

**SWP 06/05**

**TRADE UNION MANAGERS:  
INVISIBLE ACTORS IN  
TRADE UNION DRAMAS**

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ISBN 1 85905172 3

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## **Author Profile**

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# **Trade Union Managers: Invisible Actors in Trade Union Dramas**

## **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with a group of people who are almost entirely absent from the literature on trade union governance, trade union managers. It looks at various governance models and seeks to make links between that literature and analogous literature in the management field, in particular between that on the polyarchal theory of trade union organisation and that on stakeholder management. It concludes that managers have become visible and that they seek to manage their organisations subject to a number of constraints arising in some cases from the fact that management remains a somewhat problematic concept in unions. Although the values of trade union managers result in their taking a positive attitude to the democratic process, the boundaries between their roles and the roles of elected activists in the governance structures are unclear and are consequently contested.

## **Introduction**

Very little trade union literature addresses the issue of 'who manages unions.' Dunlop (1990) looks at 'administrative, executive and leadership roles' within unions but he goes on to describe the process of union management as an 'oxymoron' (Dunlop 1990). Unions have, nevertheless continued to exist. In many cases they have merged; the process of merger management requires the utilisation of significant 'administrative, executive and leadership' processes. Yet the literature does not identify who has undertaken them. To most writers, they are invisible.

Mergers in unions are often (but not always) a response to adverse environmental factors. For UK unions, the environment over much of the last 20 years has also been difficult. Even if it is marginally improving, those organizations cannot escape from the speed of change in the global economy. Developments in information and communication technology (ICT) require every membership organization to re-think its relations with its members and every organization employing staff to consider the most appropriate way to deploy them and the most effective way to provide physical space for them to work. UNISON has introduced access to services through a call centre into which its members can dial to access services and in doing so it has recognised that in responding to members' requests for services it is competing not so much with other unions but with members' perceptions of other organizations of which they are members, such as the AA or of other organizations to which they go for advice, such as a Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Kelly and Heery (1994) identify the dispersal of staff by public sector unions in response to the decentralisation of collective bargaining. At the same time, falling or static membership figures, particularly among young people (Kerr & Waddington 1995), mean that pressures for organisational changes will continue. One way or another, those changes will require some form of management.

The objective of this paper is to answer two questions:-

1. Do managers exist in trade unions?
2. If so, what are the implications?

## **The Literature**

### *Unions as organisations*

'Governance' is regarded in the Oxford dictionary as an old fashioned form of the word 'government'. It is, however, given a slightly different meaning of (inter alia) 'the act or manner of governing.' That is the sense in which the word is used, in this paper. The interest is in the relationships between the various actors in the act of governing and the manner in which they do so.

Much of the literature analysing union governance is based on deeply pessimistic notions of the inevitability of oligarchy in organizations arising from the work of Michels (1915: 401) for whom 'optimism will remain the exclusive privilege of utopian thinkers.' 'It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators,' said Michels. 'Who says organization says oligarchy.' This approach has many times been applied to analyses of union power structures, principally (as in Lipset et al 1956) as part of an argument that unions resemble one party states with the bureaucracy holding all the resources and the powers of communication, rendering them oligarchic rather than democratic. Marxist writers go further (see Kelly 1988) and assume the inexorable conservatism of union leaders.

The Webbs (1920) recognised the possibility that officers could develop different ideas and outlooks. But they believed that some form of bureaucracy was desirable, mainly to take account of unions becoming more complex organisations but also in order to regulate the members so as to protect the union itself from the consequences of irresponsible action. The analysis therefore involved recognition of the inevitability of the development of Weberian forms of bureaucratic organisation, understanding that this would lead to complex power relationships between members and officers. This involved recognition of the ways in which officers had on the one hand to remain close to the members whilst on the other hand maintaining the integrity of the union itself.

Marxist theorists share much of this analysis (see Kelly 1988 chapter 7), save that they saw the 'irresponsibility' of the members as evidence of the manifestation of class struggle and the organisational work of officers as evidence of their collaboration with capitalism. Indeed, Marxist writing on

power forms, as Hardy and Clegg (1996) point out, the root of one of two clear streams of writing on power in organizations, one which regards power as domination and actions taken to challenge it as resistance. Management writing (see e.g. Mintzberg 1983) regards power structures in organizations as reflecting legitimate, functional authority and resistance to them as illegitimate and dysfunctional. Almost all of the literature examining power structures in unions comes from the former tradition.

The role of union managers in any such structures, however, is not the subject of any analysis to speak of. This has the consequence that, in order to try to understand the activities of managers in trade unions, one has to make links between strands of literature from wholly different traditions.

