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**The historical importance of multi-employer,
national pay bargaining to the UK general printing sector.**

Jim Telford

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show how the historical development of multi-employer national pay bargaining has shaped contemporary patterns of pay regulation in general print. The resilience of national pay bargaining is set against the backcloth of a diminishing reliance on this method of industrial relations in the private sector of the UK economy. Through placing national pay bargaining within an historical context, the paper shows how trends have developed over time. In particular it provides insight into shifting bargaining priorities and tactics adopted by employers and trade unions over a range of issues including flexibility, productivity and efficiency, and training.

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The historical importance of multi-employer, national pay bargaining to the UK general printing sector.

Introduction

Printed on the dust cover of Child's (1967) study of industrial relations in the UK printing industry are the words:

In printing, more than most other industries, to understand the present problems requires a knowledge of the past. Tradition and precedent always play a strong part in craft union ideology, and the printers' unions have become a byword for their close control of the use of labour.

This passage reflects the sentiments of this paper, which aims to show how the historical development of multi-employer national bargaining has shaped contemporary patterns of joint regulation in the general print sector. Such an analysis helps explain why the changing content of bargaining issues has become a central tenet to the continuity of the agreement. The significance of this study lies in the enduring commitment to national, multi-employer bargaining in the general print sector of the printing industry as a means for resolving industrial relations issues in that sector. It places the phenomenon of national bargaining within the wider context of a diminishing reliance of this method of industrial relations in the manufacturing sector of the UK economy, particularly in the face of an adverse economic and political climate that has prevailed throughout the 1980s – 1990s. The dynamic characteristic of the agreement is illustrated through a commentary on the infrequent disputes that have interrupted the fluency of the agreement and how a dispute in the early 1990s brought to prominence the issues of flexibility and training to the national agreement.

The historical focus of this paper will go some way to explaining the contemporary structure and dynamics of the sector and the importance of multi-employer bargaining to key actors in general print. Central to this are the issues that become the focus of bargaining; and how concessions can help, on the one hand, to smooth the path for change for employers, while on the other, help maintain some control in the workplace for union members affected by the

changes. The paper begins by explaining the nature, size and structure of the general print sector, introduces the key actors in national bargaining and assesses the historical development of joint regulation during the post-war period. Against this historical backdrop, the skirmishing over the content and survival of joint regulation are considered from 1979.

The nature, size and structure of the General Printing Sector

The printing industry today continues to be a major contributor to the UK economy. A Keynote publication reports that the “UK printing industry comes within the larger category of printing and publishing” and that this category is the UK’s fifth largest industry with a total turnover in 1999 of £24.68bn, of which printing accounted for £12.08bn (2000: p 5). The UK printing industry comprises of a newspaper sector and a general printing sector that is a diverse and complex sector, and which forms the focus of this paper. Rainnie concurs that general print “is a diverse and far from homogenous sector” citing Delafons’ observation that the industry “is composed of such a conglomeration of producing units, varying so much in size, in kinds of output, in methods and processes, in efficiency and quality, in structure, in organisation, in ownership and grouping, as to make almost any generalisation no more than narrowly applicable at best” (1989: p 100)¹ David Ross, Economic Advisor to the BPIF, claims that, despite printings’ prominent position in the UK economy, it is one of the least documented. This, he claims, is partly because it has never been seen as a glamorous industry and partly because of its fragmented nature. And yet, Ross claims, printing is an industry which “serves all sectors of the economy including public authorities, financial services, publishers, distributive services and the manufacturing industry” and that “there is virtually no business that does not need a printer” (quoted in Keynote, 2000: p 2). A BPIF publication argues that the “structure of the UK printing industry reflects the diversity of its products and fragmented nature of its market with less than 20 printing companies employing more than 500 people and only around 550 employing between 50 and 499 people. These companies tend to specialise in a narrow range of products in national and international markets. There is a vast army of small firms, more than 12,000, which usually are general printers catering for a local market” (1999, Infofile)

¹ The diversity of the sector is reflected in the wide range of printed products, including magazine and periodical production; advertising literature; books, brochures, children’s books and leaflets; packaging; business cards

A Labour Market Survey report indicates that for printing and service activities related to printing there were 197,700 employed in this sector at December 1999 of whom 134,300 were full-time male employees; 3,800 were part-time male employees; 51,000 were full-time female employees; and 8,600 were part-time female employees. Both the BPIF and Printing 2000 claim that 170,000 of these workers are employed in the general print sector. These statistics demonstrate that the printing industry is still dominated by male full-time employment, a phenomenon that has changed little over its history despite the technological changes that have been introduced to the industry. Printing 2000 notes that historically women in the industry were usually found in the low grade jobs in the finishing departments of firms, but claims that “Today women are rightly climbing to every level of printing management” and further claims that “Modern computerised machinery represents no barrier to female skills and women are finding their place in sophisticated production roles” (p 37).

Unfortunately, these claims are not borne out by the statistics on employment in the general printing industry. The BPIF figures for Modern Apprenticeship and Trainee intake into the industry record that only 7.5% of recruits since 1995 were female (source: BPIF Training, London), a figure that is mirrored in the intake figures for print related training at West Herts College (source: West Herts College). There is little support from the evidence of a local survey undertaken in printing firms located the Herts and Essex area (see Healy et al, 2001: p 6). This survey produced scant evidence of women employed in the skilled areas of production and found that their employment was generally confined to the finishing departments and in administration. Such findings are in line with the research undertaken by Webster who claims the SPRU Women and Technology Studies survey (1982) confirmed that women “in printing and publishing were concentrated in labour intensive office and unskilled production operations” (1996: p 71).

The parties to national bargaining.

