An Obstacle to Management Innovation? Some Myths Uncovered on Multi-Union Workplaces in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

It has often been claimed in academic literature and the media that multi-unionism, or the presence of two or more recognised trade unions in a workplace, is problematic for both trade unions and management. The problems which arise, it is maintained, stem from inter-union rivalries, sectionalism and disputes over demarcation for example. The consequences are damaging, it follows, for union cohesion, for bargaining arrangements, and for changing work practices; thus innovation in how work is performed is obstructed. Drawing predominantly upon data from the UCD Survey of Employee Relations and Human Resource Practices, such claims are subject to scrutiny. Management perceptions of levels of conflict, the industrial relations climate and the introduction of workplace change and innovation are contrasted in both multi-union and one union workplaces. The findings cast some doubts over multi-unionism's reputation; little evidence is found which supports the notion either of a highly conflictual industrial relations climate, or that workplace change is significantly obstructed in such workplaces.

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INTRODUCTION

Multi-unionism, or the presence of several recognised trade unions within an industry or workplace, is a phenomenon normally associated with Ireland and Britain. The focus of this study as a whole, which is for PhD research, is the relationship between different trade unions and how inter-union relations within multi-union workplaces influence outcomes at the workplace on a range of issues affecting both unions and management.

This paper however, is the result of analysis of data from three sources: some preliminary fieldwork conducted by the author, some survey data produced by IBEC, and the main source of data which is from the UCD 1996–7 National Survey of Employee Relations and Human Resource Practices in Ireland.[†] Some 450 managers' responses are utilised from the questionnaire survey (from which it was ascertained that 209 were from workplaces recognising a trade union), the focus here being on the 200 which gave the actual number of recognised trade unions. The purpose of the paper is to contrast data from multi-union workplaces with those which have a single recognised union, whether this is by management design or by chance, in order to seek managers' views in two key areas:

a) management's relationships with trade unions in respect of the industrial relations climate, and the extent of individualised and collective conflict;
b) management's ability to introduce workplace change, and any obstacles to such change.

Initial findings suggest positive rather than negative management-union relations in multi-union workplaces and that, furthermore, no

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strong link is suggested between the numbers of workplace trade unions and management's ability to implement changes in work organisation. Workplaces with single union agreements however, do appear to hold slightly more advantages for management seeking to introduce workplace changes, but not to a great extent.

MULTI-UNIONISM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Prevalence of Multi-Union Representation and Alternative forms of Unionisation

At national level in the Republic of Ireland, a relatively large number of trade unions exist for the size of its working population. In 2003, Ireland had some forty-six unions with a total of just over 640,000 members, although the total number of unions exceeded one hundred prior to the late 1960s (Wallace et al., 2004; MacPartlin, 1998: 98). The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has forty-three unions affiliated, covering over 557,000 members, excluding its affiliate membership in Northern Ireland (ICTU, 2005). At the workplace, rather than national level however, 200 respondents to the UCD survey revealed that 118 workplaces recognised one trade union while a further 82 recognised two or more; thus 59 per cent of the unionised workplaces had one union and 41 per cent had two or more. In IBEC's 2004 study of *company* level employment practice, 41 per cent of the respondents recognised two or more trade unions. Hence significant numbers of employees working in organisations where trade unions are recognised are covered by multi-union arrangements, while many managers at workplace or company level deal with at least two trade unions on a range of issues which may include work organisation. The experiences of such managers are explored in the later sections.

Multi-Unionism – Much Criticised, but a Paucity of Research

The focus of much academic literature on multi-unionism in Ireland and Britain is its problematic nature for employers and trade unions alike. The treatment of issues of inter-union relations or multi-unionism tends to be limited and to highlight three or four narrow areas. In particular, a focus in some literature, and indeed the press,

