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# ***Industrial Relations Climate and Grievance Outcomes***

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*This paper reports the results of a study examining the relationship between the climate of industrial relations and whether grievances are denied, partially granted and fully granted to the grievors. The data used consists of 1115 grievances from six government organizations, and the perceptions of all management personnel of industrial relations climate in these organizations.*

The literature on labour-management relationships is filled with references to factors such as employee satisfaction, turnover, absenteeism, grievances, and other 'outcome' variables that are used as indicators of the quality of such relationships. A closer examination of the literature, both in industrial relations and personnel psychology, however, reveals that grievances have received considerably less empirical and theoretical attention than the above factors (Ash, 1970; Muchinsky and Maassarani, 1980; Gordon and Miller, 1984; Knight, 1986a).

Although the reasons for the lack of research concentration on grievances are not clear, one can speculate that difficulty in obtaining grievance data and the inconsistencies with which grievance information is recorded by organizations may have had some effect on this. This lack of empirical and conceptual evidence on grievances is particularly surprising when one recognizes the central importance of grievance process for industrial relations and the management of human resources in organizations, and the fact that it is viewed as the most important North American innovation in collective bargaining (Thomson and Murray, 1976).

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Of more relevance to this paper is that a large majority of the research evidence on grievances is on grievance filing activity (eg. Ash, 1970) and its relationship with aspects of labour-management relationships (eg. Gandz and Whitehead, 1982). Although, admittedly, such relationships are important additions to the literature, the question still remains as to the outcome of grievances under different climates reflecting the atmosphere of union-management relationships. That is, quite apart from the differing rates of grievance filing, or the varying characteristics of the grievors, that are likely to exist in organizations with different industrial relations climates, how do different climates affect the outcome of grievances (that is, whether the grievance is denied, granted or partially granted)?

This paper is concerned with exploring the above issue. In doing so, data collected from six government organizations in Western Canada will be used to shed light on the possible relationships between the climate of industrial relations and the grievance outcomes.

## **GRIEVANCE LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the empirical evidence on grievances shows that a majority of studies have concentrated on grievance rates. A handful of research has gone beyond this by providing evidence, albeit inconclusive, on grievance types or subjects, and, to a limited extent, on grievance settlements. Research on grievance rates could be classified in terms of public (eg. Begin, 1971) and private sectors (eg. Brett and Goldberg, 1979; Peach and Livernash, 1974). In summarizing this research, Gordon and Miller (1984), despite the methodological difficulties they had to deal with, conclude that the grievance rates in private sectors appear to be higher than the public sector. However, these authors, and others (Gandz, 1982), have expressed misgivings about this finding because of differing methods of computing rates, and the validity of the published data. This in many ways reflects the point made earlier about the lack of comparable and consistent information in the grievance literature.

In relation to the types of grievances, there is some evidence to suggest that most of the grievances are over disciplinary issues (Dalton and Todor, 1981; Gandz and Whitehead, 1982). However, others argue that this to a larger extent depends on the type of industry (Purcell, 1960), nature and scope of collective agreement (Begin, 1971) or work environment (Muchinsky and Maassarani, 1980).

Available research evidence on grievance settlement is much more limited. Graham and Heshizer (1979) suggested that very few grievances

reach the final stage of the procedure irrespective of the particulars of the contract language. Turner and Robinson (1972) in their study of ten organizations found that settlement of grievances at lower levels (without any clearer specification) did coincide with situations of more positive union-management relationships. In general, there does not appear to have been much interest among researchers to investigate the nature and the characteristics of settlements at different levels of grievance procedure, despite the implicit assumption made by a variety of researchers that settling grievances at lower levels in the procedure is to the advantage of all concerned (Purcell, 1960; Bloom and Northrup, 1969; Begin, 1971).

From the above overview, it becomes apparent that a leading objective of a majority of the empirical studies have been to establish the factors that would determine grievance rates, types and, to a limited extent, settlements. These can be classified in terms of (i) demographic determinants of grievance activity; (ii) organizational determinants of grievance activity; (iii) industry determinants of grievance activity; and (iv) union-management relationship, or leadership, factors affecting grievance behaviour.

