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Political Activism and Workplace Industrial Relations in a UK 'Failing' School

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of workplace unionism in an inner-city comprehensive school characterised as 'failing' and ultimately closed down. Recent and continuing educational change and the nature of industrial relations in the education sector set the context. The focus of the paper is on the way that local activists influence, resist and challenge the managerial processes during the period of 'failing' and then closing. In particular, the paper allows a consideration of the influence of local activism, the link with political activists and the tension between workplace relations and formal union organisation.

Introduction

The paper explores the relationship between trade union activists, their members and their union in a school characterised as 'failing' and subsequently closed. It begins with an exploration of the neglected link between trade union activism and political activism and, in this context, revisits the tension between unions as representative organisations and as oligarchies. These themes are examined in a qualitative case study of 'Parkville'¹, an inner city comprehensive school, which allows a consideration of the debates around union activism, union renewal and resilience.

The importance of union leadership is a recurrent theme in the debates on union renewal. Fairbrother (1994; 1996), Fosh (1993) and Thornley (1998) suggest that despite the recent trend of decline in union membership, there is a possibility for union 'renewal' as management initiatives have been devolved to the local level and 'more participative forms of unionism' (Fairbrother 1996:141) have emerged thus encouraging union renewal in the workplace (Fairbrother 1990). At the same time, Darlington (1994; 1998; 1999); Greene (2000) and Fosh (1990; 1993) identify the importance of the role of local leadership in trade union activity at the workplace level. According to Fosh, 'the possibility for union renewal comes through building up the base level of participation by careful local leadership so that members can more easily be encouraged to take part in collective activities in times of necessity' (1993:577). Darlington (1994; 1998; 1999) McIlroy (2000) and Gall (1998a) take this argument further by suggesting that the political orientations, particularly of left-wing activists, play a significant role in workplace union activity.

The paper is set against the backdrop of educational reform in England and Wales. As a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) there is a form of centralised/decentralised control through centralised curriculum control and a devolved system of local management (LMS). Running parallel to financial accountability is public accountability through the publication of school league tables, the rhetoric of which is to identify 'good' and 'bad'

¹ 'Parkville' is a pseudonym.

schools. Schools at the top of the 'league' have both pupils and staff competing to enter them whilst schools at the bottom face the dire consequences of under subscription and possible closure; thus schools are now subject to 'market mechanisms' (Sinclair, Ironside et al. 1996:641). At the workplace level, education reforms have resulted in greater work intensification, increased class sizes, more stress and a high level of job insecurity (e.g., Ironside and Seifert 1995:177; Travers and Cooper 1996). Managerialism in schools has intensified and is likely to be further heightened with the current Government's intention of introducing appraisal linked Performance Related Pay (PRP).

The shift to managerialism in schools is well documented but its interrelationship with industrial relations in teaching at the workplace level is less so (exceptions include, for example, (Seifert 1984; Ironside and Seifert 1995; Sinclair, Seifert et al. 1995). The dynamics of workplace industrial relations in English schools cannot be isolated from the national industrial relations context, which has been characterised by a high degree of centralisation. Yet, paradoxically, despite a high union density², teachers' pay is no longer covered by national collective bargaining. Competitive multi-unionism is entrenched with teachers organised in six unions ranging from the unionate³ National Union of Teachers (NUT) and National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), both of which advocate the use of industrial action when necessary, to the Professional Association of Teachers (PAT) which is totally opposed to industrial action in any form. This paper focuses on the NUT, the union at the centre of the research case study. The NUT is the largest and oldest of the teacher unions, is characterised by factionalism and is viewed as the more politically 'left' of the trade unions probably due to the visibility of an 'organised left wing presence' (Seifert 1995:103). Kelly comments that although political factionalism exists within unions, and their policies are subject to 'fierce debate' between the different parties, there is very little literature discussing the issue (Kelly 1998:54). Factionalism is,

² The 1994 Labour Force Survey suggested a density amongst the professional occupations in schools - not specifically teachers - of 81 per cent. Ironside *et. al.* found from their own research that union density of teachers was at least equal to that figure (1997:123). Teachers' pay and conditions are now determined by Government following recommendations of the School Teachers' Review Body.

³ The term 'unionate' derives from Blackburn, R. M. (1967) *Union Character Social Class: a study of white collar unionism* (London, B.T. Batsford Ltd.).

however, acknowledged as having had an important part to play in the operation of the NUT (Ironsides et al. 1997; McIlroy 2000).