A distinguishing feature of industrial relations in the general printing sector is the role played by both the trade union and the employers’ association in maintaining a national agreement that covers an array of issues including minimum pay for grade rates, the length of the working week, overtime and shift premia, holidays and holiday pay, sick pay, a disputes and

and stationery; programs and tickets; printed labels; business forms; security printing; diaries and calendars; and

grievance procedure and training for the sector. This is one of the last remaining examples of multi-employer collective bargaining that exists in the private, manufacturing sector and the agreement and is reviewed annually by the Graphical Paper and Media Union (GPMU), representing workers interests, and the British Printing Industries Federation (BPIF), representing the employers.

The influential WIRS/WERS survey series have depicted the move away from multi-employer pay bargaining in the UK economy (see Culley et al, 1999: pp 187-188). However, despite this growing trend, the BPIF continues to be a major participant in industrial relations in the general printing sector. The BPIF is a national organization representing companies in printing, typesetting, plate-making and bookbinding. The member companies control the management of the organization and, while industrial relations is seen to be their primary role, the federation also acts in the capacity of a commercial trade association². The history of employer federation in general printing reveals a resilient pattern of tradition within the industry. Howe traces the origins of the Federation of Master Printers and Allied Trades of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (FMP) back to its inception in 1901 and records that the then federations' function was to co-ordinate the activities of the many local organizations that were then in existence (1950: pp 1-5). The federation, later to become known as the British Federation of Master Printers (BFMP), changed its name again in 1974 to the BPIF, a move that Gennard claims was designed to reflect the emphasis of the organization away from a master-servant relationship to the more politically acceptable management-employee status (1990: p 16).

Until 1980 the BPIF and the Newspaper Society (NS) negotiated jointly with the print unions in a multi-employer forum for the industry³. A dispute over the introduction of the thirty-

postcards and greetings cards.

² For a commentary on the dual role of Employers' Associations see Sisson (1983); and Salamon (1998)

³ Traditionally, the craft unions were recognised as being able to wield a high degree of unilateral power over employers. Hobsbawm argues "the whole point of the classical craft union was to keep the trade, and entry to the trade, restricted – quite apart from the actuarial arguments for excluding those less healthy or qualified workers who would merely drain the union funds while weakening bargaining strength in other ways (1964: p 323). Clegg et al noted that, early in the 19th century, "printers had developed their methods of control beyond the capacity of most other crafts" and had, via the chapel organisation, "mobilized shop solidarity" (1964: p 10). Howe traces the early beginnings of multi-employer bargaining in the industry and records that in a response to the disparate claims for advances in terms and conditions from the individual print unions it was agreed in 1920 that a conference should take place between the Employer's Federation and a union delegation representing all

seven and a half hour week in 1980 had led to the temporary ending of the agreements. Gennard (in his history of the National Graphical Association (NGA)) records that the “BPIF’s attempt to lock out the NGA was a fiasco”. The BPIF member companies could not match the solidarity shown by union members and “by the end of 1980 the vast majority of NGA members, who worked under the BPIF agreement, were covered by interim deals which met the union’s claim” (1990: p 412). The NS had not shown the same disunity. Gennard argues that, “unlike the BPIF, the Newspaper society was not in disarray”. He claims that their lock-out had been more effective and that they had been able to continue production with the aid of non-union personnel. This ability was “a lesson that was not forgotten by NS members when they set about implementing new technology in the mid-1980s” (1990: p 415). After the 1980 dispute the NS carried out separate negotiations with the unions, but ultimately ended their national agreement with the NUJ in 1987 (Smith and Morton, 1990: p 107) and with NGA/SOGAT in 1991 (Smith and Morton, 1993: p 107).

The lead given by the NS in adopting policies of union exclusion culminating in the ending of collective agreements has not been followed in the general printing sector. Despite the strain that the BPIF agreement has been under in recent times both sides have persevered to maintain the agreement. This is possibly a reflection of the differences in the dynamism of the two sectors. The concentration of ownership in the newspaper sector and the homogenous character of the product are in clear contrast to the general print sector that is dominated by small employer units producing a diverse range of products. These differences made for differing approaches in dealing with ‘the union issue’. The large groups in newspaper production had the ability to buy out the terms and conditions of skilled union members, by way of enhanced redundancy payments, and to replace them with a lower paid alternative workforce (see Smith and Morton, 1990: pp 114-115). Conversely, in the general trade, with its pervasiveness of small employers and diverse product base, the trend has been more towards the marginalisation of union influence through the national agreement. This would reflect the view of Smith and Morton that, outside of newspapers, “union exclusion would remain the exception” (1990: p 120).

unions under the banner of the Printing and Kindred Trades Federation (P&KTF). While this forum was itself fraught with difficulties it non-the-less set the pattern for future agreements (p 76).

In the period up to 1982 there had been a polarization of workers into two unions, divided on a craft/non-craft basis. Ostensibly, the NGA (1982) represented craft workers in the industry while the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT 1982) represented the semi-skilled and un-skilled workers, although there was some blurring around the edges. The NGA was a predominately male dominated union while SOGAT catered for a higher proportion of women members, mostly employed in bench and finishing work in binderies and among clerical grades.

The technological changes that were rapidly being introduced into the industry were breaking down what had previously been clear demarcation lines in the production areas and as a consequence was bringing members into conflict with each other. A graphic description of this scenario is presented by Darlington in his case study of a Merseyside print factory, who, in summarizing the position, argues:

the isolation of any action to the particular section of an individual chapel merely had the effect of reinforcing departmental and chapel sectionalism, and again threw away the opportunity of forging shop-floor links and building up a unified approach towards management. Whilst the lack of such a joint stance...may not have appeared to have seriously hampered the power of union organization during the 1970s there is no doubt it underlay the erosion of strength of the chapels during the 1980s.

