

# **Civil Society Organizations and Trade Unions in the United Kingdom: Coalition, Conflict and Complementarity**

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## **Track 3: Assessing New Actors**

The focus of this paper is on a significant ‘new actor’ within British industrial relations, civil society organizations (CSOs) that play an increasingly active role in representing the interests of workers. CSOs include identity-based organizations that project interests grounded in gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, belief and disability, issue-based organizations that campaign on particular workplace problems such as work-life balance or health and safety, and advocacy organizations that provide information, advice and representation to working people. Prominent examples in the United Kingdom include Age Concern, The Age and Employment Network, Arthritis Care, Carers UK, Citizen’s Advice, the Fawcett Society, the Free Representation Unit, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, London Citizens, MacMillan Cancer Support, RNID and Stonewall. Organizations of this stamp are active in shaping public policy and employment law, formulating standards of good practice for employers, and supporting individual workers. They are an increasingly visible presence in the systems of worker representation and employment regulation.

The paper examines the relationship between CSOs and the established institution of worker representation, trade unions. One current in the existing literature stresses the scope for these two institutions to form coalitions, founded on shared interests and joint-working. The analysis, discussion and indeed celebration of coalitions of this kind have been a notable theme in the literature on union revitalization in several countries.

There is another current, however, that identifies conflicting interests between CSOs and unions and anticipates conflict. For some commentators, these are institutions engaged in rivalry to occupy a limited representational space. Others have noted the incompatible cultures of CSOs and unions and have described a repeating pattern of conflict, as attempts at joint-working and coalition have fallen apart.

A third possibility is that CSOs and unions will occupy distinct and non-overlapping niches in the system of worker representation, which means they perform separate functions that require little ongoing contact. On this view, the two types of institution perform complementary but discrete functions with regard to the representation of worker interests. They may be barely aware of each other’s activity.

The primary purpose of the paper is to establish the frequency with and conditions under which each of these three possible patterns of interaction – coalition, conflict and complementarity – emerge. Specific research questions include: the frequency and persistence of CSO contacts with unions; the pattern of joint-working where it exists; the points within the union movement at which contact is made with CSOs; the issues around which cooperation occurs; the types of CSO and types of union that form cooperative relations, including internal and external conditions that facilitate a positive relationship; the extent and pattern of conflict between CSOs and unions; the causes of conflict and types of situation in which it arises; the characteristics of CSOs that exhibit conflict with unions.

The research on which the paper is based was carried out in 2007-08 and was funded by the Nuffield Trust. It adopted a multi-method approach, which sought to provide a basis for making general statements about CSO/union relations whilst also providing detailed analysis of particular relations. To these ends, the research comprised three overlapping stages. In the first, media and web sources were used to compile a list of 422 CSOs seemingly engaged in worker representation, loosely defined. These were national level CSOs operating at the level of the United Kingdom or its constituent nations. Standardized profiles of these CSOs were then generated using websites and other documentary sources. In the second stage a conventional postal questionnaire was carried out of the population of CSOs identified through the initial search. This survey sought information on the characteristics of CSOs and their degree and pattern of involvement in worker representation, including their relationship with trade unions. About one third of the initial population responded to this survey. In the final stage interviews were conducted with senior policy officers in a sample of CSOs drawn from four types: equality and anti-discrimination CSOs, CSOs concerned with work-life issues, CSOs representing ‘vulnerable’ workers, and CSOs providing a general advocacy and information service to the UK working population. This stage of the research collected data from more than 30 CSOs via nearly 60 interviews. These cases were supplemented by a small number of interviews with key respondents from the Trades Union Congress and major UK unions that have dealings with CSOs.

The proposed paper will draw upon all stages of the research project, thereby providing an overview of general patterns of CSO-union relations in Britain while also furnishing examples of each of the three forms – coalition, conflict and complementarity – set out above.