POLITICAL FACTIONS AND TRADE UNIONS

Political factions within unions can cause consternation amongst the union bureaucracy which has the authenticity of its practices and policies challenged by the active members (for example, Rank and File in the NUT between 1967-82). Challenges and opposition are seen as important to trade union democracy reflecting the tension of interests between union officials and union members (Heery and Fosh, 1990:20; Darlington, 1994; Shepherd 1949; Lipsett, Trow et al. 1956). Callinicos provides a critique of the 'trade union bureaucracy' which allows for 'the emergence of a distinctive social layer of full-time officials with interests different to those of the rank and file' (1995:18). The role of faction is then important in the challenges to Michel's (1915) 'iron law'; for example, for Martin (1968) union democracy is about the survival of faction. More recently Cornfield's (1993) work on insurgency explores the diverse forces that erode oligarchy and Healy and Kirton (2000) show how women's factions challenge union oligarchy. However, it is also suggested that competitive factions may reinforce the dominant groups. Seifert proposes that in the case of the NUT, the 'exaggerated warring between the left groups ... enabled the Union to fall under the control of an increasingly pro-Labour Party set of officials and national local leaders' (Seifert 1987:125).

The relationship between militancy, factionalism and union growth is contested (Fitzgerald and Stirling 1999, Kelly 1998) but of interest to this paper is the role of political affiliations in relation to workplace collectivism and 'union renewal' (Fairbrother 1996)⁴. Fairbrother

⁴ The broad essence of Fairbrother's argument is that as 'new managerialism' (Fairbrother, 1994:150) has emerged in the public sector, a more decentralised and devolved form of management has been developed, albeit within the confines of centralised government controls, with a corresponding devolvement of industrial relations issues. As a result, workers have turned to their immediate trade union representatives for assistance and 'more participative forms of unionism' have emerged (Fairbrother, 1996:141) which in turn encourage union renewal in the workplace (1990, 1994, 1996). Renewal is seen as comprising a set of processes concerned with union survival and development within the workplace – recruitment and replenishment of new generations of activists, building workplace activity in the context of restructuring, the development and promotion of

argues that there is a possibility for union renewal in the workplace, particularly in the public sector (1990; 1994; 1996), an argument supported by Fosh's (1993:577) research in five different workplaces (including the public sector) and to some extent by Gall's (1998b:59) research in the newspaper industry. Fitzgerald and Stirling, however, argue for the case of union 'resilience' rather than renewal (1999:47).

Gall's fraternal critique of Fairbrother's renewal thesis identified a number of weaknesses (1998:151), including the lack of acknowledgement of political agency which he suggests should be added to the renewal thesis in 'recognition of the important part played by the politics of the workplace union leadership and activists' (1998a:154). Whilst attributing some importance to the political membership of workers at the shop floor level, Fairbrother argues that 'the development of more vibrant and participative forms of union renewal is something that must come from within the workplace, rather than from outside the union, from a political group' and that 'the touchstone for active and democratised forms of unionism is the workplace and the workplace members, and not others' (1996:142).

Gall distinguishes between two political groupings who are active in the workplace, the Broad Left/Militant and the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP); the former looks to influence unions through becoming part of the union bureaucracy whilst the latter 'seeks to build a network of socialists and militants, based in the workplaces, whose task is to lead fights based in and around the workplace' (1998a:154-5). Darlington also points to the importance of the politics of trade unionism, 'in particular the significance of shop stewards' political affiliations and the nature of the influence and leadership that groups of such activists can exert on workplace union activity' (1998: 70). An important strength of political factions is that their members support one another across sectional boundaries and that they 'act as a link between different workplaces both through their own organisations and through the shop stewards networks' (Gall 1998a:155). Wider support networks may also be advantageous to union activists who become visible (but also therefore vulnerable) in their

mutual support between levels of union members and leaders, and the conditions for international unionism (Fairbrother, 2000:47-78).

willingness to contest management decisions. Darlington also argues that left-wing leaders or shop-stewards 'with an overtly ideological and solidaristic (rather than instrumental and individualistic) commitment to trade unionism' have a crucial role in mobilising workers 'for collective action against management' (1999:2) and therefore political affiliations play an important role in workplace industrial relations.

What is apparent from the above is that, regardless of political affiliation, union 'renewal', or 'resilience' (see Fitzgerald and Stirling 1999), is reliant on trade union activists who are able to motivate the workforce to act collectively. Workplace union activity is not a static phenomenon, it varies over time with members becoming more active if there are issues with which they are concerned (Fosh 1993:581). Political activism is further linked to the sectional nature of some trade unions on which it may feed and develop. The NUT is one such case.

THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS – FACTIONALISM AND MILITANCY

The NUT seeks not only to protect their members' terms and conditions of employment but also to act as a voice in the discussion on, and implementation of, educational policies. Yet unionism in teaching is fractured. For some teachers the notion of trade unionism may be seen to be at odds with their view of acting 'professionally' in that to take industrial action would not be good for the profession whereas for others unions are the only way to express their professional concerns. Although this may be viewed as a false dichotomy (Ozga and Lawn 1981; Healy 1997a), it goes some way to explain the sectionalism and fragmentation that exist in the unionisation of teachers. The belief that collective action can influence national policy making together with the NUT's history of militant action (Ozga and Lawn 1981:ch 3; Seifert 1987) would appear to be one of the reasons that teachers both join and remain in the union. Healy found in her study of NUT members that 40 per cent of those surveyed had joined because it 'appeared to be more active than other unions', a factor which she suggests points to a union whose members have a 'more solidaristic orientation' (1997a)

