

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS PRACTICES IN MULTI-NATIONAL COMPANIES IN IRELAND

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In line with most industrialised and many underdeveloped economies Ireland has experienced considerable international direct investment over the past twenty-five years, mostly in the manufacturing sector. Ireland's participation, for the most part as a host nation, in this internationalisation of production has had largely favourable consequences in employment terms. The impact of foreign investment on Irish industrial relations, however, remains unclear, although from time to time we read popular press reports of multi-national company (MNC) experiences which are largely disparaging. There is little doubt that the presence of MNCs in large numbers does introduce new dimensions as far as industrial relations are concerned. MNCs are controlled and often directed from centres outside national boundaries. This has obvious implications for job security and decision-making processes. Also, the balance of power between these employers and trade unions is likely to be considerably different in character to that existing between Irish employers and the unions. Furthermore, some MNCs may attempt to impose certain standards and structures in the field of industrial relations, which may be regarded as being contemptuous of native customs and values.

The effects of MNCs on employment and industrial relations are well documented for many industrialised and Third World countries (see, for example, reports by the International Institute for Labour Studies and the International Labour Office). In Ireland, the impact on employment has been addressed [McAleese, 1977; NES, 1981; O'Suilleabhain, 1983], and the Federated Union of Employers (1980)* has conducted a survey of employment conditions and industrial relations practices in a sample of MNCs. The latter is largely factual and provides a useful benchmark as a basis for comparisons. However, this study does not contain any direct trade union input with the result that little is known about the relationship between MNCs and trade unions.

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From an industrial relations standpoint, the presence of a variety of foreign-owned companies undoubtedly has opened our minds to a greater understanding of different values and ideological positions, and also in recent times to the often harsh imperatives of the international capitalist order. While theory and intuition might lead us to believe that MNCs are different from indigenous industry in employment practices and decision-making processes, there is little empirical evidence, based on Irish experience, which would allow us either to describe or explain industrial relations practices in MNCs. With the exception of an unpublished paper [Nolan, McAleese and Coughlan, 1978] which focussed primarily on the strike-proneness of MNCs, and a regional study on local industrial relations practices, [Wallace, 1982], there has been no attempt to systematically study industrial relations in MNCs. This neglect is further in evidence on reading the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Industrial Relations (1981), which represented the first attempt at a comprehensive assessment of Irish industrial relations; data on MNCs in the industrial relations context was notably absent, and no reference was made as to the significance or importance of this sector. Such disregard clearly represents a serious gap in our knowledge of sectoral attributes of industrial relations. We also lack knowledge on the various industrial relations issues and practices in MNCs which may be regarded as particularly problematic or profoundly positive in their impact. In this article we attempt to provide some insights into the dynamics of MNC industrial relations. As this is an exploratory study, we would like our observations and conclusions to be regarded as no more than preliminary or tentative in the attempt to achieve a better understanding of industrial relations in MNCs.

Methodology, Sample and Variables

As stated, the voluminous international literature on MNC industrial relations dimensions, including numerous analyses of the impact of MNCs on various economies, developed and underdeveloped, contains discussions on a range of issues which continue to emerge repeatedly. The research findings of these studies and discussions with employer and trade union representatives influenced the design of this preliminary study.

Our sample consists of 27 MNCs operating in the Republic. A series of personal interviews were undertaken with management personnel and with trade union representatives and/or shop stewards who dealt with these companies. In all, we interviewed 27 personnel and industrial relations executives and 27 trade union personnel. In seeking to examine the possible sources of divergent industrial relations practices in MNCs in Ireland we decided to place the focus on those companies which could be categorised in terms of the prevailing quality of their respective industrial relations. For simplicity, we employ the terms "exceptionally good"

(GIR) and “exceptionally poor” (PIR) industrial relations to represent two extreme scenarios, and the insertion of companies into these categories is the result of a consensus of management and trade union interests. The reputation of a company’s industrial relations was not assessed primarily in conflict terms. On the contrary, the quality of industrial relations was considered in terms of a range of issues, such as the availability of information to employees, possibilities for joint consultation, the handling of discipline and grievances, general pay and conditions of work and interpersonal employer-employee relationships. Starting with a list of over 200 MNCs in Ireland we were eventually successful in categorising 75 as having exceptionally good or exceptionally poor industrial relations on the basis of the expert opinions of both management and trade union officials. This list of companies was formed as a result of interviews with head office and regional executives of the Industrial Development Authority and the Federated Union of Employers and with full-time officials from trade unions representing members in MNCs throughout the provinces. Thirty-seven companies were selected so as to give representation to industrial sector, technology type, regional distribution and company size. We succeeded in obtaining completed questionnaires from both interest groups in 27 of the 37 companies. Details of the sectoral distribution of both categories of MNCs are contained in Table 1.