has been that multi-unionism is 'a bad thing'. From a trade union viewpoint multi-unionism is said to encourage inter-union conflict, which can undermine bargaining tactics or solidarity, and encourage competition rather than co-operation between trade unions (Lane, 1974). Some evidence can be found of inter-union conflicts over competition for members, strikebreaking, and 'demarcation' disputes between different grades of workers (Webb and Webb, 1897; Cole, 1924; Brown, 1981). Turning to management concerns however, multi-unionism is purported to breed inflexibility, encourage demarcation and 'restrictive practices', and is allegedly cumbersome in terms of collective bargaining arrangements (Webb and Webb, 1897; Daly, 1968; Donovan Commission, 1968; McCarthy, 1981). Daly describes Ireland's 125 unions, for a population of three million in the mid 1960s, as 'truly fantastic'; such a structure being 'crazy', 'malformed' and developed in a haphazard manner inherited from Britain. Urgent reform was required since the system caused suffering not only for workers and unions but for industry and the public (Daly, 1968: 112). Furthermore, issues of authority and power between union officers and shop stewards were of concern; a multiplicity of unions was problematic for retaining discipline and control, which in any case was meaningless if disgruntled workers or stewards were able to play off unions against their rivals (Daly, 1968: 143). The trade union laws in both countries, Daly argued, facilitated the uncontrolled growth of trade unions as well as the setting up of 'breakaway unions' for disenchanted or militant groups (Daly, 1968: 143). The Donovan Commission in Britain also viewed that work groups' power could be enhanced by multi-unionism and inter-union rivalries over recruitment and poaching of members has also been a recurrent theme of critics.

In more recent disputes, 'inter-union rivalry' was cited as a major factor in rows over cost-cutting in the Irish transport sector (*Business & Finance*, 14 October 1996). Inter-union conflict has been cited as a contributory factor in problems at Irish Ferries and GAMA Construction (as reported in IRN 9, 2004 and RTÉ Television News, 14 April 2005). In some instances, concern has been expressed over multi-union arrangements and union responses to restructuring proposals, e.g. at Avonmore, RTÉ and Bord Gáis (IRN 3, 1998; IRN 19, 1998; IRN 17, 1997). Thus, for a variety of reasons many employers

have, at least on green-field sites, sought to reduce multi-unionism through the pursuit of single union agreements or, failing that, single table bargaining whereby trade unions are dealt with as one joint committee to negotiate a single agreement. Indeed, Bord Gáis Eireann pursued and achieved this aim in the late 1990s, following management's desire for a restructuring plan and the setting up of a single national agreement under the plan R2000 (Sinclair, 2000).

There appears little doubt that inter-union tensions and conflicts have arisen from time to time, but the underlying causes of these may be more deep-rooted than many commentators suggest. Strong evidence that such conflicts are due to the structure of trade unions is rare with little research demonstrating significant constraints on management action. One of the few actual studies to explore such phenomena was conducted among thirty British manufacturing plants and concluded that most managers claimed multi-unionism had no effect on business efficiency or flexibility (Dobson, 1997). Millward acknowledges that in Britain there was little empirical evidence until the Workplace Industrial Relations/Employee Relations Surveys (WIRS/WERS) of the 1980s and 1990s to support the belief that multi-unionism was 'economically detrimental, in terms of increased dispute activity and higher management costs, both for settling pay increases and for introducing change of various kinds' (Millward, 1994: 35–6). Nevertheless, commentators on these British surveys note the numbers of *bargaining units* at workplace level seem more likely than multiple unionism per se to be associated with, for example, a higher incidence of strike activity or constraints on management's freedom in how work is organised (Metcalf et al., 1993; Millward, 1994: 67).

Among Irish researchers, Wallace and O'Shea in their study of unofficial strikes concluded that multi-unionism 'is not a significant factor in the occurrence of unofficial strikes' (Wallace and O'Shea, 1987: 8), although work reorganisation and demarcation issues did account for 18 per cent of unofficial strikes between 1978 and 1986 (Wallace and O'Shea, 1987: 9). A survey of managers in Limerick found that they were not inclined to 'blame' multi-unionism for industrial relations problems; asked if having fewer unions might lead in their view to an improvement in industrial relations, over 50 per cent believed there would be no change, and a further 14.3 per cent were

unable to say, with just 23 per cent believing any real improvement would result (Wallace, 1982: 235). Wallace's study of a series of disputes in Limerick, including the infamous Ferenka dispute, notes that many took place where the numbers of multi-union workplaces were in fact quite low, and often an interdependence of economic and industrial relations factors such as pre-production agreements and single union representation, were in themselves contributory factors to the conflicts. Wallace concludes that the findings 'must cast some doubt on the hypothesis that a reduction in the number of unions in the country generally would of itself lead to a radical improvement in the industrial relations situation' (1982: 236).