(1994: p 279)

There had been a clarion call from the top tables of both union conferences for an amalgamation between SOGAT and the NGA throughout the 1980s. It was stressed that only through uniting would the employers be unable to set one union against the other. Gennard and Bain report that the SOGAT 1984 Biennial Delegate Conference “accepted that with the current warfare between the two unions there was an urgent need for them to amalgamate speedily into one union and that such action should take place as a matter of urgency”. The authors claim that there was recognition of the fact “The longer SOGAT and the NGA were apart, the greater the opportunity for inter-union conflict as the implementation of new technology increased the overlapping interests of the two unions” (1995: p 195). Consequently, in 1991 the NGA and SOGAT put their differences behind them and

amalgamated to form one union for the industry, the GPM). This amalgamation, that was to be the last in a long line of printing unions that had come together over the years, was not necessarily “born out of a love of each other” but rather, because a failure to amalgamate “would not resolve the inter-union disputes between SOGAT and the NGA. It was only through coming together to form one union that such problems could be permanently resolved” (Gennard and Bain 1995: p 238).

This, however, was not to be a speedy amalgamation. The General Secretary’s address to the 1990 NGA Biennial Delegate refers to the six years of long, hard and difficult negotiations that had preceded this conference and that the recommendation to support amalgamation had not been arrived at lightly. The General Secretary warned delegates that failure to deliver the amalgamation would mean “the ability to do what we exist for – protect our members’ employment and enhance their wages and conditions – will inevitably commence a sharp and unstoppable decline”. He reminded delegates of the perilous position that the union had found itself in the newspaper sector as a result of inter-union haggling and the subsequent loss of union influence and that unless the union presented a united front “it would be inevitable that, with the advance of technology, more anti-union legislation and increased inter-union strife, our influence over the general printing industry, where the main bulk of our membership is employed, will likewise decline” (1990: p 75). Today the amalgamated union presents a united front to the employer on the aspirations of their membership. This approach is at its most visible in the multi-employer forum that negotiates the terms of the national agreement that sets the benchmark for the industry. Newsome argues that one reason for this position is the traditionally high degree of employer and employee organisation and that “these prevailing structures of collective workplace regulation, most notably through national collective agreements, is in part testimony to these strong levels of workplace organisation” (2000: p 507).

Industrial relations in the general print sector – ‘the dark days of the past’.

There is an imagery of industrial relations in the general printing industry that portrays a battle that is constantly taking place over control of the workplace. Francis presents a recent example of this type of perception in her leader column in *Printweek* (17th November 2000), where she postulates that the GPMU is required to modernize its approach ‘in an industry with a long history of poor industrial relations’ where many ‘managers are of an age group who remember all too well the dark days of the past’. She goes on to argue that the GPMU needs to ‘adjust its mindset to the present and future realities of today’s industry’ (p 20). These comments were immediately refuted by the GPMU General Secretary, Tony Dubbins, who retorted that such remarks were ‘utter rubbish’ and enquired as to the source of her knowledge ‘as all of our records, including government records, suggest that this has not been the case for many years’. Dubbins goes on to express his point of view that the GPMU is willing and able to work in partnership with progressive employers and that this

Is the way forward for our industry, and the GPMU is, as always, willing to play its part in ensuring the industry, companies and GPMU members, have a positive outlook for the future and work towards the goals of profitability, efficiency and job security, while at the same time safeguarding our members’ terms and conditions in a sensible and constructive way

(*Printweek*, 8th December, 2000: p 19).

This type of exchange is indicative of the perception of a hostile relationship that exists between management and union in the typical printing establishment, and yet the scant evidence that is available on this matter does not appear to support this position. The only recorded all out strike across the printing sector took place in 1959⁴. Roe remarks on the uniqueness of this strike situation across the sector, arguing that, in a dispute where “on 20 June [1959] 120,000 printing workers ceased work; 4000 printers and 1000 newspaper offices were affected. The strike was to last six weeks and *a large part of the union membership engaged in strike action for the first time*” (1999, p 164: my emphasis). Gennard, in his account of the dispute, sums up the reactions of both sides declaring:

⁴ Detailed accounts of this dispute can be found in Child (1967), Gennard (1990) and Gennard and Bain (1995)

The 1959 strike had been a traumatic experience for both sides. There was a feeling that the situation should not be allowed to arise again. Many on both sides thought, in retrospect, that the dispute had been a self inflicted wound since in the final analysis both side had to settle their differences round the table...There had been little effort to close the gap between the two sides and tempers at times were high. Both the unions and employers realized that, now the dispute was over, they must continue to live together and there was little purpose in laying the blame for what had gone before. A fresh start was needed.

(1990, pp 385-386)

Gennard turns his attention to the issue that, between 1968-1989, the NGA were involved in a series of disputes over the introduction of new technology into the industry but makes the distinction that “the bulk of these disputes were in the newspaper field and some of them, particularly the Messenger and Wapping disputes, were the focus of heavy media attention” (1990: p 468)⁵. It is therefore important, in the first instance, to understand the structure of the printing sector, of which the general printing trade forms a part. Gennard (in his history of the NGA) argues that the media attention attributed to the newspaper unrest “created the impression in the minds of the general public that the NGA is predominately a newspaper union”, but provides statistics to show that this was far from true and that in fact only 8% of the total membership of the NGA was employed in newspaper production (ibid). Elgar and Simpson reiterate this distinction arguing their “research on the trade union side confirmed that the newspaper and general printing sectors were seen to be quite distinct and that management – and trade union – approaches in the two sectors were markedly different”. The writers go on to highlight the extent of change that the industry has undergone between the 1970s and the 1990s and how, in contrast to the newspaper sector, “considerable change had been achieved in printing without major confrontations with the unions” (1994: p 11).

⁵ For an account of the significance of the Wapping dispute to the print unions see P. Bain in *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* (1998: pp 73-105). He argues, “The dispute’s effects were also acutely felt by SOGAT and the NGA. The exodus of national newspapers from Fleet Street quickened and the workforce fell from 30,000 to 15,000 between 1985 and 1990...It is difficult to exaggerate the dispute’s significance for the unions, but it also showed the employer’s iron determination.”. Bain also makes the point that “The need for a single print union was also underlined by the events, and renewed SOGAT-NGA talks led to the formation of the GPMU in 1991” (p 101).