Child et al (1973) were amongst the first to present ideas on the trade union as an organisational type. They review literature on the voluntary sector which subsumes trade unions within a broader class of organisation (cf. Blau and Scott 1963) but suggest that whilst union administrative and representative structures may both lend themselves to measurement in terms of Weberian bureaucratic frameworks, their rationales are qualitatively different. The bureaucratic dimension they characterise 'administrative rationality', which they believe conflicts with the ideal of membership involvement in the representative process – what they term as 'representative rationality.' The former, they suggest, is located at the top of the hierarchy; the latter at the grassroots.

Undy et al (1996) extend this model to include a dimension which they describe as 'political rationality' – the ultimate purpose and primary means of trade unions. Their study is looking at unions' responses to Thatcherite trade union legislation, responses which were political. But it is not immediately apparent how this dimension helps one understand the critical dynamics of union organisation. Politics are part of the environment in which unions operate and, in so operating, they are seeking to represent the views of their members. Thus, politics are arguably a component of representative rationality.

Willman et al (1993) point out that both administrative and representative rationalities have to co-exist in the management of a trade union. They point out that a key skill in managing a trade union is managing the co-existence between administrative and representative rationality. They do this within a highly political environment, containing many different stakeholders. The external environment will include the Government, politicians and social actors of many types, employers and commentators. Internally, it will include not just members and activists but different categories of members and activists in constantly shifting categories. Activists participate in a union's structure in one or many of the different committees or bodies set up as part of the representative structure. This suggests that, far from union governance being defined by a simple dichotomy between administrative and representative rationality, it involves attention to the legitimate interests of a wide range of stakeholders.

## *Stakeholders and Polyarchy*

Various writers have described union organisation as 'a political system in which a variety of interest groups whose goals are sometimes shared, sometimes in conflict, contend for power and influence.' (Kelly and Heery (1994:15) This is usually described as the polyarchy theory of union organisation.

Different writers posit different bases for the definition of these power structures. Banks (1974) views the primary locus of competition as between officers and lay activists. Crouch (1982) identifies two types of union goal - money goals and participation goals - pursued at different levels by national officers, shop stewards and members. James (1984) looks at sources of 'legitimate' power in a polyarchy. Kelly and Heery (1994) argue that within this framework it becomes possible to analyse systematically the shifting alliances between different groups within a union. Their own research identifies distinctions arising from local and national locations, gender, generation and ideology.

If ideas of unions as polyarchies are helpful in examining their governance, then ideas of stakeholder management should be helpful in examining how managers in trade unions manage within such a framework. Freeman (1984). proposed a wide definition of the term 'stakeholder' as 'any group or individual who can affect or who is affected by the achievement of an organization's purpose. Donaldson and Preston (1995) import a test of legitimacy, suggesting that stakeholders are persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of (corporate) activity. They make the point that stakeholders are identified by **their** interests in the organization, whether or not the organization has any corresponding functional interest in them. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) propose a framework which enables one to look at stakeholders as possessing legitimacy, urgency or power and thus to enable managers to develop strategies for managing stakeholders possessing one or more of those characteristics.

Donaldson and Preston (1995) present four theses concerning stakeholder theory. One is that the theory is descriptive in that it presents a model of what an organisation is - a constellation of co-operative and competitive interests possessing intrinsic value. The coincidence of this theory with the basis of the theory of polyarchy is marked. Another thesis is that stakeholder theory is normative in that it involves acceptance of the legitimacy of stakeholder interests and the fact that they have intrinsic value. It is this that provides the moral basis for the theory and renders it such a suitable vehicle for the examination of management in unions.

A significant issue, therefore, is whether trade union managers practise normative stakeholder management. Investigating this may lead to the motives of at least one of the actors within the union being uncovered. In this context, 'stakeholders within unions' democratic structures' means, in polyarchal terms the multiple cleavages (Banks 1974) between national managers, activists and the membership. In stakeholder terms, the phrase

means the relationship between manager stakeholders and those within the democratic structure who have legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of activity. (Donaldson and Preston 1995). It should be noted that stakeholders can be in more than one category. An activist is also a member; she may also be a member of a women's committee or of the National Executive Council. Brummer (1991), in an analogous context, suggests that a class of stakeholders is a shifting one.

### *Officers, Leaders and Management*

In the literature one can find much discussion of trade union officers. They are concerned with representing and organising members, individually and collectively. They also have to balance a range of complex stakeholder relationships, internally with individual members, branches, regional organisation and various levels of management as well as externally. Kelly and Heery (1994) found that in most unions officers were in practice subject to dual systems of control, from lay representatives and superiors, but with comparatively light control from the latter. The majority of unions studied said that their officers had almost complete or a great deal of autonomy in their work. Managers tended to exercise greater control in three main circumstances; allocation of responsibilities, a crisis in the officer's work or to further a national campaign or policy initiative. Officers themselves valued their autonomy and were highly focused on serving the members for which they were responsible, with limited sympathy for policy initiatives which blurred that focus. A majority regarded accountability to the members as more important than accountability to union management.