The NUT differs somewhat from other teacher unions in that there is open factionalism within it and it is acknowledged as having an important part to play in the operation of the union (Ironsides and Seifert 1995). The factions reflect strong 'socialist and feminist traditions of activity' (Ironsides and Seifert 1995:102) within the union, although Healy and Kirton (2000) in their study of MSF argue that these are not mutually exclusive. There are three long standing groupings, the Socialist Teachers Alliance (STA), the Campaign for a Democratic Fighting Union (CDFU) and the SWP. Contrary to Seifert's (1987) view, McIlroy (2000) considers that compared to other unions, there is a high degree of informal collaboration between these factions. The recruiting benefit of factions was illustrated by Seifert in his study of the now obsolete SWP faction Rank and File whose strength was in 'its ability to attract active union members' (1984:375).

The paper now turns to explore the workplace industrial relations issues generated through the decentralisation and devolvement of management initiatives and the subsequent dynamic relationships between trade union activists, their members and their union in Parkville.

THE CASE STUDY: PARKVILLE, A 'FAILING' SCHOOL

The case study, which was undertaken over an eighteen-month period, combines in-depth interviews with participative observation as a teachers' assistant. In all, forty-eight interviews were carried out with the headteacher, deputy headteachers (3), acting head, management, teaching staff⁵, governors, union representatives and a Local Education Authority (LEA) official. The study also draws on documentary evidence from the union, LEA and governors' meetings as well as media coverage by local and national newspapers, television and radio⁶.

Parkville, was an inner-city secondary school, sharing the characteristics of many schools considered as 'failing' and situated at the lower end of the school league tables. For example,

⁵ At the start of the research there were thirty-six teachers in the school, some of whom left during the 'closing' phase and were replaced by long-term supply staff. When the school finally closed there were approximately twenty-four teachers, eighteen of whom were members of the original staff.

GCSE results were consistently well below the national average, pupil turnover was high, the majority of students came from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and more than half from families where English was not the home language. The school buildings were poorly maintained making both working and studying conditions unpleasant and in some instances a matter of health and safety concern. Against the wishes of many parents, most of the staff and some of the governors, the Local Education Authority, with the permission of the Secretary of State for Education, decided to close Parkville and re-open it under the 'Fresh Start'⁷ initiative

Following the announcement of the school's closure, the management and staff were advised that they would individually be offered severance terms. However the NUT, the main representative body in the school, successfully negotiated that any staff who applied for a job (arguably their own job) in the new school would be guaranteed an interview. The headteacher, who had been recruited three years previously to help turn the school around, resigned and a deputy headteacher was appointed acting head to see the school through its final year to closure.

The teachers in the school were vilified both in the press and by the LEA as being partly responsible for the closure of the school. One article in a national Sunday paper suggested that 'militant left-wing teachers have been largely marginalised but in schools such as Parkville, they remain a potent force' and that in the school the teachers practised 'old-style union confrontation'; a local paper suggested that the headteacher's attempts to improve the school were blocked by 'the militant staff, many allied to the Socialist Workers' Party'. Yet, of the thirty-six teachers employed at the start of the research, only two were members of the SWP and only one was overtly visible. One newspaper article went as far as to suggest that the school was being closed down in order to 'get rid of staff whose traditional politics are an embarrassment to Blairite councillors'.

⁶ Document references, newspaper and media references are withheld to ensure anonymity for the school.

⁷ This initiative was introduced by New Labour in their White Paper 'Excellence in Schools', July 1997. Schools under this programme may either be taken over by another 'successful' school in the area or be closed and re-opened with a new name and usually a new headteacher. Change has to be 'more than superficial' in order for the school to improve (telephone conversation with DfEE).

Union density in the school was virtually 100 per cent (although this reduced with the increasing number of supply teachers used through the closing period). The teachers at Parkville had a long history of trade union organisation and during this time of uncertainty and vilification their collectivism and collegiality came to the fore. The teachers demonstrated a willingness to take action when necessary both for the sake of the children and for the sake of their colleagues (for example, they took part in demonstrations outside the Town Hall against the closure). A dominant ideology in the school reflected the early aims of the NUT, where the aim of the union was not only to benefit the teacher but also the working class child 'who was to be given as broad a literary and scientific culture as was thought necessary for the child of the middle class' (Webb 1915). The class and disadvantage of the pupils in Parkville were important motivating factors for many of the teachers, factors which provided some empathy with an SWP analysis of educational change.

The management of the school was not opposed to trade unions; both the original headteacher and the acting head had initially belonged to the NUT and then subsequently the Secondary Head's Association (SHA). However, the research shows how the original headteacher was in constant disagreement with the local union which he believed to be heavily influenced by a 'militant' element, notably one member of the Socialist Worker's Party.

