

Case study two: trade unions and the prospects for unionization in the service sector

How serious a problem for the trade unions is the shift in the UK's employment structure such that an ever-increasing proportion of the workforce are employed in services?

Chapter two of the book points to ways in which the decline of manufacturing industry, where trade unionism has traditionally been robust, has affected employment relations.

Trade union activity in the private service sector is generally rather sparse; only about one in ten hospitality workplaces have any kind of union presence for example (Cully et al 1999). This case demonstrates, however, that while trade unions face considerable obstacles to extending their presence in private services, not least from hostile employers, trade unionism nonetheless has the potential for growth.

Because the private service sector is so heavily comprised of female part-time workers, it is often assumed that this renders trade unionism unviable. Only about one-fifth of part-time workers belong to a trade union. In her study of part-time workers in three retail organizations, however, Walters (2002) discovered that their employment status generally did not constitute an obstacle to unionization. Where there was a union presence, workers did not join either because they had not been asked, or because they were sceptical about its likely effectiveness. In a store where there was not a union presence, workers were unsure about the role of a trade union. Thus it is important to recognize that part-time workers in the private service sector may be receptive to unionization, and not necessarily hostile, or unresponsive, to trade unions.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to unionization in the private service sector is management opposition. In his book on the fast-food chain McDonald's, Royle (2000) documents the efforts made by the company to ensure that it remains free of trade unions or, in countries where legislation renders this impossible, undermines their power. The way in which some employers in the finance sector have succeeded in weakening union influence in their operations is ably set out by Poynter (2000), in his case studies of a credit card company and an insurance firm. In the case of the latter, for example, the union initially resisted attempts by managers to exclude it, but had its power base weakened by huge numbers of job losses. Thus rendered the union less effective, revealing it to be a 'relatively hollow institution unable to challenge effectively the company's strategy of marginalization' (Poynter 2000: 144).

Therefore, it is not so much the characteristics of the service economy that have proved to be detrimental to the trade unions, but rather the way in which managers have used the more hostile political and economic climate for trade unionism to undermine its power and legitimacy. While there are some major obstacles to the unionization of workers in the private service sector, some groups, such as flight attendants for example, are generally rather well represented by trade unions (Korczynski 2002). Even in call centres, environments where, because of the presence of sophisticated monitoring and surveillance techniques, managers are often considered to enjoy extensive scope to exercise control, there are generally sufficient opportunities available for workers to express their grievances, articulate their discontent, and thus resist efforts to shackle them (Bain and Taylor 2000; Korczynski 2002). This has helped to encourage a growing union presence within the call centre sector, including operations run by companies such as Legal and General and Barclaycall for example (Bain and Taylor 2002).

To what extent do the trade unions need to develop strategies that are explicitly focused on meeting the needs of workers in the service sector? Korczynski (2002: 184) suggests that a straightforward anti-management approach is unlikely to be effective. Rather, he proposes that unions use a 'language and a strategy that speaks to front-line workers' likely deep-rooted "pro-customer" values and experiences', since this may be more attractive to workers. In other words, a campaign for unionization could be founded upon discontent about poor quality of service experienced by customers for example. Thus unions can use rhetoric about the importance to businesses of high-quality customer service as a way of encouraging employers to improve conditions for the workers who have to provide the service. In one case, that of a directory enquiries and emergency services provider, working under contract to Cable and Wireless, unhappiness amongst the workforce about sloppy company practices, the widespread provision of incorrect addresses to callers in particular, played a crucial part in generating the conditions necessary for a successful union recognition campaign (Taylor and Bain 2003).

Question

* To what extent are the traditional functions of the trade unions relevant to the expectations of workers in the private service sector?

Sources

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