Institutional Reform as a 'Solution' to Multi-Unionism

Despite such evidence, and the general paucity of robust research linking multi-unionism itself with various industrial relations problems for management, 'solutions' have nevertheless been advanced, relying upon the reform of institutions including the promotion of single union agreements. This 'reform' tradition has a strong association with the Donovan Commission in Britain of 1968 and in Ireland the Fogarty Report on the ESB of the same year. Policy makers shared the concern that rationalisation of unions, through amalgamations and mergers, was to be encouraged. The British and Irish congresses of trade unions have long called for structural reform and a reduction in the number of unions, often with a preference for 'industrial' forms of unionism being expressed, and at times the attempts not only failed, but resulted in acrimonious splits, particularly in the 1940s (MacPartlin, 1998: 88). Both furthermore have facilitated inter-union dispute machinery and ICTU has in recent years tightened up its rules on inter-union transfers in response to the kinds of problems such as those which beset SIPTU over cabin crew at Aer Lingus seeking transfer to IMPACT (IRN 26, 2000). Effecting reforms proved difficult during various periods, such as during the 1920s, 1930s and 1960s, although mergers and amalgamations did proceed at various times such as from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s. In particular during the climate of recession, unemployment and declining union membership in the 1980s, significant merger activity took place; this period saw the creation of Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union

(SIPTU) from the merger of the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland, and the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (Wallace et al., 2004).

Many of the above issues raised by critics, which are associated with multi-union settings – flexibility, collective bargaining arrangements and changes to workplace practice – may be legitimate concerns for managers. This paper takes up some of these themes, in the hope of applying a more rigorous consideration than has often been available of management views on a range of such issues: their relations with trade unions and their ability to bring about changes in work practices within multi-union workplaces, in comparison to other types of unionised workplaces.
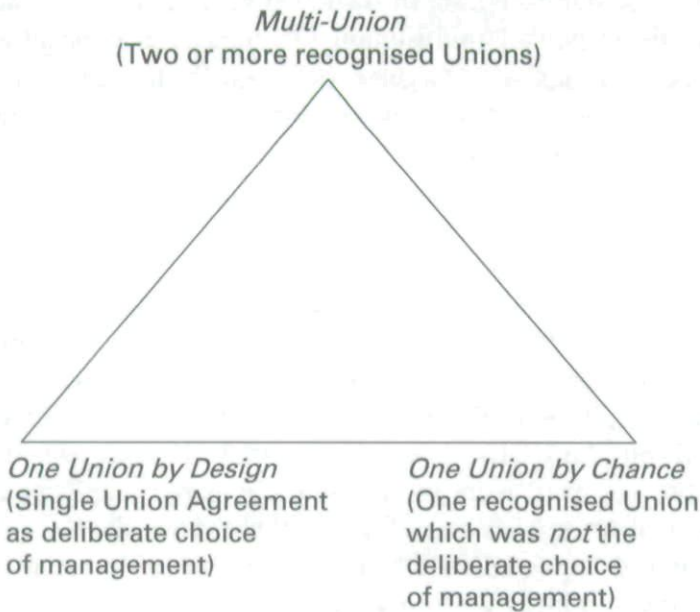
Research Sample: Outline of Data on Single and Multi-Union Workplaces