Kelly and Heery's findings stressed the significance of officers' values, which they categorised as managerialist, regulationist or leader ('resting on a perception of worker-employer interests as antagonistic' p. 25). This is a highly loaded categorisation. A more general encapsulation of trade union principles (tested by the writers with not altogether encouraging results) is that of Batstone et al (1977:27) which includes 'an emphasis on unity and.....the prevention of the fractionalisation of the domestic organisation (and) some idea of social justice. That is, those within the collectivity are to be treated both fairly and equally (Brown 1973:133). This involves, on the one hand, ensuring that members of the collectivity are not subject to managerial whim.....There should be no discrimination against the less fortunate, while the unbridled pursuit of self-interest should be minimised.' (1977:27)

Here we see a value base which might help in considering how union managers behave. It does not, however, get us much nearer to identifying union managers. Discussion of union 'leaders' is not much more helpful. Undy and Martin (1984) describe leaders as preoccupied with institutional survival. Their discussion of the identity of those leaders is rooted in a belief that they are drawn from a restricted recruitment base of 'moral activists'. Whilst this certainly was true and is still true in many unions, it is by no means axiomatic. Unions today, many of whom are seeking Investors in People status and most of whom have modernised their HR and recruitment processes, frequently advertise all posts externally, even senior ones. Whilst experience in the

sector is likely to be a criterion of appointment, as it is in many other industries, it is no longer universally true that, to become a union leader (using that phrase to include anyone in a senior position in a union where they have the ability to influence union strategy) one needs to become known by working (one's) way through the branch, district and regional committees, attending conferences, educational courses and sometimes factional meetings (Undy and Martin 1984) or to have been 'bred to the trade' (Allen 1954:190). Nearly 44% of the unions in Kelly and Heery's (1994) study practised open recruitment. Successful candidates may still become 'moral activists' (whatever that means) but not necessarily as a result of their narrow institutional experience.

Overall, therefore, the literature is of little help in identifying managers and management. Allen (1954) noted that, as unions grew into large scale organisations, general secretaries required a high level of administrative ability. In this classic historical survey, though, he did not go as far as linking this with management. Björkman and Huzzard (2002) assert that the pursuit of a union's mission requires to be supported by sound management practices but they do not identify who is responsible for that. Dempsey (2000) extensively discusses managerial activities taking place during and subsequent to the merger which created UNISON but, again, does not identify specifically who were UNISON managers.

Hannigan (1998), in a text which is really a primer for managing unions rather than one identifying what is going on, describes a union 'officer' as filling 'the roles of union leader, workers' representative and manager' and suggests that there are conflicts between all three roles. The major discussion of union managers as a category is by Dunlop (1990). He makes the point that his observations are confined to the United States and this is clear in, for example, the trade union model applied which involves extensive elections of senior managers, rare though not unknown in the UK. Nevertheless, the analysis is of interest. He compares the role of 'executives' in four fields - business, government, academia and unions. He suggests that there are six commonalities among these categories of manager - in environmental analysis, setting roles and priorities, selection and development of people, shaping the structure of the organization, negotiating and consensus-building skills and generating and introducing innovation. He goes on to identify six differences between the four fields. Some of the assumptions are controversial - for example that business leaders in modern organizations achieve results by 'command and control.' Interestingly, however, except in one area (where it is suggested that the measure of performance of a union manager is the votes of the members) the distinctive elements are largely of degree rather than being diametric opposites. For example, there is a discussion of where managers in the four sectors fall on a continuum of efficiency and equity, the analysis of which suggests that union managers are in similar positions on the spectrum to academic and government managers.



### *Modes of governance*

Cornforth (2002) examines the governance of public and non-profit organisations, an area which he says is under-theorised. He proposes a paradox perspective as a conceptual framework to bring together a number of different theoretical perspectives in a consistent manner and explain their domains of application. He uses the language of 'owners' and 'boards' but it is easy to adapt this to enlighten a discussion of the relative roles of, particularly, activists in unions and trade union managers who interact with them. Table 1, adapted from Cornforth's article, seeks to do this.

The ideas here are of considerable interest. There will be in any union a variety of relationships between managers and activists. It may be, therefore, that other theories of governance will assist in offering explanations of how activists and managers relate in this area. One does not have to abandon the language of stakeholding in this exercise. Cornforth specifically looks at the interests of the different stakeholders in utilising his ideas so the application of those ideas remains consistent with the notion of interest groups pursuing legitimate goals within a trade union, seen as a polyarchy, and of trade union managers seeking to manage within such a framework.