Therefore it would appear that a distinction must be drawn between industrial relations in the newspaper and general print sectors.

Not only is there a distinction in the approach to industrial relations between the newspaper and general printing sectors, one can also detect a discernable difference in how industrial relations is managed in general printing compared to trends in private sector manufacturing. Set within the context of the prominence of a national agreement for the industry it could be argued that the preferred method of dealing with industrial relations in general print flies in the face of convention. According to Millward et al, multi-employer bargaining in the manufacturing sector became almost a rarity, and had all but disappeared in private services (2000: p 221). This demise in multi-employer bargaining has coincided with the adverse climate, both economic and political, that has prevailed and impinged upon industrial relations during the 1980s -1990s.

The Conservatives came to power in 1979 claiming that, with unemployment standing at one million, 'Britain wasn't working' under a labour administration and put the blame full square on the overbearing power of the trade unions. Hutton records the incoming Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher's disdain of the unions including their association with collective bargaining, corporatism and Keynesian economics. Hutton claims that the Conservatives had adopted an initiative that embraced the *laissez-faire* philosophy of the New Right and that "This 'monetarist' philosophy neatly dovetailed with the long-standing prejudices of the Conservative right, because it presented a heaven-sent justification for the crusade against all collectivism" (1996, p 69). The author argues that, in her quest to change the existing state of affairs, Mrs. Thatcher

was aided not only by her visceral conviction that British corporatism had had its day and that trade unions were malevolent but also by the revival and representation of classical economics' description of how a capitalist economy should be managed. Her own prejudices were the spur; popular disaffection with the trade unions gave her a political base; and New Right economics provided the compass for a ruthless campaign against trade union power which, fifteen years later, has transformed the British labour market

(1996: p 89)

This transformation saw unemployment rise to unprecedented post war highs. Edwards et al record that, while unemployment rose in all OECD countries, “What marked Britain out was a particularly rapid increase between 1979 and 1983” a situation which saw British unemployment peak at 3.2 million workers by 1986. The authors go on to highlight the boom bust experience of the UK economy over the 1980s-1990s and the ensuing sense of job insecurity for many workers (1995: p 8). Edwards et al argue the “divisions between those in good jobs and those in bad jobs or with no jobs at all have widened” (1995: p 2). Accompanying this transformation was the issue of trade union de-recognition by employers. Millward et al reveal that “Recognition in the private sector fell progressively from 50 per cent in 1980 to 25 per cent in 1998” (2000: p 97). Within these statistics there is evidence of large scale de-recognition in the national and provincial newspaper and the publishing sectors (see Claydon 1989, and Smith and Morton 1993) and yet this is a scenario that was not replicated by employers in the general print sector. The National Agreement has survived this economic and political turmoil and is still setting the benchmark for the industry today.

The resilience of national bargaining in the general print sector may well be a reflection of the structural composition of the industry. The findings of an 1988 ACAS report supports the argument that “industries which have a highly competitive market, which are composed of a large number of small companies each with a small market share, which are labour intensive or which are geographically concentrated will, other things being equal, tend to have multi-employer bargaining”(p 33). To a great extent the general print sector falls into this category. Rainnie reminds us that “printers tend to operate in a confined sphere” and that “a marked feature of the industry is its large numbers of small family firms” (1989: p 100). It is against this background that the advantages of a national agreement in the sector can be seen. The ACAS criteria of multi-employer bargaining creating a degree of wage stability within a “highly competitive product market, where “each company’s ability to pass on wage increases through price increases is limited” (1988: p 25), fits well. ACAS also make the point that small companies prefer this arrangement “because they usually lack the resources to obtain information on pay in comparable firms and to design their own pay structures” (p 26). Further, the national agreement brings to federated employers the operation of a disputes procedure. In 1983, Sisson claimed that “the handling of disputes continues to be highly valued by the member-firms” and goes on to claim that “the industries in which the largest proportion of member-firms reported an increase in the use of procedure are paper and

printing” (1983: p 128). More recently, Arrowsmith et al claim “The national framework was valued by most small firms firstly to save themselves the trouble of bargaining, and secondly because the annual pay increase was a cash award linked to national scales which were normally well below actual rates” (2000: p 21).

The question arises as to whom the ‘BPIF’ agreement impacts upon? There are many companies who are not in membership of the BPIF. Many of the larger organizations have followed the trend of withdrawing from multi-employer bargaining and prefer to deal with their own industrial relations in-house. This has certainly been the case at St. Ives and the British Printing Corporation (BPC) before their amalgamation with Watmoughs to form Polestar. However, the GPMU would argue that none of these companies have agreements at local level that are inferior to BPIF terms and conditions.

The union’s executive council report for the 1997 conference makes the point that “BPC is not a member of the BPIF but in many instances their Agreements run parallel with the terms and conditions of the BPIF” (1997: p 10). In 1999 the executive report noted the St.Ives Group had implemented BPIF wage awards over many years, though not a member (1999: p 9). Watmoughs, prior to their amalgamation with BPC to form Polestar, were not a federated company, but followed the provisions of the agreement at their sites. It is also the case that there are a large number of small companies not in BPIF membership who follow the agreement and where their employees are balloted on the negotiated terms because their company are considered to be working under the umbrella of the agreement. This scenario of maintaining market comparability for terms and conditions of employment is a situation referred to by Arrowsmith and Sisson who make the case that even where multi-employer bargaining has ceased to exist, as in engineering, it does not appear to follow that the level of settlement at local level is much different to comparable competitors and they detect an inclination for employers in a sector to “continue to move like ships in a convoy” where there are “broad similarities of practice” (1999: p 63).