In examining selected industrial relations environments of a sample of MNCs in Ireland, the study focussed on a wide range of industrial relations and personnel management issues. This paper reports on matters concerning job security, information disclosure, consultation and trade union recognition practices.

Methodology, Sample and Variables

Table 1: MNCs Categorized by Quality of Industrial Relations, by Sector

	Companies' Quality of Industrial Relations	
	Good (GIR)	Poor (PIR)
Food, Drink & Tobacco	2	1
Engineering	2	2
Electronics	5	2
Health Care	1	
Chemicals		
Wood		
Oil		
Textiles/Clothing		3
Total	16	11

Job Security and MNCs

The fact of foreign ownership and control of the enterprise creates a potentially difficult position for trade unions. While MNCs have played a major part in employment creation in the less developed areas of all the countries in the EEC [Liebhaberg, 1980] and particularly in Ireland, they are also known, in some instances, for their propensity to engage in production switching [ILO, 1976a; Morgan and Blanpain, 1977; Kujawa, 1980]. This capacity to transfer production to another centre for whatever reason or combination of reasons (adverse industrial relations climate, political instability, or high labour costs, etc.), stems from the inherent flexibility of the MNC. In such circumstances, the trade union, confronted with a major and often immediate threat to employment maintenance, is placed in a considerably weaker position from the balance of power standpoint than that typically found with home-based companies.

The results of our survey of management and trade union representatives on this issue are contained in Table 2. Both management and trade union respondents in both categories of firms agreed that foreign ownership has clear implications for security of employment. Predictably, union representatives express greater concern than management. In those firms with poor industrial relations the matter of job security looms very large for union representatives. We should point out that this is not presented as a causal relationship, that is, poor industrial relations is not viewed here as a function of high concern about job security, or that the latter causes poor industrial relations. The evidence presented here simply shows that concern about job security comes sharply into focus in situations where industrial relations has deteriorated, but in the context of this study we cannot state the extent to which the job security dimension has contributed to this state of affairs, if at all. Clearly, such high concern suggests that union representatives are conscious of a diminution in their bargaining power and in many respects this crystallises one of the major union pre-occupations in their dealings with MNCs. We often read press reports of trade union officials' inability to establish contact with MNC head offices, and occasionally there are instances where MNCs of high

Table 2: Management and Trade Union Views on Impact of Foreign Ownership on Employees' Perceptions about Security of Employment

	Companies' Quality of Industrial Relations	
	Good	Poor
Adverse Impact	Management 75% (12) Trade Union 50% (8)	Management 45% (5) Trade Union 90% (10)
Yes	25 (4)	45 (5)
No	75 (12)	55 (6)

repute arbitrarily close plants or reduce workforce levels without allowing trade unions to influence events. It is not surprising, therefore, to see job security as a central element in the context of a MNC environment. Also, the data in Table 2 shows a high level of concern among union representatives in those firms with good industrial relations, which simply reinforces the underlying fear about the maintenance of employment. The responses of management display a broadly similar pattern to that of the trade union representatives, but, as one would expect, their concern is of a much lower key. The fact that it is evident even in the firms with good industrial relations shows that employment maintenance is a fundamental and critical issue in industrial relations in MNCs. The following observations about job security were made during the course of our interviews and illustrate both the source of the concern and at the same time the benefits of employment in MNCs.

Trade Union Respondents:

"The MNC provides greater job security because of the backing of enormous resources in international markets. As the years go by the greater is the sense of job security."

"The company is really only here to capitalise on the favourable set-up and low labour costs and once it gets what it wants, it will pull out."

"The company opened in 1964 and any feeling of job insecurity has long ago been dispelled. Knowing that the company has closed down plants in other countries makes the workers conscious of the possibility of a pull-out."

"They all have subsidiaries throughout the world and the possibility is there for a switch of production to another plant."

