Dual union & non-union voice: the dynamics of ‘double-breasting’

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Conceptualising double-breasting

- Circumventing costs of union-wage mark up, higher fringe benefit costs & less flexible labour deployment
  - “The cost advantages of open-shop contractors made double-breasting a rational alternative for many union contractors”.
    - Northrup (1995: 381)
- Unionized firm open new non-union plant and/or acquire an existing non-union plant, continuing to operate on non-union basis
- Charting trends not explaining motives and internal dynamics of actual practice
## Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Employees No. (Ireland)</th>
<th>Sites NI</th>
<th>Sites ROI</th>
<th>N respondents (All-Ireland)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brit Co.</td>
<td>Services</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Co.</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering Co.</td>
<td>Services</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14 site locations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brit Co.

- Influence of inherited legacies
  - Public sector legacy, strong unionisation in N.I.
  - If a newly acquired site had a union presence, the status quo ran supreme
  - Same pattern reigned in non-union acquisitions
  - Evident in Republic of Ireland
    - Continued recognition in engineering firm, hostility to organising other plants
- Strategic union avoidance through NER but reactive to endogenous factors
  - Dual arrangements spurred employee counter-response
Concrete Co.

- ROI based expanding into NI 2005 onwards
  - 50% density Republic, just one firm unionised in North
- Purposively decentralised managerial structure
  - Allowing for a high degree of latitude
- Each site has responsibility for own pay, pensions, hours of work, union agreements
  - “…due to demand, or tradition, or because it is seen as a good idea by management. Each division is different…”
- No coherent rationale underpinning corporate approach
  - Adapting to local/historical custom & practices
  - Wide array of voice structures from national committees & local representative forums (union & non-union)
Corporate strategy to remain non-union
- “The rules within the company are that there are no unions allowed. We don’t deal with unions”
- In reality local level flexibility with mix of union & non-union
- Rudimentary institutional ‘isomorphism’ in the form of mimicking voice schemes of host companies
  - Could be influenced by client to show cultural synergy
  - Unionisation available where client recognised union
  - In non-union site, union meetings off-site for benefit of client
- Union/non-voice had a relationship beyond immediate employer
  - Suggestive of supply chain dependencies and inter-firm networks
Assessment

- Strategic intent to avoid unions not as pronounced as might be expected
- A priori institutional arrangements, routines, norms and conventions structured double-breasting arrangement
- Management muddling through on basis of inherited legacies rather than any ‘strategic ploy’
- A “logic of appropriateness” & “path dependency” in shaping dual arrangements
  - Guided the behaviour of actors so that “routines [being] followed because they are taken for granted as ‘the way we do these things” (Scott, 2001).
- Absorb transaction costs through certain institutional forms
  - Pattern-breaking involves writing-off costs
  - Difficult to reverse course (Skocpel & Pierson, 2002)
- In sum, greater sensitivity required in conceptualising the dynamic