The UCD National Survey of Employee Relations and Human Resource Practices in Ireland was conducted in 1996–7 among individual workplaces in Ireland with at least twenty employees in the private and commercial public services sectors. The number of completed questionnaire responses totalled 450 (a response rate of 36 per cent), of which the unionised sample was 278. This figure included sixty-eight responses which were completed by a manager with joint responsibilities for HR and operations; the questionnaire for these managers being less detailed, the sixty-eight were excluded since it was not feasible to single out multi-union sites. Two hundred "usable" responses with sufficient detail on the numbers of workplace unions were thus available, having been completed by a manager with responsibility for Human Resources. The sample was weighted so as to be representative of Irish workplaces in the private and commercial state sectors. In order to make a number of comparisons with a more recent survey, data from an enterprise-based (as opposed to workplace-based) IBEC survey conducted in 2004 was also made available for this research. As with the UCD survey the IBEC study also excluded public services and construction but did include commercial semi-state enterprises. With a response rate of 15 per cent it was revealed that of the 397 companies for which there were completed questionnaires the unionised sample totalled 214, including eighty-eight which were multi-union.

Multi-union workplaces are those characterised as having formal recognition by management of at least two trade unions (as in Millward, 1994). As mentioned earlier, one hundred and eighteen management respondents to the UCD survey said they recognised one trade union while a further eighty-two recognised two or more trade unions; thus 59 per cent of the unionised workplaces had one recognised union while 41 per cent had two or more. A further question sought to ascertain whether, if there was just one recognised trade union, this was by chance or by management choice. Managers were asked whether they had deliberately chosen to secure a single union agreement to which the responses invited were 'yes', 'no' or 'not applicable due to more than one union'. Those who responded 'yes' are referred to as workplaces with a single union agreement, or one union by design; the respondents who replied 'no' are referred to as workplaces where there is one union 'by chance' since this form of representation was not particularly an outcome chosen by management (see diagram below). Of the 199 respondents to this question, sixty-two replied yes, compared to sixty-one replying no and a further seventy-six said the question was not applicable since they had more than one union. Just under one-third of unionised workplaces therefore had single union agreements chosen by management, with a similar number also having one union where this was not a deliberate choice, i.e. by chance.

The discussion is broadly divided into three sections, contrasting the three types of unionised workplace but with the focus of interest being on multi-union workplaces and the characteristics, difficulties and problems with which they are commonly associated, as raised in the previous section. Firstly, a brief summary is presented which describes the characteristics of such workplaces according to age, size, ownership and so on. Secondly, data are examined in order to gauge the 'health' of management–union relationships and the industrial relations climate. To this end, indicators of overt and covert conflict are outlined, such as strike action and absenteeism, in order to see which forms, if any, are more prevalent among multi-union workplaces compared to the others. The third section is concerned with issues of work organisation and management-led changes which may affect the division of labour (and perhaps, implicitly, the rationale for established forms of union representation).

Diagram – Three Types of Unionised Workplaces

Multi-Union
(Two or more recognised Unions)

One Union by Design
(Single Union Agreement
as deliberate choice
of management)

One Union by Chance
(One recognised Union
which was *not* the
deliberate choice
of management)

Perceived obstacles to management's desire to introduce changes in technology or other innovations are considered. The assumptions from the above literature are open to question here, such as the view that management may have more problematic relationships with trade unions in a multi-union environment, in comparison with those with just one recognised trade union.

1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND DESCRIPTION OF MULTI-UNION WORKPLACES IN IRELAND

Summary of General Characteristics of Multi- and Single Union Workplaces[1]

Among the sample of 200 unionised workplaces from which usable responses were obtained for the appropriate questions, various characteristics could be attributed to multi- and single union workplaces. These focused on issues such as age of workplace, size, sector, ownership and so on, and more detail on these characteristics was provided in the IAM conference paper (Sinclair, 2005). However the UCD and the IBEC surveys appear to hold few surprises in terms