Union structure in the school was complex. The NUT representative appeared to keep a very low profile, being described by the headteacher as the 'titular leader'. It was an SWP member, also the teacher representative on the governing body, who was seen by the headteacher as 'the real mover', voicing the views of teachers in the staff room. In fact, one of the teachers mistakenly thought he was her union representative and he was also quoted as such in the press. Before the school closed he became the NUT representative, a position he had held previously.

CHALLENGING MANAGERIALISM

As noted previously, Fairbrother's (1994; 1996) work on the Civil Service and Thornley's (1998) work on the NHS found that devolvement of managerialism had resulted in more active participation of union members in the workplace. It is apparent that teaching is no different in this respect as LMS has introduced managerialism into schools; Ironside and Seifert have argued that 'schools will become the centre for conflict-laden issues determined by the development of LMS and restricted school budgets' (1995:213).

Fergusson suggests that the changing roles of headteachers is one of the most evident manifestations of managerialism, with the headteacher 'becoming a key actor in an essentially managerialist system' (1994). Prior to the introduction of LMS the LEA was responsible for the financing and staffing of schools, however, this now lies with headteachers. As a deputy head of Parkville explained:

'...before LMS ... it would have been the authority that's doing the dirty work and not the head, but now the head has to do that ... before, as a head, you could make change but you'd push the dirty work over to the authority, or whatever, but now heads can't do that' (deputy head 2)

and it was through 'doing the dirty work' that conflict became ripe in the school.

On appointment, Parkville's headteacher inherited a massive budget deficit, which he was under pressure to reduce. As staffing costs were the largest element of the school's budget he felt that to reduce staff numbers was a viable option:

'so we went through a programme of voluntary redundancies, not without coercion of course, people had to be persuaded to take voluntary redundancy, and we reduced the staff count by nearly four' (headteacher)

thus reinforcing Evetts' argument that a headteacher's work 'is now far removed from the professional activity of educational leadership. Their work now focuses on financial management and on the managerialist activities found most commonly in industrial and commercial organizations' (1996:119).

'Goodwill' became the site of resistance to redundancies with teachers withdrawing support for lunchtime and after-school activities. This was the beginning of the breakdown of relations between the management and staff. One teacher described it thus:

'He (the headteacher) decided that he was on one side, of the river, and the staff were on the other side and he was on the good side and the staff were on the bad side and that he, he wanted control over them and he tried very hard to exert control over them' (teacher 7)

Prior to the decision to close the school Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) was closely monitoring it and emphasis was placed on improving performance. At this time the headteacher instigated 'competency procedures'⁸ for some teachers. This, combined with the redundancies, contributed to a growth in unity and collectivism amongst the staff – as one teacher proclaimed:

'we've all been driven together in defence. By doing what he did (the headteacher) helped to create a much stronger union!' (teacher 10)

Prior to the headteacher's arrival at the school, the collectivism of the teachers had been demonstrated in their ability to resist the implementation of statutory performance appraisal, supporting Healy's (1997b) argument that apparently individual management techniques such as appraisal may be collectivised. A deputy head explained:

'there was resistance, union resistance and staff resistance ... because they saw it linked to pay scales ... but because of the resistance we couldn't take it up ... and it just never happened' (deputy head 1)

It is evident that devolvement of management issues to the local level heightened industrial relations activity within the school. It was due to their collective resistance and striving to maintain their terms and conditions of employment that the teachers of Parkville were 'branded' as being 'militant' by the headteacher, the LEA and the local and national press.

⁸ These are formal procedures introduced by the head teacher to monitor the performance of teachers who are considered to be 'unable to meet the requirements of the post' [Ironsides, 1995:203]; failure to reach the desired standards may ultimately lead to dismissal.

When asked whether she thought the staff in the school was militant, one teacher had this to say:

‘if he (the head) means the staff are angry about the school closing and they don’t want it to, then yes, we are all militants, you know. Do we want decent working conditions? Yes. Are we prepared to fight for them? Yes. Do we want – are we prepared to stand by and see our colleagues victimised and do nothing about it? No. You know, now if those things are militant then we’re all militants’ (teacher 12)

and a governor who openly opposed the closing of the school this:

‘I didn’t feel that I’d suddenly become a militant’ (school governor)

The concept of ‘militant’ and ‘militancy’ becomes a social construction reflecting the pluralist values present internal and external to the school.

LEADERSHIP AND POLITICS AT PARKVILLE

An interesting factor in relation to the discourse surrounding the importance of strong local union leadership (Fosh and Cohen 1990; Fosh 1993; Darlington 1994; Darlington 1998; Darlington 1999; Greene, Black et al. 2000) and of particular significance in this school where the teachers had a collective consciousness, was the passive role of the initial union representative⁹. In this case, leadership in union matters emanated not from the official union representative but from the political activist in the school; he had a highly visible presence and other teachers turned to him to raise issues, as was evident from observed staff meetings and a meeting with an LEA official. On being asked why he had ultimately resumed the role of union representative he commented:

‘there was no, no erm, there was no particular reason other than who had the motivation and the drive and the energy to do it, you know, it needed doing’ (union representative)¹⁰

⁹ It is not known why he had taken the role as he was one of only two teachers who refused to be interviewed.