Management Respondents:

"There is no feeling of security in the present economic climate, either for MNCs or Irish companies."

"The feeling that the company can pull out is a factor — the workers feel that decisions are made externally and finance is also controlled from abroad."

"The workers don't look at it as a foreign company. It has taken on a very Irish complexion and people appreciate this."

"The Irish working class is very alienated — they expected and got the worst from Irish employers. Now they see foreign companies as a decided improvement."

"It is international markets rather than foreign ownership which affects job security."

"Workers generally feel that being part of a big concern affords them more security."

"If it was Irish-owned it would probably be closed by now."

Table 3 contains the views of trade union representatives on job security on the assumption that the companies concerned should be Irish-owned. Clearly, there is a view that home-based companies provide greater job security, insofar as they are less likely to disinvest than MNCs. However, this view is far from being unanimous. Thus, the matter of job security is not viewed as a problem to be found exclusively with MNCs. Indeed, as

Table 3: *Views of Trade Union Representatives on Job Security if Companies Irish-owned*

Job Security	Companies' Quality of Industrial Relations			
	Good		Poor	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
More Secure	31	(5)	55	(6)
No Difference	63	(10)	36	(4)
No Answer	6	(1)	9	(1)

a result of substantial job losses in most parts of the private sector in recent years it is not surprising to find that trade union representatives do not necessarily see indigenous industry as offering the desired succour as far as job security is concerned. It is reasonable to conclude that job security is an issue which pervades all industry in the private sector, but is more acute with MNCs because of the additional, and unique, variables in their character which may put employment at risk.

Information Disclosure

A review of the literature on the matter of information disclosure practices in MNCs points to a widespread concern by trade unions [ILO, 1976, a; ILO, 1976, b; Morgan and Blanpain, 1977; Blanpain, Eddy, Gladstone and Günther, 1979]. Trade unions in European countries are concerned particularly about information being made available on various decisions, and strategies at the multi-national level of the enterprise, and show less concern about localised information requirements. However, for the most part, the international trade union movement has failed to define and implement a global strategy which would attempt to counteract alleged production-switching strategies of MNCs. From the MNCs standpoint, a decision to restrict or curtail the availability of certain information is to be expected and probably stems more from the culture and imperatives of the business decision-making environment than from an obsessive anti-trade union bias. To remain successful, most business organisations in a competitive environment must limit their information flows to competitors, interest groups and even governments. For MNCs trade union demands for more global strategic information probably are regarded (not differently) than demands from other quarters. As Lloyd Ulman (1975) pointed out in a treatise on multinational unionism, and commenting specifically on MNCs information disclosure practices, "the monopoly of information is one of the most important bases of monopoly power, and the power to discriminate among markets, if that is an objective of corporate policy, can be served by restraining the flow of information across national market boundaries." Thus, in limiting, or restricting

Table 4: *Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction with Information Disclosure and Trade Union Representatives' Ratings of Disclosure Practices*

Satisfaction with Information Disclosure	Companies' Quality of Industrial Relations							
	Good				Poor			
	Management %	Trade Union (N)	Management %	Trade Union (N)	Management %	Trade Union (N)	Management %	Trade Union (N)
Satisfied	81	(13)	44	(7)	82	(9)	27	(3)
Dissatisfied	19	(3)	50	(8)	9	(1)	73	(8)
No Reply	—	—	6	(1)	9	(1)	—	—
Rating Against Other Companies	Rating Against Other Companies: Much Better 13 (2), Better 18 (3), Same 69 (11), Worse 11 (3)							
Total	16							

the availability of information MNCs enhance their power in the international market place. A review of the literature on the matter of information disclosure in MNCs points to a widespread concern by trade unions (ILO, 1976). In looking at information disclosure practices in MNCs it is necessary to draw a distinction between two different types of information. The first concerns information about the functioning of the MNC at the centre, and here unions rarely have been successful in their demands. The second concerns information at the level of the subsidiary, which is sought by unions in order to allow them to engage in normal collective bargaining processes. In this section we concentrate on the practices of MNCs in Ireland in this area, as it is unlikely that the Irish trade union movement will be spectacularly successful in securing central strategic information where more mature and powerful movements have failed. In our discussions with MNC management and trade union representatives we sought to establish whether the parties were satisfied or dissatisfied in general with the information being disclosed by management, and also how this stood in relation to their knowledge of practices in other companies. We also attempted to establish specific additional information requirements. Table 4 contains responses on satisfaction and ratings. Commenting specifically on MNC information disclosure practices, it would be most unusual to find widespread satisfaction with information disclosure among trade union representatives, and equally it would be surprising to find that management should be dissatisfied. Unions, representing the permanent opposition, will always claim more information,

