joint union-management bodies represented a fundamental shift in the tensions from bureaucracy to democracy at local level. In many respects, a marginalised workplace branch began promoting its own approach and agenda, seeking ambitious demands underpinned by the ideological motives for membership involvement:

> "We started doing things which seemed to surprise people at first...like turning up on site to meet some night shift [members] .....What we didn't have was some sort of magic wand......In fact we were loosing more cases than we won. But there was definitely more enthusiasm about the place at this time, interest not in the union as such, but in the issues" (Bootle Branch Officer)

Secondly, the strategy of a new organising method was consciously deployed through an active educational programme, with weekend residential schools to train new stewards in discipline and negotiation aimed at devolving key representational activities below branch officer level. Special 'giro health & safety' training courses provided by the regional TUC increased participation among members. As such activists no longer held the dual occupancy of 'union and safety rep', effectively widening the representative-member ratio at local level.

Finally, post-privatisation workplace structures are self-governing and increasingly independent of national union machinery than was the case hitherto. Discipline cases are dealt with locally rather than through full time officer mediation; the local branch have a greater propensity to use industrial tribunal courts; the use of recruitment campaigns targeting non-union A&L staff initiated by Bootle activists, utilising a network of CWU branches throughout the country to distribute branch literature in high street A&L outlets; membership petitions to embarrass and raise publicity against Director pay levels; and more direct involvement with both local and national management decision-makers.

ii) Increased Membership Consciousness
Against the backdrop of a new leadership style and restructured steward body is the concerted attempt to 'come in from the collective abyss'. Strategically, literature was distributed to members outside company premises, effectively eschewing any token managerial concession for reduced facilities on site. Further, the 'tactic' behind local membership engagement increasingly caused embarrassment to both senior management and national officers, with activists distributing key bargaining information at strategic stages of the negotiation process in

furtherance of both branch demands and to stimulate membership mobilisation.

It is probable that the nature of communication was influenced by a participatory style aimed at involving and informing members through a regular attendance of committee members outside company gates. As a consequence, stewards had the opportunity to explain and discuss with members issues which had become increasingly difficult on site. Moreover, members themselves recognised the commitment of union stewards distributing literature in all weather conditions and at all times of the day. As one local branch officer explained:

> "I was extremely sceptical of standing at the gates and giving [members] circulars as they drove in.....but after a couple of times they'd be asking for extra copies for their mates; they'd even leave some in the tea rooms for us..... Some members even came along and helped before their shift started....in fact some branch managers soon appreciated the circulars as they drove in. People in the regions would get wind of them and ask for copies to be faxed up"

iii) Managerial Inertia and Local Union Organising
Further explanations are found within a complex and contradictory supervisory-steward relationship at shop floor level. Following privatisation junior and middle managers pursued limited industrial action over grading and evaluation criteria. Arguably, a supervisory grade became cautious (if not fearful) of restructuring in a new privatised organisation. Crucial is that line managers had to meet new and demanding targets with a significant degree of budgetary freedom. Thus the amelioration of revitalised local organisation was further stimulated through an informal shop floor relationship, capable

and willing to make deals despite senior management policies toward marginalisation and union exclusion [23]. As one branch officer explained:

> "I'm convinced personnel where out 'to do us in' on every issue. National played a very cosy game with personnel. But at the line [manager] level we could make real deals...it was their budget now. Some thought the money came out of their own pockets, but most are willing to do deals....they were weary of us after we had the strike, but I think even more scared of the other lot [Alliance & Leicester]"

iv) Revitalisation through Membership Action

Finally, but by no means the most insignificant factor, is the ability of local activists to mobilise members in a pay dispute contrary to national union recommendations †. Significantly, employees had real and genuine grievances since privatisation, especially the 'dovetailing' of bank and building society products posing real threats to employment. The agreed closure of the Bristol regional office in 1992 was one such threat. Closer to home a number of key clerical occupations at Bootle moved to Leicester; personal loans, payroll, purchasing along with the marketing division. In addition a voluntary redundancy agreement received over-and-above the intended number of applicants. Consequently, employees rejected for generous severance terms had to remain despite the desire to leave. Crucially, co-operative national union-management relations failed to satisfy a disillusioned workforce unhappy with an exit channel without compensation, to which the local branch became the immediate focal point. The impact from such managerial failings consolidated the growing member-steward dependency at local level, simultaneously highlighting the limitations to national union policies as a method to address workplace concerns. In particular, local representatives where able to target key bargaining forums to voice a conflict-based strategy towards management proposals:

> "we now have one of our people on the pay team. We chair the national BAC....and national [union officers] won't offer a deal to

management without asking us first" (Bootle Branch Officer)

Of course the dispute did not occur in isolation. Without doubt the combination of local activism; campaigning 'on the gates', asking members to take informed decisions at regular meetings and obtaining small yet tangible results at line management level legitimised the style and preference for wider participation within a conscious framework of resistance rather than accommodation:

> "We could now say with more accuracy how much the company had made, how many staff we'd lost, how far behind lower grades had gone in real terms....even *The Sun* reporting directors pay....and sum it all up a rise which was equivalent to the price of a packet of ciggies a week" (Bootle Branch Officer)

vi) Limitations to Workplace Unionism

Although the 1990's mark the beginning of local revitalisation in union organising activity, pulled by the paradoxical consequences of privatisation and pushed by a distinctive leadership style, a combination of tactical and structural factors tended to limit the extent of renewal, broadly categorised on two accounts.

First is the theme of wider social and political networks which can shape the typology of steward behaviour and local mobilisation [37]. Certainly among local stewards existed a group active in socialist politics characteristic of Merseyside's political history, however the overall implications are difficult to measure, not least the impact on underlying membership attitudes. One indication is that the periods of political-orientation were characterised not by renewal or mobilisation but rather alienation and rejection of local unionism.

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† The 1993 pay claim was for a £450 flat-rate increase rather than a percentage award. Against national union advice the Bootle branch recommend rejection and secured a yes vote for industrial action. The action included a continuous overtime ban and selective one-day strikes over a period of months during key cheque processing days. The £450 claim was met in full by the company, although split between consolidation and bonus pay

Moreover, the shift from national bureaucratisation to local participation bears a strong correlation to a declining political utility. In short, members appeared to be motivated by instrumental rather than ideological forms of union organisation. Equally, however, is the need to recognise the internal dynamics, history and socialisation of political affiliation on workplace union activity [38] rather than rely on snap-shot evidence. Despite the apparent instrumentality of members, key stewards displayed both ideological and political orientations which reflected a motive to resist.

The second area of limitation to a more sustainable wave of renewal activity is potentially more serious, and linked to both the physical structure and social relations found within the company. To begin with the geographical dispersion of local unionism made it extremely difficult to maintain membership involvement, not least the need to support elaborate forms of 'indirect' membership participation. Further is a psychological gulf engendered around an occupational hierarchy that local leaders found difficult to break. In particular, clerical employees in a comparatively cleaner office environment found it extremely difficult to relate to the factory-type surroundings of cheque processing, suggesting that social relations and workplace issues are far from homogeneous even within a single organisation. With large and multi-occupational groups of members concentrated in one workplace branch, then the capacity for stewards to respond to member-specific grievances raises the issue that a branch oligarchy may replace bureaucratic forms of unionism found at national level [39].

Conclusion and Discussion

This article has sought to illustrate a number of central themes within the union renewal debate to recent experiences of local shop steward organisation both during and after the process of privatisation. From the evidence presented it would be wrong to infer that the 'balance' of power has shifted to labour. However, what is argued is that the ability for local unionism to question and challenge the managerial prerogative appears to be both renewed and above all legitimised. In so doing the evidence raises a number of implications concerning the redefinition of adversarial as well as participative unionism which lie behind national union policies for greater partnership with employers. The importance of key mediating factors have been identified as the combination of distinctive leadership style, a clear motive and ideological orientation to resist management as well as the contradictions of a complex supervisory management system. While there are always dangers in predicting 'causality' and inferring 'generalisability' from a single case study, the wider implications for union renewal and workplace industrial relations can be broadly discussed on three accounts.

