Institutions or Actors: What Really Matters for Worker Representation?

Christian Dufour, Adelheid Hege, Christian Lévesque and Gregor Murray
(Institut de recherches économiques et sociales (IRES), HEC Montréal, Université de Montréal)

Recent comparative studies of flexibility practices in unionized production sites highlight both the commonality of pressures associated with globalization and the persistent diversity of workplace union responses across different national contexts.

Plausible explanations of this diversity can be ascribed to institutional effects (the impact of different types of institutional regime), to organizational contingencies (both internal as related to size, technology and historical markets strategies and external as related to product and other market conditions), and to variations in actor capacity. Despite this range of potential explanations, the literature invariably seems to be pulled back to first- and second-order explanations of how external factors such as the “home” and “host” country effects of institutional regimes or particular sets of organizational contingencies or even particular actor histories shape their responses.

Recent studies certainly point to the need to disentangle the conceptual underpinnings and the complex interactions behind this persistent diversity. Pointing to the need to go beyond idealized national models, Meardi et al (2009a) highlight their “internally heterogeneous and dynamic”. Sector and company contexts clearly affect actor strategies (Meardi et al, 2009b), but the variations in these strategies cannot be systematically linked to institutional, sectoral or organizational factors (Kahancova, 2007). Dufour et al (2009) highlight the complex construction and apparent path dependency of local union actor strategies.

The challenge is to move beyond an understanding of institutions as formal sets of arrangements and towards an understanding as ongoing and contested norms and meanings. In so doing, we want to locate variations in and explanations of the autonomy of the actors of representation vis-à-vis these institutional settings. How do these actors mobilize the institutional instruments at their disposal and seek to maintain or change their effects? Can they in fact do so?

In an effort to understand these interactions, this paper examines actor strategies in different institutional contexts faced with comparable sets of organizational contingencies. Drawing on case studies of five sites in two multinational companies (sites in France and Germany for one of these companies and sites in Belgium, France and Canada for the other company), this study permits us to scrutinize the interactions between actors and their institutional contexts. The particular interest of this approach is that these different systems of representation are each experiencing a period of self-doubt and introspection as regards their capacity to deal with the forces of globalization.

Competing explanatory strands run through the analysis. Faced with common pressures, different institutional arrangements do indeed define and limit the range of responses. Yet the diversity inscribed in the varied interactions between actors of representation and their different institutional regimes is related to their ability to mobilize and act upon different institutional resources. Ultimately, this is related to their ability to act upon themselves.