of the characteristics of the various types of unionised workplaces with the possible exception of ownership/nationality. For the most part the frequency of multi-union workplaces is concentrated in older organisations with large workforces. With regard to sector, there was a larger concentration of multi-union workplaces in commercial semi-states, compared to the private sector, and services and transport had the highest proportion of multi-union workplaces. In the IBEC survey, sectors with the highest proportion of multi-union companies tended to be paper/print/publishing, chemicals/pharmaceuticals and healthcare/medical devices. According to both the UCD and IBEC data, foreign owned firms were more likely than Irish owned workplaces or companies to be multi-union, and this was the case also with the frequency of single union agreements by design. From the UCD survey, slightly more foreign owned workplaces (46 per cent) were multi-union compared to 37 per cent of those which were Irish owned. In breaking down the UCD survey responses by nationality the largest group of foreign owned unionised workplaces were found to be US owned, at twenty-three, with twelve of these being multi-union (52 per cent) in contrast to 37 per cent of Irish owned and 45 per cent of UK owned workplaces. Foreign owned workplaces were more likely to have deliberately chosen single union agreements, at 41 per cent of those with foreign ownership who answered the question, compared to a quarter of those with Irish ownership. US owned workplaces had a high proportion of single union agreements, namely eleven of the twenty-three. It may have been expected from the earlier narrative and critique of multi-unionism that Irish and UK owned workplaces may be more likely than other nationalities to be multi-union. Nevertheless the phenomenon of US ownership and such characteristics has been pointed out elsewhere (Roche and Geary, 2000; Wallace, 1982).

2. MANAGEMENT AND TRADE UNION RELATIONS: STRIKES, INDUSTRIAL ACTION AND OTHER FORMS OF CONFLICT IN MULTI- AND SINGLE UNION WORKPLACES

As referred to earlier, critics of multi-unionism have often claimed that workplace conflicts are caused or aggravated by the presence of

two or more trade unions and the various inter-union rivalries which can ensue. Actual disputes over demarcation and 'restrictive practices' were highlighted as problems for efficiency, among other concerns for management and in some instances, for unions themselves. Data was examined from the UCD survey in order to probe these issues of overt and covert conflicts, particularly instances of industrial and strike action. Respondents were also asked to rate the quality of relations with the trade unions at their workplace. In all cases only a minority of workplaces had experienced industrial action, but some differences emerged between strike action and other forms of industrial action among the different workplaces. Of the whole group of 209 unionised workplaces from which responses were received, twenty-one, or 10 per cent, reported strike action had taken place in the previous five years, and twenty-six, or 12.4 per cent, reported industrial action other than strikes in the same period.

Questions on industrial and strike action were cross-tabulated against multi-union workplaces and those with one union as set out in Table 2.1 below. Twelve of the eighty-two multi-union

Table 2.1: Strikes and Industrial Action in Multi- and Single Union Workplaces

	Strike Action in Last 5 yrs	Other Industrial Action in Last 5 yrs
	Number of Workplaces	Number of Workplaces
All Unionised Workplaces n=209	21 (10%)	26 (12.4%)
Multi-Union Workplaces n=82	12 (14.6%)	15 (18.3%)
Workplaces with Single Union Agreement n=62	1 (1.6%)	7 (11.3%)
Workplaces with One Union by Chance n=62	8 (12.9%)	4 (6.5%)

respondents, or 14.6 per cent of this group, reported strike activity in the previous five years compared to only one respondent with a single union agreement. However of those with one union by chance, eight of sixty-two, or 12.9 per cent of this group, reported strike action over that period i.e. only a slightly lower percentage than for multi-union workplaces. In terms of industrial action *other than strikes* however, again multi-union workplaces had a higher propensity for such action: fifteen of the multi-union workplaces, or 18.3 per cent of this group, reported industrial action other than strikes. The two types of one-union workplaces appeared to have different profiles in respect of industrial action however. Of those with a single union agreement who responded seven (11.3 per cent) reported such action compared to just four (6.5 per cent) of work-places with one union by chance. Figures here are often too small from which to draw significant conclusions; nevertheless, workplaces with one union by chance and one union by choice do not necessarily share a similar profile with regard to strikes and other forms of industrial action; the number of unions may be less relevant than other workplace characteristics. Differences may be accounted for by the smaller size of workplaces characteristic of those with one union by chance, by other factors relevant to the industrial relations climate, or the content of agreements including 'no strike' clauses (Millward, 1994).

Turning to other forms of conflict recognised in industrial rela-tions literature as 'individualised' withdrawal of employee consent, questions were asked about levels of absenteeism and staff turnover among employees over the previous five years, namely whether these had increased significantly, slightly, stayed the same or decreased; see Tables 2.2 and 2.3 below.

