

Workplace activists in service sector organising campaigns: roles and tensions

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What do workplace activists do during organising campaigns?

- Growing interest in union organising over the past 10 years
- Service sector particularly relevant as high employment grown, but low unionisation
- Workplace activists: not paid union officers/organisers, not necessarily formally elected
- Centrally important to organising and recruitment within the workplace (Bronfenbrenner et al 1998)

Central tension: leadership and activism

- Long history of studying workplace reps in IR
- Tensions between centralisation and professionalisation of leadership vs. rank and file activism
 - Principle of leadership predominance vs. principle of membership participation (Fairbrother 2000)
 - Inevitability of bureaucratisation? (Bramble 1995 vs. Voss and Sherman 2000)
- Managed activism (Jarley 2001, Heery 2003, Simms 2007)

4 key roles for workplace activists identified in literature

1. Recruitment of colleagues
2. Organising – developing workplace activism, building representation structures etc.
3. Dealing with the employer
4. Dealing with the wider union (and perhaps beyond)

Case study organisations

- **MSF in Scope** – Charity: 4000 staff, 150 workplaces, managerial hostility
- **CWU in Typetalk** – Charity call centre: 400 staff, 2 workplaces, managerial hostility
- **Usdaw in Ethel Austin** – Retail: 2800 staff, 200 workplaces, managerial support for union
- **TGWU/GMB in Gala casinos** – Casino chain: 1100 staff, 6 workplaces, managerial hostility
- **PCS in LSCs** – B2B quango: 4500 staff, 47 workplaces, benign management

The research

- Successful campaigns identified
- Part of a wider project on union organising run from Cardiff University
- Longitudinal case studies: 1998-2005
 - Interviews with key actors (102 participants)
 - Observation at meetings
 - Campaign planning
 - Shadowing organisers
 - Documentary data: recognition agreements, campaign materials etc.
- NOTE – no access to management, but observed behaviour

Recruitment activities

- Even in relations to this core activity considerable variation
- Where union excluded from workplace (Gala, TT, Scope) more emphasis on activists doing this role
- Where officers/organisers had access, they did a lot

Organising

- Employer behaviour again crucial
- Where hostile or difficult (TT, Scope, Gala) more work done by reps
- Where supportive (EA) or benign (LSCs) more emphasis on trying to secure deals from the employer that would allow officers to set up structures e.g. regular meetings etc.

Dealing with the employer

- Might expect officers to take on more of this where employer is hostile
- But little evidence of this – depends more on policies of union
 - Unions that have a culture of less officer servicing (CWU, TGWU) tried to build up activist skills/confidence – but activists often reluctant
 - Some unions have a clear policy that this is the responsibility of officers (Usdaw)
 - Others somewhere in between (PCS, MSF) – here, also, officers complain about activists lacking capacity to do this

Dealing with the wider union and beyond

- Variation explained by:
 - Union structures
 - Organising policies
- New orgn part of a larger branch? Or new branch?
- Little effort to engage newly organised workplaces into wider democratic structures of union e.g national conferences etc.
- Very little evidence of links outside union

Discussion

- Activist role focuses mainly on recruitment and building workplace organisation BUT considerable variation in the extent to which officers help out.
- Tension emerges in the extent to which activists are/are not independent in dealing with the employer
 - But where officers encourage this, it tends to be activists who are reluctant to take this on.
 - Contradicts argument about inherent bureaucratisation
 - Also challenges the idea that activists inherently 'get' organising

Conclusions

- Considerable contingency in roles adopted by workplace activists in organising campaigns
- 3 main contingencies explain variation in roles
 1. Union structure and policy (esp. training and encouragement from officers)
 2. Structure of workplace (large bargaining units broken into small workplaces present challenges)
 3. Attitude of employer to campaign (where access is denied reps *must* take far wider roles)