Table 5: *Management and Trade Union Representatives Views on the Provision of Further Information*

Further Information on:	Companies' Quality of Industrial Relations							
	Good				Poor			
	Managements' Views							
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
Costs	13	(2)	87	(14)	36	(4)	64	(7)
Profits	—	—	100	(16)	36	(4)	64	(7)
New Machinery Plans	56	(9)	44	(7)	55	(6)	45	(5)
New Product Plans	50	(8)	50	(8)	55	(6)	45	(5)
	Union Representatives' Views							
Costs	50	(8)	50	(8)	64	(7)	36	(4)
Profits	63	(10)	37	(6)	73	(8)	27	(3)
New Machinery Plans	37	(6)	63	(10)	45	(5)	55	(6)
New Product Plans	31	(5)	69	(11)	45	(5)	55	(6)
Manpower Plans	44	(7)	50	(8)	45	(5)	55	(6)

while management will seek to defend the status quo regarding prevailing practices. Such conjecture or prophesy is borne out by the data in Table 4. Here, we see evidence of widespread satisfaction among management in both categories of companies, and a reasonable threshold of satisfaction among trade union representatives. The significance of the data in Table 4 lies more in the fact that information is being disclosed by MNCs in Ireland and it is also interesting to note that the trade union representatives view existing practices as largely comparable with known developments in other companies. Thus, we may conclude that MNCs are providing certain information to employees and there is no compelling evidence to suggest that these organisations are excessively or more restrictive than other companies in their information disclosure practices. In summary, the practices of MNCs do not appear to be substantially different from the prevailing norm for Irish industry as a whole.

Table 5 reveals a marked difference between management and trade union representatives with regard to the provision of further information on a variety of issues. On the whole management do not see any need for further information on costs and profits, although there is some difference of opinion in companies regarded as having poor industrial relations. And approximately half of all managers interviewed agreed that further information should be disclosed on such matters as new machinery and product plans. By contrast, trade union representatives place greater stress on the need for more information on costs and profits. These differ-

ences in emphasis tell us much about the immediate interests of both parties. It could be argued that management see a need for further disclosure of development plans because they recognise the possibility of confrontation or difficulty in the implementation of change. Their reticence on further disclosure on profits and costs is to be expected because of collective bargaining implications. The trade union stance is interesting insofar as it shows their concern to be primarily with pay-related issues. They seek to enhance their position in the pay bargaining context and do not accord a high priority to long-term development issues. Thus, Irish trade unionists appear to be less concerned with the sorts of issues frequently ascribed to union interests in the MNC literature. The content of their demands for further information does not suggest that their dealings with MNCs are materially different from their activities in other companies in general.

Consultation Practices

Formal or informal consultative processes allow trade unions and employees the opportunity to express their views on various issues before management make decisions. With MNCs there are likely to be specific difficulties. For example, unions are likely to find it difficult to obtain access to the real decision-makers, that is, at the transnational level of the enterprise. Thus, involvement in decisions at the planning stage is not likely to occur. Consultation, where it occurs, is much more likely to be a localised affair. In our survey of 27 MNCs we came across a variety of consultative institutions, which together represent a particularly healthy aspect of industrial relations policy in this sector.

Twenty-four of the MNCs surveyed practiced some form of consultation. The consultative institutions took various forms, such as suggestion schemes, voluntary and statutory safety committees, production committees and in 4 cases there were formal works councils, whose membership included management and trade union representatives. There was no evidence of a works council composed exclusively of trade union representatives. Besides these formal institutions we were made aware of various informal contacts between shop stewards and management, where the discussions effectively amounted to an ongoing consultative process. There was no evidence of any transnational consultation process, where unions might have the opportunity of meeting with their counterparts in other countries and with management at the enterprise headquarters. All consultative institutions dealt exclusively with issues at the level of the subsidiary. Management and trade union officials viewed the prevailing forms of consultation as broadly similar to those found in Irish-owned firms. Table 6 illustrates the response of management and trade union representatives to consultation.