It can be seen from Table 2.2 that the majority of respondents reported that staff absenteeism had stayed the same in the previous five years. There had however been significant or slight increases in some workplaces. Of all categories, workplaces with a single union agreement were the most likely to report increased absenteeism, with 30 per cent reporting an increase to a greater or lesser extent, compared to 14 per cent of multi-union respondents who were the least likely to report increases.

Table 2.2: Levels of Staff Absenteeism in Multi- and Single
Union Workplaces

No. of Unions	Levels of Staff Absenteeism in Last 5 Yrs		
	Increased Significantly or Slightly Nos. (%)	Stayed the Same Nos. (%)	Decreased Significantly or Slightly Nos. (%)
All Unionised Workplaces n=206	41 (20%)	114 (55%)	51 (25%)
1 Union n=117	29 (25%)	66 (56%)	22 (19%)
2+ Unions n=80	11 (14%)	40 (50%)	29 (36%)
Single Union Agreement n=61	18 (30%)	26 (43%)	17 (28%)
Workplaces with One Union by Chance n=62	12 (19%)	41 (66%)	9 (15%)

In relation to staff turnover, significant numbers of respondents reported this to have stayed the same over five years, although this was not in the majority of workplaces within every category (see Table 2.3 below). Those from multi-union workplaces were the least likely to report increased levels, with 41 per cent reporting slight or significant increases. Of those respondents with single union agreements, 48 per cent recorded an increase in staff turnover and 13 per cent a decrease. The highest numbers of respondents reporting increased levels of turnover were in workplaces with one union by chance, at 55 per cent of this category. Thus some difference in the frequency of conflict can be found among the different types of unionised workplaces; moreover in respect of the *form* of conflict there are notable differences as to whether conflict takes a more collective, or individualised form. This may imply that the channels available for the expression of employee conflict differ in nature within the different types of unionised workplaces.

Table 2.3: Levels of Staff Turnover in Multi- and Single
Union Workplaces

No. of Unions	Levels of Staff Turnover in Last 5 Years		
	Increased Significantly or Slightly Nos. (%)	Stayed the Same Nos. (%)	Decreased Significantly or Slightly Nos. (%)
All Unionised Workplaces n=207	94 (45%)	90 (43%)	23 (11%)
1 Union n=116	58 (50%)	46 (40%)	12 (10%)
2+ Unions n=81	33 (41%)	39 (48%)	9 (11%)
Single Union Agreement n=60	29 (48%)	23 (38%)	8 (13%)
Workplaces with One Union by Chance n=60	33 (55%)	23 (38%)	4 (7%)

Ratings of Management–Union Relations
Management views were sought on less tangible aspects of conflict
and co-operation, namely their attitudes towards the quality of
management–union relations at their workplace. The majority of
respondents rated relations to be good or very good in all types
of unionised workplaces; of the eighty-two respondents from multi-
union workplaces, 83 per cent of this group reported good or very
good relations, and the more unions were recognised at the work-
place, the more likelihood of good union–management relations
being recorded. Those with single union agreements showed a
similar level of positive relations however, but those with one union
by chance recorded the lowest proportion of positive responses
with forty-two of the sixty respondents (70 per cent) reporting good
or very good relations. Again, these findings do not suggest
large variations but may imply that the channels for contact, includ-
ing the expression of conflicts, grievances or dialogue between
employees and management, differ among the types of workplaces.

**Table 2.4: Rating of Management–Trade Union Relations,
in Multi- and Single Union Workplaces**

	Rating of Management–TU Relations				
	Very Good	Good	Poor/ V. Poor	Percentage V. good/ Good	TOTAL
Overall Unionised Workplaces	70	89	43	79%	202
No. of TUs: 1	39	52	26	78%	117
No. of TUs: 2	19	19	9	85%	47
No. of TUs: 3	12	18	5	86%	35
of which, Single Union Agreement	15	38	9	85%	62
One Union by Chance	28	14	18	70%	60

Nevertheless, the presence of one or more unions might appear less important in influencing the nature and form of workplace conflict and the general climate of management–union relations, than specific arrangements or other factors which might condition such relations.