The resilience of the national agreement since 1979

Despite the adverse prevailing economic and political climate and, in the aftermath of the dispute that took place in 1980 over the reduction in the working week, and the subsequent resurrection of the national agreement in 1981, the ‘BPIF’ agreement provided a relatively undisturbed formula for the terms and conditions of employment in the general printing

sector over the next ten years. This period saw rises in pay and longer holidays for workers. Gennard and Bain record that over the period 1981-1991, the minimum earnings guarantee in the provinces had risen by 101% and by 100% in London (1995: p 474). The continuation of the agreement was not without pain for the unions. The NGA “accepted full flexibility of labour in the origination and machine departments and arrangements to enable full cooperation at national, branch and local level in changes necessary to achieve increased output and lower unit costs through the most effective use of people, material and machines” (Gennard, 1990: p 417). For their part, SOGAT “made concessions in the deployment of their members designed to improve efficiency and productivity”. They also accepted “the ending of demarcation lines between warehouse, bookbinding, print finishing, stationery, carton converting and printing departments” (Gennard and Bain, 1995: pp 475-476). From a management point of view, Bennington, at a BPIF conference, argued “the national agreements since 1980 have achieved acceptable agreements for the industry and have made progress on productivity and efficiency” (1993: p4).

The signs of strain on the agreement began to appear after 1991. 1992 saw the agreement only narrowly carried by the membership of the newly formed GPMU. The GPMU figures for the ballot show 26,532 in favour with 21,715 against, a majority of only 4,817. The main problems to emerge in the implementation of this agreement were that the new money increase was to be introduced in two stages in April and August, as opposed to the established custom of being paid in April, and that many companies were indicating that they were not in a position to pay anything, despite the settlement. The GPMU responded to the threat of non-payment by circulating its membership employed in ‘BPIF’ companies arguing that the low monetary element of the settlement reflected the ‘current economic circumstances of the industry and should therefore enable even the smallest companies to pay’ (circular 105/92). In the light of this and the narrow majority of the ballot in favour, the union recommended taking ballots for industrial action in companies who indicated that they were not prepared to meet the increase. To this end the union issued sample ballot papers for limited industrial action, short of a strike, and for strike action, to its branches. Examples of companies yielding to this ploy were to be found at the Martins Group, Garnet Dickson, Hardy Business Forms and W.C. Cowells (see Telford, 1995: p 31).

It was against the troubled background of the 1992 settlement that the BPIF undertook to review their industrial relations policy. A Review document (IR93/01) setting out the federation's 'Industrial Relations Strategic Objectives' for the next five years supported the retention of a national agreement, recommending an annual review, but brought into play the issue of a company's ability to pay any agreed increase in pay. Other objectives were laid down in a BPIF press statement (21/1/93) which argued that "Widening differentials in pay between skilled and unskilled employees, making shift and overtime working more cost effective, and formulating a new job grading structure based on the application of skills are identified as our prime goals" (p 1). For their part, the GPMU were formulating their claim for the 1993/1994 period. The adopted approach was a departure from the normal practice of presenting a 'shopping list' of items, some of which could be offset against any concessions by the BPIF. In this pay round the GPMU settled on three items, a sixth week of holiday, a substantial wage increase and pro-rata terms and conditions for part-time and casual workers in the industry. A press statement laying out the details of the claim, along with evidence purported to support the viability of their claim, was issued just prior to the initial meeting of the respective negotiating panels in February 1993. The GPMU made it clear that they expected the BPIF to deliver on all three counts.

Talks between the parties eventually broke down with the GPMU then adopting an aggressive approach by taking their claim to individual employers in an attempt to reach a house agreement. The claim from the GPMU to individual companies was for a class 1 increase of £8.03 per week, £7.47 for class 2 and £7.12 for class 3; a minimum earnings guarantee of £162.80; along with the provision of an extra days holiday in 1994; and an agreement on terms and conditions for part-time and temporary workers. The union targeted groups of companies where ballots for industrial action were to be held in support of the claim. Targeted companies were also to include non-federated companies such as the St. Ives Group, a move intended to stop federated companies resigning their membership. In response, the BPIF advised their members that talks had broken down and they were now free "to make their own arrangements as to what (if any) award to make to their employees" (IRS, 331: p 6). They issued a booklet to members, 'After national bargaining – guidance notes to member companies', and provided support, advice and negotiating assistance from their regional offices to member companies. The breakthrough for the GPMU came with a settlement at the Lawson Marden Group, a major player in the BPIF, where an agreement

was reached which saw a new money increase of £6.50 for class 1 with proportionate increases for class 2 and class 3 workers, an extra days holiday from 1994, and pro-rata terms for part-time and temporary workers. This agreement set the benchmark for the GPMU campaign and chapels were urged to push for this level of settlement.

The GPMU claimed great success in this campaign. They issued a series of newsletters listing the companies who had signed an agreement that matched the Lawson Marsden deal and also released the profit margins and the salaries of directors of companies who were refusing to reach a settlement. By the summer of 1993 the GPMU were claiming an 85% success rate for their members covered by the 'BPIF' agreement. In his review of the dispute Gall concurs that the campaign was to a great extent a success for the GPMU. In his assessment of the campaign he accepts that "the GPMU does appear to have won the propaganda war and the battle on the ground although not necessarily hands down" (1994:p 18). Gall suggests that employers took the threat of industrial action seriously, to the extent that:

Given the success of the campaign and the far fewer cases of industrial action than ballots, it is fairly clear that many employers were convinced that the union had the membership support to conduct effective industrial action.

(1994: p 20)

Any hopes that the GPMU leadership had of reaching an agreement for 1993/1994 with the BPIF were scotched by the very success of the campaign. It would have been impractical to have resumed negotiations that might have reached a settlement that fell short of the increase that had been achieved in so many of the companies that had conceded to pressure.