<b>THEORY</b>	<b>INTERESTS</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE MEMBERS</b>	<b>EC ROLE</b>	<b>MODEL</b>
<b>Agency theory</b>	Activists and managers have different interests	Representatives of the members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conformance – to seek to safeguard the interests of the members, as they see them</li> <li>• Oversee management</li> <li>• Check compliance</li> </ul>	Compliance
<b>Stewardship theory</b>	Activists and managers share interests	Experts – to inform management of membership views, to add political perspectives and 'add value' to the relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve performance – add value to managerial decisions and strategy</li> <li>• Partner and support management</li> </ul>	Partnership model
<b>Democratic perspective</b>	Activists/members contain different interests	Lay representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political – represent member interests</li> <li>• Make policy</li> <li>• Control the executive</li> </ul>	Democratic model
<b>Stakeholder theory</b>	Stakeholders have different interests	Stakeholder representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political – balancing stakeholder needs</li> <li>• Make policy</li> <li>• Control management</li> </ul>	Stakeholder model
<b>Resource dependency theory</b>	Stakeholders and organisation have different interests	Stakeholder representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boundary spanning – secure resources, stakeholder relations and maintain external perspective</li> </ul>	Co-optation model
<b>Managerial hegemony theory</b>	Activists and managers have different interests	Representatives of the members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolic – ratify decisions, give legitimacy (managers have real power)</li> </ul>	'Rubber stamp' model

**Table 1 Theories of governance (adapted from Cornforth 2002)**

## Method

This research involved semi-structured interviews with 56 senior 'managers' from four UK unions, all formed by merger. The rationale for this was that it was anticipated that managerial processes could be expected to be more visible in organisations where integration following merger had been accomplished. Interviewees, from both national and regional level, were chosen at random with the exception of one union where a list was provided of those who could be approached. All interviewees were taped and transcribed using Dragon v4 speech recognition software. Coding and analysis was undertaken using QSR NVivo v2 qualitative analysis software.

## Results

### *Leadership and Management*

In the world at large, senior union officials are usually called 'leaders', whether they have a leadership role in the union or not. General Secretaries in the UK have been turned into political figures in their own right by the statutory requirement for election, which was not the universal model prior to 1985. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a senior manager expressing the view that he wanted the union to reflect some of his objectives.

*That's called the leadership role of the Chief Executive. My job isn't just to run the union. My job is to take it somewhere.*

Trade union leadership in these terms is a concept which is almost certainly understood – the role of senior trade unionists *in 'taking the union somewhere'; 'managing an idea, a crusade' (Senior manager)*. In another union, a senior female manager said that senior negotiating officers

*see themselves as the leader and they've got there and the rest of you jump because I'm the leader. They see the leader bit, they don't see the manager bit. .... Their whole life has been pugilistically fighting for that position and they want to run the staff on that basis. ... Unions are very male cultures and a lot of very able women are intimidated.*

Perhaps leadership, then, is a rather macho activity – managing the rhetoric as much as anything. Can union managers, however, be identified? In one union, according to one General Secretary, there were around 30-35 people from the General Secretary down to central services who could be identified as managers. Another General Secretary described a similar situation:-

*Myself, the other joint General Secretary and the two deputies. Every national Secretary, in my view, has a managerial role. Every regional organiser who has staff underneath him or her has a managerial role and then I would go so far as to say that even head office functions such as education and learning all have managerial roles. We have said that the management of people, the*

*management of resources and the management of issues are things that we have to do. While we have got our ethics of trade unionism there is nothing wrong in using business identification processes and business methods to deliver what our ethics are about.*

So the view from the top seems to be that both trade union officials and leaders have assumed managerial responsibilities. Did other interviewees accept the proposition that they had acquired these responsibilities?

*I think perhaps most of us would now hopefully acknowledge that we were managers the same as leaders. I think we probably have reached the point where there is generally a recognition that that is a role. (National Officer)*

*On the merger, I was given a temporary post of jointly managing a bargaining team.....so I changed from having a main role as a negotiator into a role of being more of a manager but maintaining the role as negotiator (National Officer)*

*I did very little management. I was managing my own work and the committees that I was responsible for and working with one or two other National Officers and secretaries. Very little management and certainly no line management. So I have become a manager since May and I now have a large complement of staff that I am managing, also responsible for a budget, developing a work plan and conference agendas and the resolutions that arise out of that. So, a significant jump. (National Officer)*

*I believe I have very direct managerial responsibility for the cultural tone. I take that responsibility very seriously. You know, like no raised voices, no swearing at staff, no aggression, all that. I expect people to exchange with each other on a very proper personalised basis. So I can have very direct influence over the culture and I feel responsibility for that. (Senior manager)*

