The phenomenon of ‘double breasting’ is receiving increasing interest within the employment relations literature. Put simply, it refers to a practice whereby multi-establishment firms concurrently operate union and non-union facilities (Beaumont and Harris, 1992). Studies have identified the growing occurrence of unionised firms operating new sites which have not recognised trade unions through either opening new non-union plants or taking over smaller non-unionised companies and continuing the non-union status quo. Often non-union representation (NER) structures are frequently adopted, seemingly to substitute the union role (Gunnigle et al. 2005). Whilst these findings are of significance, much of this literature has been preoccupied with identifying the incidence of such systems rather than what has actually occurred within them and their impact on various industrial relations actors (Gunnigle et al, 2009; Bryson et al. 2007).

As such, conceptual debate within the NER would suggest that the outcomes from such managerial practices may be complex and underscored by a variety of objectives. This must be seen within a context of a traditional perspective that viewed NERs simply as vehicles to circumvent union influence and defend the non-union managerial prerogative (Gall, 2004). There is an emerging counter-argument which proposes that NERs and double-breasting are not simply about union avoidance, but often function as part of a HR agenda around developing employee commitment and morale (Pun et al. 2001; Taras and Kaufman, 2006).

This paper offers exploratory case-study evidence around which to assess these issues empirically. Specifically it presents evidence from a large British multi-national operating on the island of Ireland, where a conscious strategy of double-breasting was pursued. Resulting from data collected over a two year period which incorporated a detailed interview programme with key organisational respondents, the paper reports on a number of issues revolving around the capacity of management to effectively pursue such a strategy. In particular, the paper highlights the dynamics of running an NER in a non-unionised site parallel to one where a robust collective bargaining relationship exists. Pertinent issues arising include the use of the unionized site as a reference point and the extent to which a union organizing campaign influences management activity.
References