As a result of the 1993 dispute the whole future of national pay bargaining in the general print sector was called into question. The BPIF launched yet another consultation exercise with its members in an attempt to discover if national pay bargaining was what they really wanted for the industry. IRS reported on the fears that were held for the long term prospects of national bargaining in the industry. The paper provides details of the consultation exercise, reporting that the survey had been conducted amidst a climate of doubt that had been cast by a review group "comprised of mainly chief executives of BPIF companies" who had come to

the conclusion that “It is unlikely that BPIF industrial relations objectives can be delivered by national bargaining” (544, 1993: p 7). Despite the strong anti-national bargaining lobby that was evident in some quarters of the BPIF, ⁶ exploratory talks between the parties to discuss the resumption of an agreement for 1994/1995 took place in October 1993. The talks were held in the knowledge that the GPMU General Secretary had threatened that if the BPIF were not prepared to continue pay bargaining the GPMU would pull out of all national agreements, including disputes procedures and health and safety agreements, and declared that “if the BPIF do opt out, then next year’s campaign will make this year’s look like a picnic” (IRS, 554: p7). A Printweek article in November 1993 makes reference to what appeared to be “a dramatic U-turn in favour of returning to national wage negotiations” by the BPIF for the 1994/1995 period. The article claims a joint statement declared that “Whilst a number of difficulties still remain, both the BPIF and the GPMU representatives believe that there are sufficient grounds to commence national negotiations in 1994” (5 November 1993: p 3). The return to national pay talks was confirmed through a joint press release issued on the 18th November 1993.

The agreement that was struck for the 1994/1995 period was seen in some quarters as the bare minimum that was required to get a national agreement back on track. A low monetary increase of £5.00 for class 1 workers, reducing down to £4.33 for class 3 workers was set. This represented a 2.8% increase on the minimum rates with machine and photo-composition extras increasing by the same amount. The agreement also included for the first time ‘a commitment to full cost recovery at company level, where practicable’. Gall comments that, in order to reach a settlement, there had to be agreement on three main areas between the parties in that :

The 1994 agreement must not disturb the position established by the 1993 company-level negotiations i.e. there was to be no catching up clauses for workers at firms who did not pay the union claim, there will be cash only payments and a joint commitment to make any settlement self-financing through the removal of all demarcation leading to full flexibility

(1994: p 26)

⁶ There was an abundance of reports of statements made by leading executives such as BPIF President Nick Hutton’s claim that “enthusiasm [among members] for the national agreement is lower than ever before”

The eventual settlement was only marginally accepted by the BPIF member companies. This position was also true for the GPMU members. Circular 62/94 reveals the very low poll, which produced a vote in favour by a mere 2,877 votes. Gall alludes to the point that the GPMU may not have capitalized on their success in the 1993 dispute. He claims the BPIF felt the GPMU approach to the 1994 talks presented the impression that the GPMU “clearly needed a return to national negotiations badly and are prepared to make substantial movements to our position” (1994; p 27). Writing in the GPMU Journal the General Secretary of the GPMU reflected on the success of the 1993 campaign, but also reminded members that an unfortunate one in five of the membership covered by the BPIF agreement did not receive the full benefits of the campaign. He therefore welcomed the return to national bargaining arguing “the stability provided by the national agreement is of enormous benefit to our members”. He goes on to stress that the agreement sets minimum terms and conditions and does not preclude any branch or chapel entering into local bargaining in order to improve such terms and conditions so that, for workers, they “match the skills which they possess and the profits they help to produce. That has always been the case and long may it remain so” (May 1994: p 4).

Despite the doubts and fears that had been cast, and the accusation from some sections of the GPMU membership that the union had capitulated in order to get an agreement back in place, the 1994 settlement paved the way for constructive discussions to take place for a 1995/1996 agreement. Writing in the GPMU Journal the General Secretary reiterated the union leadership’s commitment to national agreements arguing that “they provide a level playing field for employers and employees in the industry, and they also provide a mechanism whereby change can be introduced into the industry with the minimum of fuss” (March 1995: p 4). An offer was recommended for acceptance by the executive council for the 1995/1996 period. It included a class 1 increase of £6.70, representing a 3.65% increase on minimum rates, which at the time was ahead of inflation. The offer would establish a new class 1 minimum earning of £190.17. The extra days holiday would be incorporated into the agreement from October 1997. From the employers’ point of view the offer was again subject to full cost recovery through improvements in productivity and efficiency at house level. The GPMU membership carried the proposal by a majority of 10,574 votes in another

(Printweek 1 October 1993), and Bembrose Managing Director Graham Bennington, who “felt it was very

unspectacular voting return with only 26,280 votes returned. The national agreement remains in force, the 2000-2001 agreement saw a new money increase along with the inclusion of a national sick pay scheme for the first time. The most recent agreement, for the 2001/2002, which provides a new money increase of £6.88p for class I, improvements in the sick pay scheme and agreement on parental leave has been agreed by a ballot of the members covered by the agreement (see GPMU Ballot Paper: March 2001).

The collective bargaining issues – giving up sacred cows

The concessions won by the union side through national bargaining were not gained without some sacred cows being given up by the unions, particularly those representing skilled workers. During the post war period from 1946-1960 the industry experienced remarkable expansion, Gennard argues that paper and print production witnessed an expansion of 18% as opposed to 8% for all manufacturing (1990: p 11). As a result of this expansion managers claimed that the restrictive apprenticeship quotas imposed on the industry by the unions put pressure on prices and hence competitiveness causing work to be sent abroad. From the union viewpoint, “the apprenticeship quotas were used to ensure that the demand for labour exceeded its supply” (Gennard, 1990: p 453, see also Gennard and Bain 1995: p 501). During this period of expansion the unions were seeking a reduction in the working week from 45 hours to 40 hours per week and an increase in holiday entitlement from one week to two weeks. Howe records that the unions at that time justified their claim on the premise that “all the benefits of increased production due to new methods and faster running machinery should not be passed on to the consumer, but that some material improvement in the conditions of the workers in the industry should be made” (1950: p 205). The unions won a phased reduction in the working week, eventually getting it down to 40 hours by 1959 and an extra weeks holiday, but in return they eventually made concessions on labour intake and apprentice quotas.