¹⁰ Henceforth, the term ‘union representative’ will refer to the SWP member unless otherwise stated.

highlighting the importance to him of commitment to workplace activism, as would be expected of him as an active SWP member (Callinicos 1995).

It was also apparent that politics influenced workplace union activity as the union representative brought his political ideology into the school. This, however, was not uncontested by other teachers; confrontation took place regarding the displaying of a SWP poster, partly due to the nature and language of the poster but also because of its political connotations. Nevertheless, the momentum of action within the school was sustained by the SWP activist and was valued, but not uncritically; as one teacher commented:

‘I don’t like the SWP *per se* but you’ve got to *appreciate* some of the energy that some of the people who are active SWP members have’¹¹ (teacher 14)

Another teacher had the following, positive, comment with regard to the perceived ‘militancy’ in the school:

‘[if] you have to fight for a thing and it’s done at the right time and the right place then it *needs* to be there, really. Otherwise teachers here would have been all pushed out by now, you know, and we wouldn’t get double [redundancy] pay’ (teacher)

At Parkville, in the minds of the press, the LEA and some of the senior management the term ‘militant’ became synonymous with the SWP. Reflecting the value loaded nature of the term, SWP members generally are not displeased at the militant association (Callinicos 1995). When asked whether he saw himself as being militant, the union representative replied as follows:

‘I hope so yes! I mean, if, if I wasn’t *perceived* as being active in representing the interests of the members then that would be – we would be *failing* in our roles as union reps and it’s, it’s a label that’s stuck on you, I mean people *interpret* it in a *negative* way when it suits them. But if it wasn’t for the *activists* in the union, individual members would, in *countless* cases, would have got a raw, a rawer deal

¹¹ Interviewees’ own emphasis is indicated by italics.

than they've had over the years when they've had to call on the union to, to represent them or fight for them' (union representative)

He believed that it was his duty as a SWP member to bring his political ideology into the school and to take an active part in union affairs, thus reflecting the Party philosophy, because:

'well, the members of the SWP have a responsibility to play an active part in their trade union' (union representative)

and he hoped that he was able to influence other teachers in this,

'I *hope* that we do have an influence, as a political group, amongst staff. But I haven't a *clue* what the extent of my *personal* influence is, although ... after, what, *eighteen years* of working here I, over the years I would imagine that I *have* influenced people in one way or another and I *hope* that it's in a positive way – certainly from the union point of view it has' (union representative)

Although he also thinks that this influence can be exaggerated:

'when people – and it's usually the authority, or certain people of a political persuasion which is different to that of the SWP – when they say that, what they mean is that ordinary people can't think for themselves and that they are somehow *manipulated* by these activists who are spinning a web of *intrigue* or whatever, you know' (union representative).

Just as oligarchy theorists may be criticised for treating the workers as 'indifferent and apathetic masses' (Michels 1915), so that those who proffer a simplistic 'agitator theory' also forget that workers interpret the motivations and meanings of those who claim to represent them. The teachers' area negotiating secretary (a lay official), another SWP member, felt that the blaming of the closing of the school on the SWP was 'ludicrous', on the other hand:

'you can take it as a compliment if you like *as well* because the SWP make sure we have been in the *forefront* of all the campaigns that we have been involved in

and we are honest about our politics, we're open about our politics' (area negotiating secretary)

and this 'openness' in their political ideology raises an awareness in others. One of the governors commented thus:

'the SWP are a *very strong* group because they tickle everybody's conscience. There's something in there that reacts to, in all of us, to what they say. They can make us all feel guilty' (Governor 1)

It would appear that although they are a relatively small group of political activists (the area negotiating secretary estimated about ten NUT SWP members within the schools in that, quite large, educational authority) the SWP have the power to worry the educationalists in the area. The representative was not offered a job in the new school or in any other school within the LEA, the area negotiating secretary suggests that he:

'symbolises everything that New Labour detests and who the local Labour councillors wanted to get rid of and it is likely that he is going to be the symbolic sacrificial lamb, if you like, at the end of this, this sorry saga' (area negotiating secretary)

and the fact that he hasn't been offered a job is because:

'he's a union activist, he's a revolutionary socialist, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, has been for many years ... and this is why I'm absolutely certain it's political victimisation' (area negotiating secretary)

The Regional Secretary (the full-time official) had this to say about the teacher:

'[he is] a member of the SWP and he's active in his political party, he's very active in the union, he certainly is a militant and he would admit that, he also was one of the most successful teachers in the school...' (Regional Secretary)

and on this basis, the union decided to take his case to an industrial tribunal because, as the Regional Secretary sees it, he 'is being discriminated against on the grounds of union activity'.