It may be thought that this ready acceptance of managerial roles is surprising. Clark and Gray (1991), citing Barbash (1959), suggest that the background, experience and personal characteristics of those who succeed to high office in unions tend to clash with the businesslike characteristics needed to administer a large scale organisation. And, as a manager in another union said above, trade union officials have been 'pugilistically fighting' with management for much of their lives. These experiences potentially problematise the whole concept of management:-

*There are some people in Headquarters, some senior full time officers, who say that people shouldn't be spending too much time managing. They should be doing the traditional full time officer's job of engaging with the employer and improving people's terms and conditions. There's obviously a connection between managing*

*resources properly and improving terms and conditions which I think is lost on some people. So there's that kind of tension. (Senior manager).*

*I think the biggest tension is the view held by a number of lay officials, and senior full time officers as well, that managing is not profitable time. ...Management as I have described it is undervalued (Senior manager)*

*You get your street cred. from your bargaining role rather than from your management role'. That role is what gives you a name and a reputation within the union. (National Officer)*

*It is a bit problematic but it's only problematic because people haven't got their head round it yet and they have not got used to this style of management and they haven't got used to being anything other than autonomous (National Officer)*

*We had the management development courses recently. The one I went on was mostly for regional staff, which was really interesting because it meant you actually met regional managers and they seemed to be completely variable. Some of them were kind of like - what? Management? -- and others were kind of fantastic, really impressive. (Functional manager)*

Kelly and Heery (1994) found that many senior officers did not view the deliberate management of their subordinates as a priority. What seems to be emerging is that a change is taking place. It may not be universal – indeed, in the light of a culture of ‘pugilisation’ it would be surprising if it were – but a change seems to be visible.

If management, therefore, is a developing role within trade unions, is it different in any respect from managing elsewhere? Dunlop (1990), it will be recalled, suggested areas of difference. Opinions vary about this. In one union the political system was felt to be unique and managing in such a system was not something in respect of which there was a parallel in other sectors. But other differences were identified:-

#### *Customer Service*

*I suppose the other thing really is that you have not got the pressure from your customer (Functional manager)*

#### *Business Orientation*

*If this was local government, we'd have lost the contract! (Functional manager)*

### *Training*

*The major difference between trade union managers and managers in other sectors is that trade union managers are not usually trained in management. (Senior manager)*

### *Thinking 'outside the box'*

*We had some outsiders come in, like L.S., .....and she would do things outside the box and that brought tensions, a bit like 'don't do that sort of thing.' (Senior manager)*

### *Committees*

*I think there is one very marked difference in that unions seem to have far more meetings to discuss operations....the biggest difference is that there seems to be this layer of committee management which is not apparent to the world at large (Senior manager)*

### *Lack of profit orientation*

*I think the biggest difference between the union and an outside operation is that we are not profit-orientated. We are not profit driven. Therefore we don't all stand the same side of the net for that reason. (Senior manager)*

### *Inability to change the 'product'*

*We are the oil tanker in the middle of the channel. We can't switch and change. We can't suddenly say 'well, we'll buy red plastic.' (Senior manager)*

Dunlop (1990) suggested that performance management is not something that trade union managers undertake. Whilst there is some support for this, there are attempts in most of the unions researched to form an objective-setting and monitoring process. In one, a new General Secretary has instituted a strategic planning process which not only sets SMART objectives but, in a public document, identifies which senior manager is responsible for achieving those objectives, saying that

*the main reason of course if you have a plan, people are accountable to that plan.*

Similarly, there is some assent to the notion that personnel constraints exist, particularly with regard to appointments and disciplining of staff.

*The personnel role is, I think, limited because of lay involvement in the democratic structure and the number of people who might be involved in decision-making, particularly appointments and the whole political influence there. I think you can't be purists in personnel practice in trade unions. It doesn't happen. (Functional manager)*

## *Values and Management*

Noticeable have been two distinct schools of thought about the topic of discipline. One is that lack of perceived ability to discipline staff is a major constraint – that ‘*there are people who shouldn’t be paid in washers*’ who are still employed. The other is that disciplining does take time but that this is rooted not only in institutional personnel constraints but in a belief that trade union managers, because of their values of fairness and a belief that people should be able to achieve their potential at work, were happy to go the extra mile to help people. Management style does often seem to have a values foundation:-

*In a union, an open style is the only style. (Senior manager)*

*We looked at this concept of Emotional Intelligence. This was deemed to be the approach that we ought to adopt in terms of our management style. I mean, I am very sympathetic towards having that sort of approach. We are going to go with our values, aren't we? (Regional manager)*

