

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

Authors:

Niall Cullinane (Queen's University Belfast), Tony Dundon (NUI Galway), Jimmy Donaghey (University of Warwick), Adrian Wilkinson (Sydney), Tony Dobbins (Bangor University), Eugene Hickland (NUI Galway)

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

Case	Sector	Employees No. (Ireland)	Sites NI	Sites ROI	N respondents (All-Ireland)
Brit Co.	Services	3,000	1	2	26
Concrete Co.	Manufacturing	2,000	1	3	20
Catering Co.	Services	4,000	3	4	47
	14 site locations				93

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)

Catering Co.

- 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