The evidence suggests that the SWP member was a strong leader in industrial relations matters arising at Parkville, openly giving voice to the views of other teachers. This is clearly linked to his political ideology and his belief in trade union activism. However, his commitment, the high level of union activity and the teachers' fight against closure, did not stop the school from closing and the teachers being made redundant. (Of those who applied to the new school, four were given jobs; of these two were given jobs other than those they applied for - following union intervention.)

The perception of 'militancy' the SWP member provoked in the school has had severe consequences for him and, perhaps if, as suggested in the press, the school was closed to marginalise 'the militants', for the other teachers and the pupils of Parkville. In his ability to obtain alternative employment, his political ideology was considered of more significance in the selection process than his reported ability as a teacher.

REPRESENTATION AND OLIGARCHY

Although the teachers in Parkville did not express dissatisfaction with their local union representation, this was not the case with the national union's reaction to the closing of the school. One teacher vocalised her frustration at the lack of speed and action:

'... they're too wishy washy for my liking ... there are *real issues* in this school – so why do we have to keep having *ballots* when people's *deadlines* are so *short*. They're too *wishy washy* ... too *scared* to take action. If they're going to do it, do it. Just get off your backside and do something. And I don't think they've really done anything to show support – we can have as *many meetings as we like*, but people in this school want *action* and the union aren't doing anything' (teacher 11)

Clearly, the laws governing industrial action oblige trade unions to ballot members prior to taking strike action and therefore inhibit their actions. However, just over a year before the school closed but six months after the announcement of the closure, one teacher appeared to have greater foresight than the national union with respect to the need to take action to save the jobs of the teachers in Parkville:

'the unions, the way the unions act, always in my view seem to be a little bit *too late*, so we get the compulsory redundancy notices and it has to be *instant* once those are served – “oh, you've got to have an indicative ballot” and “you've got to have this” and “somebody has to talk to so and so”, and by the time that is done the date is up . . . and the union's still doing the indicative ballot, you know! *It's too late!* . . . They should be talking *now* to the LEA about *how* they're going to proceed with staff negotiating. *Now!!* Otherwise I know, it will get to March, they'll all get their redundancy notices and then somebody will go “Oh, oh dear, we'd better have a meeting and then maybe we'll have an indicative ballot in August when you've all got the push!”, know what I mean? All of that is *too slow*' (teacher 7)

thus also indicating a level of bureaucracy within the union. The representative himself, although generally supportive of the national union and recognising the necessity of following procedures, agreed with the teachers in this case:

'I think for the *future* the minute that an authority announces it *isn't* going to re-employ staff in Fresh Start situations then the union should ballot straight away . . . if the union had acted a lot earlier . . . I don't think we would be in the position we are in now with regards to . . . three individuals who still haven't got a job' (union representative)

The NUT members at Parkville, therefore, felt somewhat neglected by the national union. Indicative ballots were finally taken; although the turn-out for two indicative ballots was low (approximately 39 per cent and 43 per cent respectively), these gave overwhelming support to the staff of Parkville. The area negotiating secretary identified two possible reasons for the low turn-out. Firstly as the discourse surrounding the closure of the school had been in both the public and the trade union domain for a long period of time, the issue was becoming stale and members had perhaps begun to see the school's closure as a *fait accompli*; the second, not unconnected, reason was that the national union had acted too late:

'I certainly don't blame *members* for that [low turn-out], I think that, you know, the national union should have moved sooner, as in organising action in defence

of members there, *knowing* full well what was likely to happen...' (area negotiating secretary)

The Regional Secretary, however, did not think that this was the case:

'... the idea is if you'd done it six month's earlier ... you'd have got a yes vote, but I, I don't buy it, I think it would have been a worse vote ... I don't think an earlier ballot would have produced better results, I think it would have produced a worse result ... that's my *strong belief* and that of the executive as well' (Regional Secretary)

The tension between interests of members and national leadership, well documented in the literature (Michels 1915; Martin 1968; Kelly and Heery 1994; McIlroy 2000), is borne out in the case of 'Parkville'. McIlroy (1995) describes how 'unions may develop their own institutional interests. The link between lay officials and the formal union may also be uneasy; although quick to praise the union for their positive actions, the area negotiating secretary nevertheless thought that their motives may be more political:

'I think that the national union is desperate not to upset New Labour ... the national union did not want to get involved in confrontation with New Labour, therefore, whilst it *had* to abide by union policy, or genuflect in the direction of action to support for members, it was very reluctant to pursue with any degree of vigour or urgency ... ' (area negotiating secretary)

Part of the renewal thesis outlined by Fairbrother (2000) emphasised mutual support between levels of union members and leaders. This synergy of support is inevitably problematic and uneven. Whilst the NUT has vigorously challenged a number of government initiatives (see McIlroy 2000), at the same time at the regional level there is a degree of compromise inherent in their response.