*There probably are key things about being open, trying to involve people and trying to get people on your side. (National Officer)*

*Initially the side of management that I like doing is very much being about motivating people and looking at what people are good at and trying to encourage them to go a bit further, that kind of thing, I suppose. Soft management, I suppose. And I think that suited the union fairly well (Functional manager)*

*I think it is probably personal values both make you a trade unionist and that says something about the way you see people. That comes through in the way the you manage (Functional manager)*

*My thing about being a trade unionist is that you need to have the sensitivity of a butterfly and the hide of a rhinoceros. You know, you have got to be both (Senior manager)*

The overriding impression at this stage, is that many trade union managers seem concerned in their management roles that ‘those within the collectivity are to be treated both fairly and equally’ (Brown 1973; Batstone et al 1976). Whether in practice their theory in use reflects their espoused theory (Argyris 1976) is a matter for further research.

There are two further areas in particular where values are particularly evident. The first is in resource allocation:-

*It is often said by the larger groups that the smaller groups get more resources pro rata and I'm sure that's true. That's what we have unions for. When push comes to shove, you are able to manage*

*these groups because you come back to them and say; ' it is right that smaller groups, of perhaps lower paid workers, get more of our resources because we are a trade union.' It's one of the advantages of managing a trade union that often you can go back to the first instincts of why people join trade unions to help you manage the organisation as well. (Senior manager)*

*All of the groups are competing for inevitably scarce resources. Where do you retreat to defend your decision? Well, yes, why not; we are trade unionists and you have to be able to defend your decision on some sort of trade union principles. (Senior manager)*

*If you go back to core trade union principles in allocating resources you must have regard to the scale of the problem that the member is facing and if you move too far away from that as an allocation for resources you potentially get corrupt, if you know it I mean (Senior manager)*

Secondly, in resolving conflicts between stakeholders, managers seem often to adopt conciliation techniques, bringing people together to work through an issue and decide it, which reflects closely the core activities which most trade unionists will engage in:-

*Bringing people in. Not excluding one of the interests -- bringing them in and trying to sort it out. And usually you can sort it out. (Senior manager)*

*I guess what I do is, normally I will bring people together to do that. That's the way that we tend to work. We identify a problem or an issue, we identify a range of interested stakeholders or interested individuals -- you know, it is an issue for officers, is the an issue for lay members, it is an issue of both, it is an issue where we have got to get officers together first and then get lay members together and you either deal with it through a series of individual consultations or you deal with it by bringing people together around the table in a much more structured way.(National Officer)*

*The job of a trade unionist is to look for areas of commonality (Senior manager)*

*There are overlapping circles of interest and it is getting to the central core, knowing what the central core is and influencing that and trying to build it out so that you get a consensus on what you are trying to achieve. If you can usually get the central core on board you can usually bring the others in as well. The process is networking around to get majority support for a particular approach and the networking is done initially with the core group and you identify who the other stakeholders are that you need to bring on board (Senior manager)*



## *Values and Stakeholder Management*

We have seen how values can influence functional management. Now we consider how they may influence stakeholder management. The implications of the Marxist/Michelsian critique of trade union officials is that, somewhere along the road of a journey from member to activist to paid official, principles fade.

First, how are stakeholders identified? In one union, 52 stakeholder groups can be identified from the rule book. These include members, activist structures at different levels of the union's governance structures, senior staff (not managers, by that name), sectoral groups, groups of members defined by equal opportunity categories, ex-members of partner unions and delegations to various representative structures. Employers' structures are also referred to. Furthermore, under its powers in the rule book, the NEC has set up fora of members covering some policy areas, such as pay policy, acting as consultative bodies on these issues.

*We find these are very useful opportunities for two way interchange from the centre to the various organisations we have and back again. And it's a reasonably effective way of making sure that people who are key players at different levels of the union understand what the union's trying to do and have an opportunity to influence it. (Senior manager)*

The Rule Book does not seem, however, to be particularly significant in determining stakeholder legitimacy in practice. The approach which they take to the legitimate roles of lay members seems to be more value based than legalistic:-

*I said that I wanted some lay members involved in the (pay bargaining) process.....and we did it and it worked really well and this year I have been the only full time officer in the process with one of the Executive working with me and a big team involved as well. (National Officer)*

*There should be a healthy balance in the organisation between the lay structure, which is accountable in terms of its election...and the full timers who see themselves as the professionals. (National Officer)*

*Well, I think, though it can sound terribly trite, that you have to give them the importance of their elected position. You've got to recognise that their elected position is important to the organisation, that they are not there as voting fodder. (Senior manager)*

*They (elected lay members) are viewed, I think, either as absolutely critical to keep on board through to their being a waste of space and having to work round them rather than with them (National Officer)*

This latter comment touches on the complexity required in analysing managerial attitudes towards stakeholder legitimacy in merged organisations in which organisational values differed substantially. Mergers involve cultural clashes in which the relationships between stakeholders are exposed, as Dempsey & McKeivitt (2001) noted in the context of the Unison merger.