The studies on demographic characteristics of grievors and non-grievors have identified a number of factors (for example, age, sex, location, work experience) that could affect the grievance behaviour of individuals (Ash, 1970; Price et al., 1976). However, many have concluded that there is little consistency across these studies in terms of the relevant factors. Further, because of methodological weaknesses, few generalizations can be made based on this line of research (Kissler, 1977; Peterson and Lewin, 1982). Gordon and Miller (1984) have gone further and have seriously questioned the ethical dimension and implications of demographic studies on grievances.

A number of other studies have concentrated on group, organizational and work environment determinants of grievance activity. Ronan (1963), for example, showed that the type of group and the nature of the task had an impact of the grievance behaviour. The degree of technological change in organizations (Peach and Livernash, 1974) and the type of technology used (Nelson, 1979) have been shown to influence grievance activity. In addition to technology, research has also examined the relationship between grievance activity and other organizational factors, such as decision-making centralization (Weiss, 1957), and general work environments (Wynne, 1978; Muchinsky and Maassarani, 1980).

Research done by Kuhn (1961), Peach and Livernash (1974), and Gideon and Peterson (1979) can be regarded as attempts to identify the industry determinants of grievance activity. However, the generalizability of the findings of these studies to other sectors and industries has been questioned (Begin, 1971; Peterson and Lewin, 1982).

The final category of research considered in this brief review relates to union-management relationship and leadership determinants of grievances. Gandz and Whitehead (1982) and Gandz (1979) have shown the impact of more positive union-management relationships on the grievance initiation and resolution. The effects of both management's (Fleishman and Harris, 1962) and union's (Glassman and Belasco, 1975) leadership styles on grievance rates have also been the subject of study by researchers. These studies have generally concluded that, with some exceptions, more positive union-management relationships tend to relate to lower levels of grievance filing activity. For example, Gandz (1979) in his study of 118 bargaining units in Ontario found that «lower grievance rates are associated with organizational units in which the industrial relations managers view the union as more valuable and less harmful to the organization than higher grievance rate units» (p. 787). They also reported a negative relationship between the extent of union-management consultation and grievance rates, and found that the use of arbitration in disciplinary grievances related to more conflictual industrial relations settings.

Although the above studies have without doubt contributed to the improvement of our understanding of the nature of grievances and the conditions under which one might expect varying rates of grievances in organizations, the question of the outcomes of grievances has largely remained unanswered. In a recent study, Ng and Dastmalchian (1989) found that grievance outcomes vary according to the grievance levels in which the grievances are settled, the salary of the grievor, and the issues involved in the grievances. Their analysis however did not examine the influence of organizational climate on the grievance outcomes.

## THE STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between industrial relations climate and grievance outcomes. It is argued that a gap exists in the grievance literature, particularly regarding the union-management relationship and its impact on grievances, in that various aspects of the outcome of grievance filing activity have not been so far examined.

Gordon and Miller (1984) in their exhaustive review of the grievance literature criticized the line of research that has concentrated on organization and union-management relationship determinants of grievances for lacking consistent conceptual schemes. They suggested that «This line of research would profit if a conceptual system for identifying and operationalizing organizational variables were used (eg. Payne and Pugh, 1976)»

(p. 129). Following from this suggestion, the quality of union-management as an organizational variable has been identified for the purpose of this study. Defining the quality of union-management relationship has been the subject of numerous studies (Biasatti and Martin, 1979; Blyton et al., 1987) and in this study, it is defined as industrial relations climate. The latter has recently been conceptually developed (Blyton et al., 1987) and a method for its operationalization has been suggested (Dastmalchian et al., 1986; 1989) in the literature. Although no specific hypotheses are put forward here, it is generally expected that different prevailing norms and atmosphere regarding industrial relations in an organization are likely to have an impact not only on grievance rates, but also on grievance outcomes (i.e. granting, denying, or partially granting to the grievor), the levels at which outcomes are settled, and the speed with which such outcomes are decided.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Source**

The grievance data for this study was collected from 15 federal government organizations in Western Canada. However, because the climate questionnaire was administered to only six organizations, the results of this study are therefore based on the data from these six organizations. The latter are all in the same industry providing the same services to their respective geographical constituencies. Two of the organizations are located in Saskatchewan, one in Manitoba and three in Alberta.