This is illustrated by the experiences of one teacher not offered a job in the new school and who felt that she was being pressurised into accepting a short-term job in another school, again for political reasons:

'I felt like I was being manipulated because they wanted to place me before this meeting [between the union and LEA] and I felt like I was in the middle – I was a *pawn*, I really did ... we're getting feedback from the union saying that they want us to be slotted in to jobs. They don't want trouble, they don't want strikes ... it's [the LEA] going to be *scrutinised* by the Labour Government' (teacher 18)

The area negotiating secretary confirmed what the teacher felt:

'there is no doubt whatsoever that he [Regional Secretary] wanted people to take what offers were available to them, so that there would then cease to be a problem for the union to resolve' (area negotiating secretary)

Again, the Regional Secretary did not feel this to be the case:

'I think that she was offered a post which *in my view* was a *sufficiently reasonable* alternative for her, for me to feel that it was basically a relatively *good offer* and so I couldn't *genuinely* turn around and say she hadn't been made an offer – I could fully understand her not accepting it, but I personally feel that it was a good enough offer for me to be able to say, well she was made an offer of alternative employment' (Regional Secretary)

The processes involved in this are highlighted in the regional secretary's comment on whether he had 'pressurised' the teacher:

'sometimes ... you believe that something is in somebody's best interest ... I was perhaps *encouraging* her to take it because I thought it was in her best interest yes, but I wouldn't have said I pressurised her ... I did try to explain to her why I thought this job was in her best interests to take, she wasn't going to get a very good redundancy package ... I thought, and I still believe, it would have become a permanent job. So that's why I mean, maybe I did pressurise her a bit' (Regional Secretary)

The decision of the national union to delay balloting for strike action in an area where the teachers are known to have a strong commitment to solidarity and are willing to take strike action to support colleagues was perceived to be influenced by the wider political spectrum. It was thought that the NUT did not want to be the public sector union to challenge the

New Labour government or cause problems for the local authority. Whilst this may or may not be the case, the relationship between a labour government and trade unions is always uneasy and strategies and actions open to interpretation. However as McIlroy (2000) argues, the NUT is now one of the public sector unions making strong challenges to New Labour.

Although the NUT is against compulsory redundancy and two teachers in Parkville were made redundant, the Regional Secretary did not see this as a failure from the union's point of view:

'I don't see it as a failure for the union in, in the context of nearly all the teachers being in membership, some forty-odd teachers, most of whom were re-deployed or took voluntary packages and were *relatively* - I don't know whether they were relatively satisfied, but I mean in terms of unions – if you put it into the context of something else, I mean a factory closing and you had fifty members in there, if ultimately only two were made compulsorily redundant you wouldn't see that as a failure. So I don't see it as a failure' (Regional Secretary)

In a quantitative analysis of the situation the union could be perceived to have been successful in its strategy, but qualitatively, many of the agreements and compromises were at the cost of individual members. The Regional Secretary claimed other successes had been achieved on behalf of the teachers, for example:

'we took the health and safety issues and some improvements were made'
(Regional Secretary)

but the teachers had been working (and the pupils studying) in appalling conditions for years; he did acknowledge that the attitude of the LEA during the closure period was more conducive to the union's claims:

'of course *they knew* that they were going to have to make improvements, they couldn't possibly open the new school in the state that it was in. So in a sense, one was knocking for the first time on a more open door. Once the decision

had been made to close it then they were willing to start to address some of the problems ... so, we started to get some improvements to the building' (Regional Secretary)

Therefore, the question has to be asked whether this was a victory for the union and also why this was not achieved sooner? The Regional Secretary also felt that the union had:

'also got a pretty *reasonable* redundancy package agreed ... and quite a *significant* number of teachers accepted the voluntary redundancy because of it' (Regional Secretary)

To what extent did the union influence this LEA concession? He again acknowledged that:

'the council was keen to, I think, have as many volunteers for redundancy as possible, to reduce the level of potential militancy' (Regional Secretary)

but as he explained, the package was not without a cost, as the teachers

'agreed to stay on until the end, that was the deal, you stayed on until the end, saw the school through and then you would get an enhanced redundancy package' (Regional Secretary)

On this occasion the union were in a strong bargaining position, the LEA needed the staff to keep the school running; the acting head even suggested that the LEA would have 'gone higher' with the redundancy payments to keep the teachers there. On this basis, the 'achievements' of the union appear to be somewhat limited. However, it was the indirect effect of the known preparedness to take industrial action, of the reputation for militancy, that influenced the decisions and the final outcome. A more acquiescent group of teachers may have fared even worse.

CONCLUSIONS

The case study of Parkville supports Fairbrother (1994; 1996) and Thornley's (1998) findings on the relationship between increased managerialism and increased industrial relations activity in the workplace. Devolved management initiatives drew the headteacher and staff into conflict and negotiation that would previously have happened outside the school. This sharpened the awareness of power relations and led to some contestation over scarce

resources, thus building on the solidaristic collectivism already evident in the school and in teaching.