Ministerial interventions and courts of inquiry into the industry characterized the period from 1946-1967. As a result of the recommendations of the courts of inquiry there were improvements in apprentice intake that would eventually ease manpower shortages. This ongoing concession was a situation that Child saw as pleasing the employers, as this approach “clearly demonstrated that less rigid union attitudes to labour supply, indicated in

unlikely that national pay bargaining would survive in the long term (Printweek, 5 November, 1993).

the 1950 settlement, was persisting” (1967: p 342). Gennard claims that during the period 1948-66 national wage negotiations “were characterized by wages increases being traded by unions in return for increases in the labour supply, including apprentices” but goes on to argue that the unions always feared “that if entry into the industry was not limited then in times of recession a disproportionate number of members would be claiming the union’s unemployment benefit” (1990: p 453). It was the resilience of the pre-entry closed shop in the skilled (or craft) areas that was the focus of the employers in the 1950s and 1960s, an area that they considered to be regulated to the point of making the industry uncompetitive. However, during the 1970s the entire production side of the sector was dominated by closed shops, pre-entry for the skilled workers and post-entry for the semi and unskilled. Darlington refers to this phenomenon in his case study of a Merseyside print factory arguing that, during the 1960s and 1970s, not only did the skilled workers keep a tight check on labour intake, their semi-skilled and un-skilled counterparts acted accordingly, and effectively operated the local union branch office as a labour exchange (1994: pp 103-132).

The debate over manning levels and worker intake remained prominent until the beginning of the 1980s from when the emphasis on training and apprentice intake has witnessed an ironical about face. Over the period since 1981 there has been a constant call from the union side for government intervention to force employers to adopt a training agenda to address the skill shortages that are evident in the sector. Gennard points to the great lengths the NGA went to in attempting to keep training on the agenda during the 1980s and into the 1990s. As part of their negotiations with the BPIF the unions were able to secure a joint approach to training that encompassed not only apprentice intake, but also adult recruits to the industry, re-training and up-skilling for existing employees (1990: pp 456-461, see also Gennard and Bain, 1995: pp 504-505). This was a radical departure from the customary approach to apprenticeship intake and industry training. It was a view that reflected the technological change that has transformed the industry and continues to do so. This advance in technology made the unions representing skilled workers realize that their members could be lost to the industry if adult training was not introduced. The sweeping changes made it highly unlikely that a worker with a specific skill would be able to expect a job for life carrying out that specific task and that retraining and upskilling of adult members would be a necessity. The calls for changes in training policy were prompted by the fact that, due to the fall in intake of young people to the industry printing colleges were closing down their facilities or were

under threat of closure. Such developments were partly due to the fact that training in the 1980s and 1990s had become largely unregulated in line with the ideology of the conservative administration, a situation reflected on by a Labour Research article on the state of training in the manufacturing sector claiming that, even today, “Britain’s continuing system of “voluntarism” in workplace training provision has meant that training and apprenticeship opportunities are piecemeal with no compulsion to provide anything. As a result even employers that did provide training slashed their recruitment budgets during lean times and failed to restart them as the economy picked up’ (2000: p 22).

This newly adopted approach to training from the print unions is evident from motions passed at the NGA biennial delegate conference where a motion from the Three Shires Branch called on the executive council to “review its policies towards the encouragement and co-ordination of existing training resources. This must include support for local printing colleges and pressure on employers and suppliers to develop training and re-training policies to maximize opportunities for young entrants and existing members” (1990: p 199). This approach to training contradicts what had been the prevailing attitude prior to the 1980s when, despite the demands of the non-craft unions, the unions representing skilled workers refused to accept any progression of adults through promotion (Gennard 1990: pp 453-458). Today training is very much a bargaining issue on the BPIF agreement agenda but it is being pushed from the union side. The executive council report to the 1999 BDC refers to a survey undertaken of 500 print or print related companies that highlights the skills shortages and skill gaps that have become evident in general print due to a lack of commitment to training and comments that “the findings indicate there is some reluctance in the printing industry to recruit and train new staff” (1999: p 15). The reluctance of employers to become involved in training is further highlighted by a statement from the BPIF in a Print Week article claiming “their proposals for a printing industry Skills Action Fund has been met with “hardly any response – we have been deluged with apathy”. The article goes on to argue that “a voluntary approach to training has failed to deliver the number of skilled people the industry needs” and that employers have failed to respond to requests for their views on training (2000: p 4). As part of the most recent (2001/2002) discussions on the BPIF agreement the union and employers’ association have made a commitment to approach the government with a view to introducing a training levy into the sector to promote training for the industry.

The problems that the unions faced over manpower issues were compounded by the inclusion of flexibility and productivity and efficiency clauses introduced by employers and requiring the unions to make concessions in return for gains in the terms and conditions. The flexibility issue was raised in 1981 when the agreement was resurrected after the 1980 dispute. The NGA delegate conference received a report on the revised agreement that accepted flexibility for skilled workers across all disciplines within departments and made provision for addressing new manning levels on the basis of technological advancement on the proviso that no member would be made redundant as a result of these clauses (NGA BDC, 1982: p 14). This acceptance of flexibility and efficiency has been extended by subsequent agreements and through the amalgamations of the unions to a situation where the issue is now addressed by a clause inserted in the agreement that allows flexibility across and between all departments.⁷

This clause is complemented by the full recovery clause first inserted in the 1994 agreement and which today states that “the parties agree, that where practicable, additional costs arising from the 2000 national settlement will be recovered in full by efficiency and productivity improvements at company level. Such improvements can be wide-ranging in scope” (settlement ballot paper, 2000). The cost recovery clause has been the subject of some debate at conferences. In 1997 a composite motion was moved instructing the negotiating panel to have the clause struck from the agreement. The General Secretary made the case that the agreement would be in danger of being destroyed because the BPIF would not continue unless it was part of the agreement. The mover claimed that the clause allows the managers to attack the core terms and conditions of the agreement in the name of efficiency and

⁷ The clause in the agreement now reads:

- (a) The parties to this agreement place great importance on the training of GPMU members to enable them to acquire the new skills to work flexibly.
- (b) Subject to suitable training and the necessary health and safety requirements, full flexibility of working between all occupations and the elimination of demarcation lines is accepted.