The data on grievances was collected from the records kept at regional headquarters of these organizations. A total of 1115 grievances were filed over a period of two years up to the time of the study. Following from this, personal interviews were conducted with personnel and industrial relations managers and other senior managers in each organization. During these interviews, in addition to gaining an understanding of the background and operation of these institutions, the procedure for distributing the climate questionnaire was agreed upon. Forty-seven top managers existed in these organizations, and it was agreed that the climate questionnaire would be distributed to all of the top management group. The questionnaires, with a covering letter from the authors, and the return envelopes were sent to each manager. Forty-six of the questionnaires were completed and returned, constituting a return rate of 98% (the number of respondents from each organization ranged from 5 to 9).

## Measures

In order to measure industrial relations climate, the instrument developed by Dastmalchian et al. (1986) was used. This instrument consisted of 26 items measuring 6 dimensions of industrial relations climate, on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'). Factor analysis of the data, using varimax rotation, yielded six factors accounting for 69,5% of the variance. Two items did not load on these factors and were deleted. These six factors were: union-management cooperation; mutual regard; joint participation; trust and fairness; communication; and union support. The reliability coefficients for the scales ranged from ,73 to ,96. The statistics of these measures are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Mean, Standard Deviation and Range of Climate Scales (N = 46)**

<i>Sales</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
1. Cooperation	14,778	2,215	7 to 20
2. Mutual Regard	6,889	1,526	3 to 10
3. Joint Consultation	10,222	1,964	6 to 14
4. Trust and Fairness	18,273	2,346	13 to 25
5. Communication	7,667	1,108	4 to 10
6. Union Support	10,682	2,419	6 to 16

The primary measure of grievance outcome consisted of determining whether a particular grievance was granted or partially granted to the grievor, denied, or withdrawn. Of the 1115 grievances filed, 259 were granted or partially granted, 704 were denied, and 152 were withdrawn or abandoned. In addition, the step in the grievance procedure that each grievance reached was ascertained. In the organizations under study the formal steps were: step one (supervisory level), step 2 (director of the institution), step 3 and 4 (regional and national directors). The final level in the grievance procedure is arbitration. In our grievance data, 27,3% were settled at step 1, 25,2% at step 2, 16,4% at step 3, 29,7% at step 4, and 1,2% reached arbitration. The average length of time for settlement was 69 days (range from 1 to 339 days). Additional information indicated that by far the largest category of grievances in our data were departmental procedures (which includes non-disciplinary issues relating to staffing, health

and safety, training, and so on), overtime, and payment procedures. Also, over 85% of the grievances came from the operative levels in the organizations hierarchy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Due to the limited number of cases, only the descriptive statistics of the variables will be examined. Table 2 outlines the information for the whole sample, as well as for each of the six institutions. These include: mean scores for industrial relations climate scales; percentage of grievances granted/partially granted, denied and withdrawn; percentage of grievances reaching various steps in the grievance procedure; and the average elapsed time for reaching decisions on filed grievances.

**Table 2**  
**Industrial Relations Climate and Grievance Characteristics**  
**of Six Organizations Under Study**

<i>IR Climate</i> <i>Mean Scores</i>	<i>Whole</i> <i>Sample</i> <i>(N = 46)</i>	<i>Organizations</i>					
		<i>A</i> <i>(N = 5)</i>	<i>B</i> <i>(N = 9)</i>	<i>C</i> <i>(N = 8)</i>	<i>D</i> <i>(N = 9)</i>	<i>E</i> <i>(N = 7)</i>	<i>F</i> <i>(N = 6)</i>
1. Union-Management Cooperation	17,2	17,8	16,8	17,7	16,8	17,5	15,8
2. Mutual Regard	10,4	11,2	9,7	10,2	10,7	10,5	10,0
3. Joint Participation	10,2	10,6	10,7	10,5	9,9	9,8	9,3
4. Trust and Fairness	18,2	19,2	17,0	18,7	18,8	19,6	16,0
5. Communications	7,6	7,6	7,7	7,9	7,5	7,6	7,3
6. Union Support	10,7	11,0	10,4	10,3	11,0	10,0	11,1
	<i>(N = 1115)</i>	<i>(N = 114)</i>	<i>(N = 127)</i>	<i>(N = 170)</i>	<i>(N = 206)</i>	<i>(N = 63)</i>	<i>(N = 435)</i>
<i>Grievance Outcomes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
1. Granted/Partially Granted	23	25	19	28	21	24	23
2. Denied	63	66	77	55	73	73	56
3. Withdrawn	14	9	4	17	6	3	21
<i>Grievance Step</i>							
1. Step 1	27	26	16	38	13	51	30
2. Step 2	25	22	13	15	26	22	30
3. Step 3	16	17	5	11	21	3	22
4. Step 4	30	32	63	24	40	22	18
5. Arbitration	2	13	3	2	0	2	0
<i>Elapsed Time (days)</i>	69	72	98	49	66	37	73