3. CHANGES IN WORKPLACE PRACTICE, IN MULTI- AND SINGLE UNION WORKPLACES

This section of the paper, it is hoped, might shed some light on the perception that multi-union organisation inhibits management's ability to make change and introduce flexible or other innovative work practices, and that traditional demarcations between work groups or trade unions do not facilitate such changes. The UCD survey contained a significant section on the Management of Workplace Change, which investigated innovations initiated in the previous five years. The changes themselves concerned a range of practices including payment systems, working time, numbers employed and work organisation. Since the original rationale for union organisation was its relationship to the division of labour, job territories and their protection, three broad groupings of new work

practices which may affect or disturb the division of labour were decided upon as the focus for questions on the various innovations. These groupings were listed in the survey as:

i. Changes in working practices (e.g. multi-skilling, work re-organisation, teamworking);
ii. Introduction of new plant and technology;
iii. Introduction of initiatives to involve employees (e.g. quality circles, suggestion schemes, team briefings).

The survey questions first asked respondents to indicate whether or not such a change had been made, and secondly, which approach had been used to manage the change(s) from a list of four options. Further questions then related to any obstacles management had faced in introducing such changes and their preferences for managing change in the future. The responses were cross-tabulated as for earlier sections, so as to compare the multi-union workplaces with those where there was just one union by chance or by design.

Changes in Work Practices, New Plant/Technology and Employee Involvement Initiatives

As Table 2.5 indicates, it would appear that most workplaces *had* brought about changed work practices, including multi-union workplaces, but those with a single union agreement were slightly more likely to have done so than others. Of the sixty-one workplaces with a single union agreement by design, forty-three had brought about changes as in example i. above, compared with fifty-one of eighty-one (63 per cent) of those workplaces with two or more unions.

With respect to the introduction of new plant and technology, similar findings occur. The multi-union workplaces were just as likely as those with a single union agreement to have introduced these changes, with 85 per cent and 84 per cent of each group of respondents respectively claiming to have introduced new plant and technology while just 75 per cent of those with one union by chance had done so.

With regard to new initiatives to involve employees as in iii., workplaces with single union agreements by design were the most likely, and those with one union by chance were the least likely, to have introduced such employee initiatives. Multi-union workplaces

Table 2.5: Changed Management Practices in Last
5 years – Multi- and Single Union Workplaces

No. of Unions	Whether Changes in Workplace Practice Initiated by Management in Relation to:					
	Work Practices		New Plant/ Technology		New Initiatives e.g. Teams/QCs	
	Yes	of Total No.	Yes	of Total No.	Yes	of Total No.
All Unionised Sample	67%	133	82%	165	65%	130
One Union	69%	108	79%	113	65%	110
2 + TUs	63%	81	85%	79	63%	81
Single Union Agreement	70%	61	84%	62	71%	62
One Union by Chance	60%	53	75%	57	59%	54

were almost as likely, at 63 per cent of these respondents, to have seen their introduction as the whole group of workplaces with one union. It appears that across the range of innovations therefore, management in all three types of workplaces was able for the most part to introduce the changes they sought. New plant/technology was the change most commonly introduced from the three innovations selected for this paper. Differences are marginal but again implied is that the number of trade unions has less significance than critics of multi-unionism have suggested, with regard to management's ability to innovate in these areas of workplace practice. Those with single union agreements did differ in many respects from those with one union by chance, the latter group being least likely to innovate across all areas of change. Again, several factors may be suggested in explaining such differences, such as workplace size; those with one union by chance tend to be smaller and may have less opportunity for innovation, for example. The data also contain details on the institutional industrial relations arrangements such as the frequency of management–union meetings or time off permitted to shop stewards

(Sinclair, 2005), however the numbers of responses to such questions are small. Nevertheless it may be suggested that both multi-union workplaces and those with deliberate single union agreements tend to invest more in these institutional arrangements compared to workplaces with one union by chance. It may be that certain types of workplaces enjoy a 'good' industrial relations climate due to greater attempts at nurturing management–union relationships, an issue which may warrant more attention than merely taking account of union structures.