What is clear is that notions of trade union renewal and resilience have to be seen in the context of the specific conditions of the workplace. In Parkville, the conditions were not conducive to renewal in a *numerical* sense. However, in terms of awareness of the role and importance of workplace industrial relations, it could be argued that the conditions the teachers faced enhanced a sense of collectivism, which will become part of their frame of reference through which they will interpret future workplace relations. Workers and union members bring with them their experiences and politics into the workplace; the experiences of Parkville teachers will undoubtedly influence their future interpretation of management actions and union response and their preparedness to take action.

The case study indicates that regardless of political affiliation, union 'renewal' or 'resilience' is reliant on trade union activists who give voice to union members and motivate them to act collectively. This is not to suggest that union members are passive actors who simply take on board what union leaders dictate. Unions leaders reflect members views but also interpret events and help shape views, using terms from the Donovan Commission (Donovan 1968), but refuting their analysis, they are both a 'lubricant and irritant'.

The role of political factions is important since activists will bring their own ideological values into the workplace and interpret events accordingly. Further, in the case of the SWP, part of these values is to take an active part in workplace industrial relations and therefore by design, such activists will take on leadership roles, formally or informally, in their workplace unions. In the NUT, the relatively strong presence across the union of such activists will continually fuel their commitment and involvement. This provides further evidence to Darlington (1994; 1998; 1999), Fosh and Cohen (1990) and Fosh's (1993) findings regarding the importance of the role of local leadership in trade unions and to Darlington (1998:69, 1999:1) and Gall's (1998a) view that union activism can be attributed to the influence of socialist politics.

However, the case shows how threats of militancy are exaggerated and used by management in order to influence those within the school and in the outside political arena. Indeed there may be a reinforcing of these perceptions through the inter-relationship of these different managerial levels. The SWP members took an active part in the workplace unionism. Nevertheless, it is the case that the influence of political activists was greater than their small numbers would suggest. Their 'success' in the conditions of Parkville is difficult to assess, but it was the case that voice was given to members when they were in an insecure and vulnerable position and that activists' influence mediated some, although not all, of the worst effects of the closure.

Whilst this case has provided a focus on the workplace activities of members of left wing political activists, it is important to recognise that the issues with which they were engaged were mainstream industrial relations activities associated with the conventional struggle for control that characterises all workplace industrial relations activity. From this perspective, it becomes clear that it was not just the 'SWP factor' that led to the labelling of the teachers in this school as 'militant', it was their preparedness to resist.

Ultimately, members and activists were of course powerless to prevent the closure of the school. What is rarely documented is the personal costs of political activism; thus, the managerial perception of activists as damaging to the system leads to the conclusion that they must be taken out of the system. The extent to which union activists are likely to be made scapegoats is well documented in industrial relations history; this case was no exception.

The relationship between workplace activists and the national union has been an important aspect of the case study and of the renewal thesis. Clearly it is not possible to envisage the outcome for the Parkville teachers had the union taken earlier action with respect to strike ballots. Nevertheless, it is evident that the teachers and their local representatives felt that they had not received the level of support they needed. If, as was suggested by the area negotiating secretary, the national union were putting political objectives before those of their members then they failed not only these teachers but the strive for union renewal as a

whole in that the mutual support identified by Fairbrother (2000) was missing. Thus, despite their collective solidarity in the school the teachers were not able to combat the hard-line management strategies of the LEA and the help that they needed from the national union was not sufficiently forthcoming. However, this interpretation is only a partial account.

Importantly, however, the uneven relationship between trade unions and their members (see McIlroy 2000) is evident in this case. After the closure of the school, the authority agreed to settle the unfair dismissal case of the union representative and, paradoxically, despite the perceived militant role in Parkville, he is now working in the new school. Once again two SWP members are part of the fresh start school. Ultimately, mutual support of members by union is also part of the account.

There is no claim to generalise from the experience of Parkville. Parkville is a school facing the most extreme effects of government reform and at the same time it has its own workplace industrial relations culture and specific set of conditions. The value lies in the analysis of the processes and meanings of the key actors at the micro level and their reaction to macro and micro events. Case studies in other schools would not necessarily replicate the events at Parkville; however, given our knowledge of teachers' experience of change, it is likely that many of the issues and uneven patterns which emerged at Parkville would be of relevance elsewhere.

The case study has demonstrated the importance of activism enabling the trade union role of representation to be fulfilled and demonstrates the complexity of any renewal process, as well as the potential costs of political activity. The dynamic nature of workplace industrial relations indicates the constant interrelationship between the renewal process with both resilience and retreat. Nevertheless, the case suggests that where unionised teachers face hostile conditions, a collectivist orientation is likely to emerge, although this orientation may also reflect a critical appraisal of the formal union organisation.

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Note

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