The research identifies 'claims of power' and consequent boundary disputes and these are real issues here. Managers do not dispute their lines of accountability:-

*The Executive calls the tunes and I shape the activities, the actions and the approaches of our bargainers towards that (Senior manager)*

*As far as accountability is concerned, the lay structure in fact judges the outcomes of senior managers' work, who are therefore exposed all the time to criticism of their work. So there is a direct, immediate system of feedback. (Senior manager)*

Furthermore, there is sometimes a proactive approach to getting lay members involved:-

*You really have got to have a consensus if things are going to work. It's no good us trying to pursue a certain path of management style that is going to be opposed by the people at the top of the union. They do have some power at the end of the day. (Senior manager)*

Nevertheless, ambiguities within these power relationships are very much in evidence:-

*Where does the power lie? That is the huge tension that is in the organisation at present. The senior lay officials say that the power is theirs; the joint General Secretaries, or at least one of them, says the power is with him to make the decision, as the chief supervisory officer, which is a description in the Rule Book. But I think the Rule Book is unclear. (Senior manager)*

*It might be a bit difficult at times because you have to satisfy the different expectations of the member, the National Executive Committee and the factions that make up the politics of the organisation. (Senior manager)*

*The tensions are that you make bad calls, bad decisions, you do things for the wrong reasons, or you find a way round it, or you try and work with the groupings and rub up with them and offer them something in return for them giving you something to deliver a vote through a committee or whatever. (Senior manager)*

Although this sounds somewhat despairing, others are quite clear about how to manage the boundaries:-

*It (setting up a new team) was not put to them (lay members). I have a strong view that this is not their role. And, in fact, I have stopped them coming into the office now like they used to do and sitting in the office. In my view, it disrupts the office. (National Officer)*

*In (my old union), there was probably too much involvement of the day to day running of the office by senior lay officials which I never see as part of their function. The General Secretary allowed that interference, which I think is wrong. Now...there isn't that sort of involvement. (National Officer)*

*My role is making recommendations to committees; theirs is taking a decision and telling me what is acceptable and what isn't. We have clear roles and the running of the team is certainly my job and not that of elected people. (National Officer)*

There are contested areas of responsibility here even though the principle of accountability to lay members is uncontested. These issues are important in the whole area of the behaviour of union managers, whether as stakeholders in a polyarchic structure or as actors in a struggle between lay members and appointed officials in which the latter deployed their expertise in union affairs against dissidents and exploited their monopoly of the union's administrative resources, as Marxist theorists suggest.

### *Governance and Stakeholder Management*

The literature assumes that those at the structural apex of unions see their roles in terms of control. Kelly and Heery (1994) note the relative autonomy of field officers and counterpose it with 'more intense management control over officers' work'. They analyse the relative accountability of field officers to lay committees and to management and the dichotomy which this sometimes creates. And, indeed, Marxist and Michelsian traditions assume that union leaderships are inevitably counterposed against the grassroots membership. Fairbrother (1994) complains that management initiatives weakened the powers of local leaders, with the intention not of increasing effectiveness but imposing control.

In many cases, this pessimistic view is not supported:-

*That's all I want to do, to give power to the members. People can say that's a left or right wing agenda. You can pay your money and take your choice, but it's pretty radical stuff. (Senior manager)*

*I am facilitating them in the process of hopefully taking ownership of the product. (National Officer)*

*Inside our rule book there are four or five key groups or committees who are almost autonomous. The trick is to give them autonomy, to*

*delegate to them properly responsibility for their decision making process. (Senior manager)*

*My view is that when people say, democracy is majority rule I say, it's not. It's majority rule with the consent of the minority. The minority must feel that they count as much (Senior manager).*

However, there is little doubt that in practice boundaries between managers and lay stakeholders in the governance structures are contested areas:-

*Sometimes there is a desire of the Executive to actually try and run the administration or to interfere in it in ways that are not always helpful (Senior manager)*

*What has happened in this organisation because of the splits amongst the full timers is that the lay structure has assumed disproportionate power (Senior manager)*

*Very few lay members seem to know the difference between governance and management. Many of them want to get involved in management rather than just governance. (Senior manager)*

*Even now, I am not sure that people are clear at all what their limits of authority are and, if they have got them, whether they work within them or whether they are quite extended (Functional manager)*

This suggests that polyarchal relations, where stakeholders compete for power and influence, are demonstrable in respect of the relations between managerial and democratic stakeholders. Managers, practise stakeholder management. The research suggests, however, that they actively manage the boundaries between their own spheres of authority and those of lay members within the governance structures of their unions. They choose a variety of strategies – some co-operative but some competitive – for example, power strategies, institution of financial controls, manipulating interest groups or use of the Rule Book to defeat lay challenges. Whilst this behaviour is spread more or less consistently on a continuum between co-operative and competitive, the evidence does not suggest that normative stakeholder management is the significant mode of managerial behaviour that had been anticipated in respect of the governance structures of trade unions.