Examining the pattern of mean scores for climate scales, it appears that organization F has consistently lower scores for a majority of the scales. It has the lowest scores for union-management cooperation, joint participation, trust and fairness, and communication, and has the second lowest score on mutual regard. This organization, on the other hand, has the highest mean score for the scale of union support. Organizations A and C, however, have relatively higher scores on union-management cooperation, mutual regard (organization A), and communication (organization C). Organization B has the highest score on joint participation and lowest on mutual regard, whilst organization E demonstrates high trust and fairness, but low perceptions of union support.

In terms of the outcomes of grievances, overall 23% of the grievances are granted or partially granted, 63% are denied and 14% are withdrawn. Comparing these across the six organizations, the granting rate varies from 19% (organization B) to 28% (organization C). The denial rate ranges from the lowest case of 55% (organization C) to the highest of 77% (organization B). It appears that the extent to which grievances are withdrawn or abandoned varies substantially from 3% (organization E) to 21% (organization F).

Comparing the outcomes with grievance steps and elapsed time, it appears that organizations in which larger proportion of grievances are granted to the grievors are also those that tend to settle them at lower levels and with least elapsed times (eg. organizations C and E). It also appears that when a large majority of grievances are denied, such decisions are likely to be taken at much higher levels in the grievance procedure and thus they would take longer to finalize (eg. organizations B and D). In this respect, there seems to be a fair amount of consistency in the grievance data in that over the period of two years, the organizations under study show a style or a consistent pattern of grievance handling.

To examine the relationship between grievance outcomes and the industrial relations climate, consider Figure 1.

Point A represents the combination of the percentage of grievances granted by organization A and the overall IR climate score of that organization. The overall IR climate score of each organization is obtained by adding its scores in the first five dimensions of industrial relations climate presented in Table 2. Thus, for organization A, the overall score is 66.4. Point B is also calculated in the same fashion, and it represents that particular combination of percentages of grievances granted and overall IR climate pertaining to organization B. Similarly, point C represents organization C, and so on.

**Figure 1**  
**Relationship between Grievance Outcomes and**  
**Industrial Relations Climate**

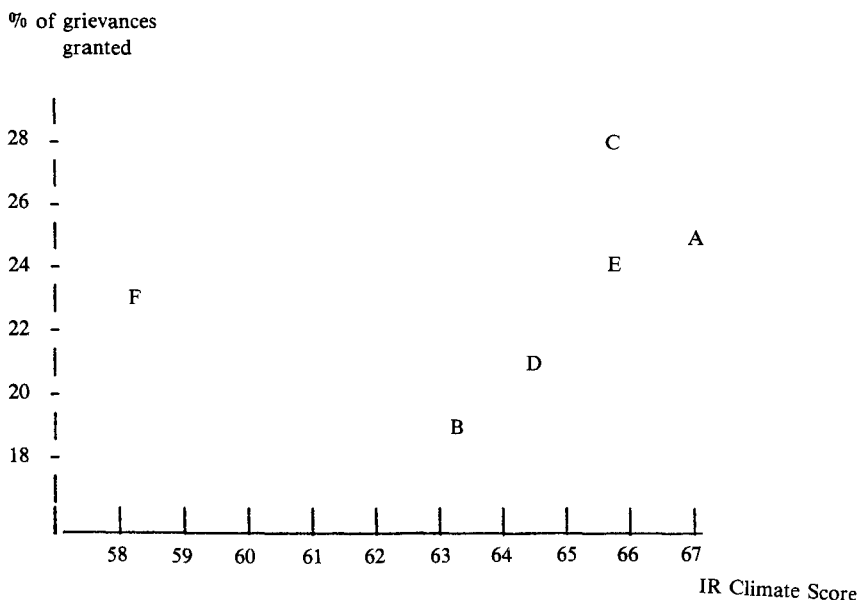


Figure 1, therefore, represents different combinations of overall IR climate score and the percentage of grievances granted. A visual inspection of the six organizations shown in the figure suggests that there is a positive relationship between IR climate and percentage of grievances granted. Indeed, using the least squares estimation technique, the relationship between these two variables can be expressed as:

$$Y = -9,03 + 0,51x,$$

where Y is the percentage of grievances granted and X represents the overall IR climate score. The positive estimated coefficient on X therefore supports the notion that higher IR climate score should lead to higher percentage of grievances granted.

Our least-squares estimate also shows that there is an inverse relationship between IR climate and the likelihood of a grievance being denied or withdrawn. More specifically, the relationship is expressed as:

$$Z = 108,1 - 0,51x,$$

where Z is the percentage grievances denied and withdrawn, and X is the overall climate score.

From the preceding paragraphs, it therefore appears that there is a relationship between grievance outcomes and the overall IR climate. To further explore this relationship, let us compare the grievance outcomes to the mean score of particular industrial relations climate dimension. This exercise reveals some interesting patterns. For example, organizations with highest rate of granting, or partial granting of the grievances are also those with high union-management cooperation (i.e. organizations A and C). Conversely, organization B, which has the highest proportion of the grievances denied, and the lowest granted, is characterized by low scores on climates of mutual regard (lowest), cooperation and trust and fairness.

It is interesting to note that organization F, having the lowest scores for five of the six climate dimensions, does not demonstrate any particular pattern regarding granting or denial of grievances. However, it has the highest rate of grievance withdrawal. This indicates that employees attempt to file grievances and let the grievance move to higher levels in order to clog the system. They may also be «voicing» their dissatisfaction with the work, or industrial relations and related issues. Further analysis of the information pertaining to organization F showed that almost all the withdrawals of grievances have taken place at level 3 of the process (i.e. at the regional level). This indicates another way in which unfavorable union-management relationship climates can have an impact on the outcome of grievances, namely the withdrawal pattern.

This tactic of «clogging» up the system as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with local union-management relationships is also seen in organization B. With relatively unfavorable climate (eg. second lowest overall score on cooperation) and the highest rate of grievance denial (i.e. 77%), it appears that a significant proportion of the grievances reach Step 4, the national level (63%). Of these, over 81% were denied at this level of grievance procedure. In other words, it is possible that a relatively unfavorable climate would demonstrate itself through filing grievances for the purpose of «clogging» the system, a large majority of which would end up being denied at the highest level of the grievance procedure.

Organization E shows the highest score on climate of trust and fairness, and the lowest on union support. That is, this organization represents a situation in which support for unionism is low and at the same time the degree of trust between industrial relations actors is relatively high. This organization shows a close to average rate of granting, but a relatively

higher percentage of grievance denials (second highest denial rate). In addition, as shown in Table 2, it has the highest percentage of grievances that are finalized «within» the institution (i.e. 73% of grievances are finalized at or below Step 2).

In this sense, the results presented here agree with the suggestions in the literature that the quality of union-management and labour-management relationships have an influence on grievance filing activity and grievance resolution (Turner and Robinson, 1972; Gandz, 1979; Knight, 1986a). Clearly, the political and the strategic dimensions (Kochan et al., 1984) of industrial relations in an organization have definite influences on grievance behaviour and outcomes. These are among the factors that future research would benefit by incorporating them in their designs. Concentration on the climate of union-management relationships and the strategies of industrial relations as factors that may explain grievance behaviour and help unravel the complex web surrounding the issue of grievances in organizations is clearly an area that needs considerably more attention.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this paper has been to investigate the interaction between grievance outcomes and industrial relations climate. Using data from six federal institutions, the results suggest that grievances are more likely to be granted under positive industrial relations climate. More specifically, the results indicate that the more cooperative and harmonious union-management climates are likely to increase the chances of grievances being granted or partially granted. This may be because under these conditions, only «valid» grievances are filed and as such, they are less likely to be denied. In addition, when union-management relationship is good, it is usually the case that grievances are examined in a spirit of cooperation and problem-solving, and are therefore more likely to be assessed positively.