First, it is unclear how or in what manner the relationships between union representatives, full-time officers and management will be in the future given a revitalised degree of local autonomy. The signals of an 'enterprise-based unionism' [40] are certainly evident against a federal union structure. As a single organisation Girobank has developed as a minority section within a continually expanding national union project, subject to two large scale mergers in little over ten years between different ideological movements; the POEU with the telecoms section of CPSA to form the NCU, and more recently the latter and UCW to create the CWU. The links to postal and telecommunications are clear, however the rationale for a financial and banking section is less obvious.

The evidence is not so much a 'fracturing of collectivism' [41] but further indication of decentralised British trade unionism and the difficulties in closing the long-standing gap between national policies and workplace practice. Problematic, however, is that such a gap may well symbolise additional concerns on the ability of local stewards to address member-specific issues as national union policies become increasingly abstract from sectional interests. Thus the resources, effort and facilities for workplace stewards to respond to increasing change is questionable if new organising initiatives are based on demand-led factors from below, without a concerned response from above to match local problems within a coherent national union strategy.

Arguably, without the combination of national resources and local co-ordination, such a long-standing gap appears to represent an important barrier for workplace union renewal. A number of authors have already established that such a situation offers the potential for an emerging bureaucratic lay representative elite rather than the requisite participatory factors mentioned in this article [42]. Thus for renewal activities to be sustainable is the need to develop more sophisticated and innovative union objectives based on a multi-dimensional view of participation rather than rely on structural forms to facilitate membership engagement [43]. Moreover, the principles which underpinned local organising activity demonstrate that strong, independent workplace unionism based on collective participation is a much more favourable route to union renewal than that of co-operation and accommodation with an otherwise antagonistic managerial prerogative.

Second is the wider view of less recalcitrant shop steward behaviour given the managerial challenges of the past decade [44]. To be sure Girobank members are far from symbolic of militant workplace agitation, yet the ability of local representatives to mount a managerial offensive despite national union accommodation is testimony to the view that workplace unionism is extremely complex, dynamic and above all subject to contradictory fluctuations. The implications are directly relevant to Kelly's (1996) critique of 'social partnership' on a wider scale, not least the willingness to embrace decisive organising methods which have *a priori* reasoning to challenge management among less traditional sections of the trade union movement. In many ways the evidence that stewards were prepared to make deals at supervisory level *and* mobilise resistance is part and parcel of effective unionisation [45] rather than a clear commitment to co-operative relations in general.

These provide lessons for other comparable organisations facing similar environments, not least large clerical occupations in local authority and parts of the civil service subject to privatisation, deregulation or competitive tendering. There is also the analogy to similar union organisations contemplating merger and the implications of a national-local division where workplace issues appear abstract from overall union goals.

Third is the implications from what a number of commentators suggest is a growing individual member-servicing orientation in place of more traditional collective representation [46]. The primary argument is based on a more strategic union response to the changing nature and composition of labour markets. While the response shown by Girobank stewards is fundamentally different from older forms of joint regulation and consultation, evidence of an individualised servicing relationship as the source of revitalisation is highly questionable.

The methods of new organising, both in terms of style and substance, drew membership attention to the harsh realities of redundancy, insecurity, work intensification and the potential gains accruing from mobilisation.

Finally, of course, there is the critique that a study based in one organisation which is also subject to a unique political landscape such as Merseyside is hardly the basis to draw any general implications. While the relationship of militant politics and industrial relations may have a propensity to influence contextual events, the case of Girobank is far from symbolic of radical traditions evident elsewhere in Liverpool [47] and thus hardly unique. To be sure, unionism at Girobank has been characterised by long term stability interrupted by privatisation and managerial self-confidence, with an employee profile characterised by a large female, white collar and part-time occupations which draw a link to other post-privatised sectors [48].

Furthermore, the fact that all Girobank sites engaged in industrial action, from Ashford to Edinburgh, would suggest that the tensions and social processes are not unique to Bootle alone. In that respect the evidence presented here complements an ethnographic perspective which suggests that workplace unionism and recalcitrant behaviour is both a dynamic and complex social process [49] but one potentially shaped by style, ideology and purpose rather than determined by its structure.

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