To this end management and chapels will agree arrangements to achieve these objectives including full flexibility and where appropriate establish arrangements for the necessary training and retraining of GPMU members.

In accordance with the above, GPMU members may subsequently be called upon to carry out any of the duties within and between Craft and Classes I to III and transfer between machines, equipment and departments.

productivity. In reply the General Secretary made it clear that the clause was not to be used in this manner and that there had been ample correspondence with the membership but he was happy to reiterate that “such items as core money, temporary transfers, balancing of time, overtime rates, shift rates are not items that should be discussed as a contribution towards the National Agreement cost recovery clauses” (1997: p 101). Newsome reflects on this move to a more flexible approach to work in her study of Graphical unions on an international basis that includes the UK, and claims that “based on a desire to ensure continued company survival, the concern of the respective graphical trade unions in the study was not to reject out of hand shifts towards increasingly flexible forms of working. Alternatively the aim was to ensure that moves towards increased flexibility were negotiated and as a result remained within the best interests of the members” (2000: p 509). It would appear from the foregoing evidence that this is an accurate reflection of the bargaining position adopted by the GPMU and its constituent unions prior to amalgamation in order to secure advances in the terms and conditions for their members working under the national agreement.

Through technological advancement equipment has been simplified and, from the employers’ point of view, requires fewer less skilled people to perform the tasks. This impacts on the workforce through there being fewer people to perform the tasks, which in turn leads to an intensification of work. Newsome refers to the very clear message that came across from respondents to her study that there had been an “increase in workplace pressure and a corresponding intensification of the work process” (2000: p 513). Newsome claims that many workers are responding to this intensified pressure on an individual basis rather than the traditional collective approach and that one aspect of coping with the stress is seeking extra training which she emphasizes should be on the union agenda to ensure “a wider collective response to the real causes of work intensification and stress” (2000: p 515). Newsome claims that there is still a ‘community of interest and identity’ among print workers, particularly in the craft areas, which allows traditional channels of representation to prevail and resist employer attempts to dilute trade unionism in the sector” (p 516). To a certain extent this is a situation that was found to exist in a survey undertaken by Healy, Telford and Rainnie in the Herts and Essex region where it became evident that, despite the conditions on flexibility contained within the national agreement, there was little flexibility of workers between departments, but there was evidence of flexibility within departments. This was more to do with management not pushing the issue, despite the existence of weak

chapel structures at many of the companies surveyed. Lack of chapel activity was highlighted through the findings in Healy, Telford and Rainnie's local survey where the typical response to 'why did you become Mother/Father of the Chapel (M/FOC)?' was that no-one else would do the job.

It is important to make the point that, from the trade union perspective, the issues of training and worker flexibility are intrinsically linked. Keep and Rainbird argue that the traditional organizational systems developed by UK trade unions, along occupational lines creating separate bargaining units for different classes of workers, led to "structures [that] impose constraints on occupational mobility and, in particular, limit the possibilities for semi-skilled and un-skilled workers to upgrade their jobs" and that consequently "moves towards increased flexibility and multi-skilling may be perceived as a threat to the spheres of influence of different trade unions and bring them into conflict with each other". The authors claim that one logical resolution to this dilemma is for unions to merge in order avoid conflict between competing unions (1995: pp 532-533), a situation that the NGA and SOGAT faced and a solution they adopted. Keep and Rainbird go on to refer to the paradox that, in facing a hostile political climate, "the formal exclusion of trade union interest from training bodies has coincided with unions' increased interest in, and awareness of, training as a bargaining issue" and that one reason for the adoption of this policy is that, because of their restricted position "the generally weakened bargaining position of unions mean that bargaining strength is no longer sufficient to increase members' pay and status. Strategies towards training therefore supplement wage bargaining" (1995: pp 535-537). The flexibility clause inserted in the 'BPIF' agreement is subject to training and health and safety regulation, ensuring that skill levels are maintained, and is supplemented by the union keeping training on the bargaining agenda in an economic and political climate that makes the use of a social rather than material agenda significant in maintaining the profile of the union in the workplace.

Conclusion

This paper has concentrated on industrial relations in the general printing sector and has focused on the resilience of a multi-employer, national agreement that continues to impact on the sector and set the benchmark for terms and conditions of employment for workers in that sector. There is a historical overview of the progression of the national agreement that helps to emphasise the uniqueness of the agreement in comparison to trends away from this model of industrial relations in the wider private manufacturing and private services sector of the UK economy. It is argued that a possible reason for the persistence of the agreement is the structure and dynamics of the sector. General print is dominated by SME's, who operate in niche markets with highly competitive wage and price structures and evidence is submitted to support the claim that this type of market is conducive with multi-employer bargaining. Industrial relations tend to be passive, despite the media hype attributed to printing which tends to mistakenly tie general print in with what was a more volatile newspaper sector.

A central topic for discussion between the negotiating bodies has been that of manpower. The traditional stance of the unions was to restrict and control worker intake through apprenticeship quotas and maintaining closed shops, whereas employers sought concessions from the unions on this issue in return for improved terms and conditions. During the 1980s the emphasis changed and it was the unions who pushed for a more constructive approach for training and up-skilling to address skill shortages and skill gaps. This was a radical departure for the unions but has not yet been met with any great enthusiasm among apathetic employers. Flexibility, productivity and efficiency clauses became very much a part of the discussions since the 1980s. The employers sought concessions from the unions in order to create a more cost efficient competitive business structure; in return, the unions advanced conditions but, more importantly from their point of view, kept some control over the rate of change in the workplace. Work has to a great extent become de-skilled by technological change that in turn has led to a more intensified, stressful environment and the subsequent call for an improved training regime to improve job stability.

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