The results also show that in organizations that have relatively low scores on the various components of climate, grievances are more likely to be denied or withdrawn. This finding is not unexpected because in such situations, there may be a tendency for the union to file unnecessary grievances without any intention of winning them. Rather, the objective of these grievance-filing activity is to clog up the system.

Last, the evidence suggests that the industrial relations climate may be related to the levels at which grievances are granted. It appears that under favorable climates, grievances are likely to be granted at lower levels of the grievance process. They are also dealt with more quickly than in other situations.

This study has shed some light on the influence of industrial relations climate on outcomes but because of the small number of organizations involved, additional studies are needed before any generalization can be made. Further, since so little is known about the outcomes of grievances, additional research in this area is definitely warranted. For example, one may look at influence of economic factors on grievance outcomes. One may also examine whether grievance outcomes vary between public and private sectors.

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### ***Le climat des relations du travail et le règlement des griefs***

Une revue de ce qui s'écrit sur la question des griefs permet de se rendre compte que la majorité des études mettent l'accent sur la présentation des griefs. Celles qui portent sur ce qui en advient sont à peu près inexistantes. Dans un travail récent, Ng et Dastmalchian (1989) ont traité de l'impact des étapes de la procédure de règlement des griefs, du niveau de salaire et du poste du réclamant ainsi que de la nature des

griefs sur le règlement des griefs. L'objet du présent article est de poursuivre le travail de Ng et de Dastmalchian et, plus précisément, d'approfondir l'interaction entre le climat des relations professionnelles et l'issue finale des griefs.

On peut définir le climat des relations du travail comme l'atmosphère qui entoure l'exercice à l'intérieur d'une organisation (Blyton et al., 1987). Il comprend six éléments principaux, soit la collaboration entre l'employeur et le syndicat, le respect mutuel, la participation paritaire, la confiance et l'impartialité, de bonnes communications et le support du syndicat. Quoiqu'il n'y ait lieu d'avancer aucune hypothèse spécifique pour expliquer l'interaction entre chacun des éléments du «climat» et l'issue des griefs, on peut présumer que ces diverses composantes ont un degré différent d'influence sur leur règlement.

Les données sur lesquelles repose cette étude sont tirées de six organismes du gouvernement fédéral de l'Ouest du Canada. Les statistiques se rapportant aux griefs proviennent de leurs dossiers respectifs. Pour cerner le climat des relations professionnelles de ces institutions, on a fait parvenir des questionnaires à leurs cadres supérieurs et sur les 47 rejoinis, 46 ont retourné le questionnaire. Leurs réponses constituent la source des données relatives au climat.

Ces données indiquent que là où les relations du travail sont bonnes, il y a davantage de probabilité que les griefs soient accueillis. Si l'on fait entrer en ligne de compte les différentes composantes du climat énumérées ci-dessus, les résultats indiquent que des relations fondées sur la coopération et qui sont harmonieuses augmentent les chances que les griefs soient accordés ou partiellement accordés. Nous estimons que, dans une telle situation, seuls les griefs 'valables' seront soumis et qu'il y a une forte probabilité que ceux-ci soient acceptés d'une façon presque automatique.

Les résultats montrent aussi que, dans les organisations où les composantes du climat des relations du travail laissent le plus à désirer, il est plus probable que les griefs soient rejetés ou retirés. Ceci s'explique parce que, dans ces conditions, le syndicat peut avoir tendance à présenter des griefs peu sérieux sans avoir l'intention de les gagner. Au contraire, l'objectif recherché consiste à engorger le système et, une fois ce but atteint, à les retirer. Dans d'autres cas, le syndicat peut les pousser au stade le plus élevé de la procédure pour les voir éventuellement rejetés.

Les constatations de cette enquête indiquent aussi que, dans un milieu où les rapports sont cordiaux, on fait droit aux griefs, possiblement dès les premiers stades de la procédure. De plus, on les traite avec plus de célérité que dans les autres situations. Même si cette étude a permis de mieux comprendre comment se terminent les griefs, des études plus approfondies demeurent nécessaires dans ce domaine. Par exemple, on pourrait considérer l'influence des facteurs économiques sur leur règlement. On peut aussi se demander s'il y a sur le sujet des différences entre les secteurs public et privé.