Obstacles to Management's Ability to Introduce Workplace Changes

As discussed above most respondents did not indicate they had been unable to introduce changes; just thirty of 196 respondents reported they were unable to bring about changes in work practices such as multi-skilling. The survey went on to ask whether, and for what reason(s), management had been unable to introduce such changes over the previous five-year period, from a list of options. These options were:

a) resistance from senior/middle/first-line management
b) resistance from trade union works/company council representatives
c) resistance from employees
d) skill shortages
e) poor training provision/poor quality management
f) lack of time/funds to introduce it
g) other reasons

Respondents were asked to indicate all which applied from this list; therefore some respondents suggested several reasons for their inability to introduce change. The most commonly cited reasons for inability to make change was resistance from trade unions and resistance from employees across all groups of respondents. Of twenty-eight responses citing trade union resistance, thirteen came from multi-union workplaces, seven from workplaces with a single union agreement, and eight from workplaces with one union by chance. However thirty-three cited resistance from employees, of which fifteen were from the multi-union category, seven from those with a single union agreement and eleven from those with one union

by chance. In all types of unionised workplaces resistance from *employees* was cited more frequently than resistance from trade unions. Furthermore, a number of responses from multi-union workplaces revealed that lack of time or lack of funds to introduce the initiatives had prevented management introducing the changes desired.

The general influence of trade unions on workplace change may be weak regardless, or in spite of, the number of trade unions, although other circumstances may have an effect. Millward notes that work-places in the UK with single union agreements by design were *more likely* to report obstacles to management's attempts to reorganise work than those with one union by chance or with several unions, possibly reflecting that management had conceded joint decision-making over the organisation of work, in some instances, as a way of avoiding multi-unionism (Millward, 1994: 72). Nevertheless in the majority of British workplaces management did not report any constraints on these freedoms (although more did so where there were larger numbers of negotiating groups), possibly reflecting what Millward describes as the 'common reality of the widespread lack of union influence in the sphere of work organisation' (Millward, 1994: 69). Roche and Geary furthermore have elaborated on the 'exclusionary' forms of decision-making which dominate the handling of change in Irish workplaces, whereby management's preference for 'direct employee involvement' over 'partnership with trade unions' was evident in a number of both operational and strategic areas (Roche and Geary, 2000: 18).

CONCLUSIONS

The above discussion, drawn from the UCD workplace survey data and partially from IBEC survey data of companies, attempts to explore the notion that multi-union workplaces are particularly 'problematic' and that reform of union structure was, and remains, a requirement. The purpose of the above data analysis and discussion is therefore to tease out any differences among multi-union work-places, and those with one recognised union where this was, firstly, a deliberate management choice to adopt a single union agreement, and secondly, where the recognition of one union was not management policy, described as one union 'by chance'.

Strong differences among the three types of union structure do not generally emerge, nor does there appear to be strong support for the 'myth' of multi-union workplaces as highly conflictual. Similarly, the perception of workplaces with single union agreements as 'harmonious' and strife-free is not borne out yet they do appear to have a different profile from other workplaces in areas, such as industrial action and some elements of workplace innovation. Those with one union by chance often appear markedly different from workplaces with single union agreements on issues such as individualised conflict and the extent of innovation, in spite of both types of workplace being free of the inter-union problems addressed in the earlier literature. Multi-union, and indeed single union, workplaces do not generally appear to conform with the expectations and assumptions as reported in the established literature and which particularly surrounded the excitement over single union deals as part of a 'new industrial relations' paradigm. Where they do conform 'to type' however, the number of trade unions in the workplace may be less significant in contrast to other factors as each industry or workplace has its own dynamics, traditions of employee behaviour, and other reasons that may explain inter-union as well as management-union behaviour. It may be that certain types of workplaces enjoy a 'good' industrial relations climate if there are greater attempts at nurturing management–union relationships, an issue which may warrant more attention than merely taking account of union numbers. The remaining research for this study is intended to uncover the various dynamics and processes which condition and inform such relationships.

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1 Some differences and variations occur in statistics in all tables due to missing variables from survey responses. All percentage points are rounded up or down to nearest .5%.

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