In terms of modes of governance, the evidence so far adduced does not suggest that managers recognise the 'rubber stamp' model; indeed, several managers suggested that it was an outdated concept. Very many managers recognised and espoused the partnership model, but there was little agreement as to what it involved. In one union, attempts had been made to define the lay member zone, the officer zone and a 'shared zone' but this work had not been completed and the consequence was that, although managers were enthusiastic about their positive relationships with lay members:-

*The tensions that we have with lay members in that big area that we used to call the grey area, the shared zone; it's not so much people sharing, it's people walking about blindfolded (Senior manager)*

Cornforth (2002) suggests that a criterion for this model is the assumption on the part of activists that managers want to do a good job and are effective stewards of the union's resources – something dependant on a high trust environment. This is not always evident, as some of the evidence quoted above demonstrates.

In most cases, the stakeholder model is the one that is most clearly articulated. One manager saw his core managerial skill in terms of managing stakeholder conflict:-

*My role is in some ways a facilitator. You have the staff, the full time officers, all with roles and responsibilities. You have the lay structure of the union who have their agenda, their priorities and sometimes those have to be brought into one. Sometimes there is huge potential for conflict, particularly when you start looking at things like money, budgets, priorities, the way you go. So, facilitating in terms of trying to bring those two together. (Functional manager).*

The fact that such conflict exists and that boundary disputes proliferate suggests that many lay activists reject co-operative models and have aspirations to establish models of governance based on control of officials by activists – 'compliance' or 'democratic' models. The role of managers in such an environment is likely to be much more constrained although it appears that ambiguity in relationships is commonplace.

## **Conclusions**

Over many years, trade unions have been managed without any outward acknowledgment of how that has been done and who has been doing it. These phenomena have been invisible. In this research, trade union managers have been visible. In some respects, they remain embarrassed by some aspects of their roles. The role continues to have problematic features and to be constrained in some respects – most notably on the issue of performance management. Nevertheless, values seem significant in the way in which they determine how to undertake their roles. This is particularly significant in how trade union managers articulate their approach to management style. Research amongst their staff would be required to draw conclusions about the extent to which these articulated values are translated into practice. Failure to do so would not necessarily indicate lack of principle; it could, for example, indicate lack of training and consequent lack of knowledge of how to translate principles into practice in managerial roles. In this, trade union managers would be similar to many other untrained managers.

These actors within trade unions interface with their unions' democratic governance structures. Their values lead them to articulate positive views about those structures and to be, in many cases, pro-active in improving

them. In doing this, they can be said to practise stakeholder management. However, boundaries are in many cases unclear and hence are contested. Managers adopt a range of strategies. Some could be said to be based on their espoused values and are co-operative. Whilst behaviour spans a continuum, some is competitive and, in such cases, relations take on the form of those predicted by the theory of polyarchy; stakeholders contend for power and influence.

Whilst trade union managers may practise stakeholder management, this does not mean that they do so within a stakeholder model of governance. The model most frequently articulated is the partnership model but high trust relationships which are a feature of Cornforth's (2002) outline of that model do not always exist. The fact, however, that lay activists contest boundaries suggest that they engage in behaviour designed to increase their own ability to control management and that, therefore, models reflecting that (in Cornforth's (2002) terms, compliance or democratic models) may be their goal. The stakeholder model, whilst it recognises that stakeholders have different interests, arguably requires rather more defined boundaries than it seems possible to recognise on the basis of this research.

These discussions do, however, suggest that Cornforth's (2002) framework does offer the prospect of enlightening debates about trade union governance structures which have too long been rooted in what Kelly and Heery (1994) describe as the over-simplistic bureaucracy versus rank and file division (p196). This is something common to much of the literature about trade unions and their activities. In this research, however, trade union managers have become visible, occupying a significant and distinctive role in the administration and governance of trade unions. Potentially, this fact is of considerable significance in future studies of trade union life. The behaviour of managers, vis-à-vis trade union organisation, trade union staff and trade union lay activists, is influenced by different factors and is of a different character from that which has featured in most trade union literature to this point. It needs to be factored into the debate.

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