Before discussing the results in general we wish to return briefly to the methodological decision where MNCs were sampled in terms of their **Trade Union Recognition**. An interesting feature of industrial quality is that while there are many documented cases of refusals by MNCs to recognise trade unions in their subsidiaries in many countries, the general picture is one of a widespread acceptance of the unions' role [Bergman, 1973; McGee, 1973; ILO, 1976a; ILO, 1977b; Stopford, 1979; Liepberg, 1980]. Our survey of Irish-based MNCs points to a similar conclusion. During the mid-1960s there were a few instances of resistance and intransigence by new MNCs, but these often flared to prominence because of conflicts about whether appropriate majorities of employees favoured unionisation, and a concern by management to achieve an American-type bargaining unit where one trade union would hold exclusive representation rights. In a highly unionised country such as Ireland these conflicts became disproportionately conspicuous, and one result in later years was the growing acceptance of post-entry closed shop agreements between new MNCs and one or other of the largest general unions. These generally covered manual workers, as in many instances there remained a resistance to the unionisation of white-collar workers.

Table 6: *Views on the Usefulness of the Consultation Arrangements in the Context of the Company's Industrial Relations Climate*

	Companies' Quality of Industrial Relations							
	Good				Poor			
	Management %	(N)	Trade Union %	(N)	Management %	(N)	Trade Union %	(N)
Useful	63	(10)	63	(10)	55	(6)	27	(3)
Not Useful	25	(4)	6	(1)	36	(4)	20	(2)
No Consultation	12	(2)	12	(2)	9	(1)	8	(1)
No Reply	—	—	19	(3)	—	—	45	(5)

On the whole management and trade union representatives saw consultation as a valuable and necessary element in the context of improving the company's industrial relations climate. Predictably, union representatives expressed some concern about the limits to the consultation process, whereby access to the core decision-making process was completely blocked. In a few cases there was doubt on the part of trade union representatives as to whether the local management themselves had any significant access or involvement in the central decision-making process. Also, they complained that management seemed to emphasise consultation when the enterprise found itself in difficult economic circumstances.

Our survey of MNCs shows that union recognition is not a major problem in the general context of industrial relations. All 27 firms in our survey were unionised, and in only 7 cases was there evidence from trade union representatives of difficulty in achieving recognition. In the other 20 firms there was an agreement with a particular union that union membership would form an integral part of the conditions of employment, thus ensuring a closed shop for various categories of workers. The defined quality of industrial relations in the various firms was not a factor which separated MNC practices on the question of trade union recognition.

Discussion and Conclusions

As we pointed out in the introduction to this paper, this research should be viewed as no more than a pilot study which provides some insights into the conduct of certain industrial relations practices within MNCs in Ireland. The sample of companies, drawn from various industrial sectors and regions, may be regarded as reasonably representative of the general MNC population and we believe our results do cover a range of situations in terms of enterprise parentage, size, location, technology type and length of time established. Furthermore, our decision to stratify the sample according to a company's quality of industrial relations was useful, and perhaps unique, insofar as it allowed us to examine whether certain practices might be associated with or be a function of distinct forms of industrial relations environments. In addition, our access to both management and trade union representative views allows us to construct a more balanced picture of the practice of industrial relations in MNCs.

Before discussing the results in general we wish to return briefly to the methodological decision where MNCs were sampled in terms of their quality of industrial relations. An interesting outcome of this study is the way in which a consensus emerged on the various issues addressed, but no particular consensus could be ascribed to the prevailing quality of industrial relations. In other words, MNCs which were agreed by all interests as having particularly poor industrial relations, could not also be charged as being deficient in the provision of information, be slow to enter into consultative arrangements with employees, or refusing to recognise trade unions. Similarly, MNCs with exceptionally good industrial relations did not always show high ratings on these same issues. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest that the absence or presence of any or all of these factors leads to the development or emergence of a particular quality in the industrial relations of the enterprise. Neither does it follow that a particular quality of industrial relations assures a negative or positive outcome on these same factors. The fact that one cannot establish a causal relationship suggests that the notion of a company having good or poor industrial relations is a somewhat fluid proposition in the present context. Clearly, it is not an absolute state, but is more likely to be related to the

immediate experiences of the enterprise concerned. For example, an enterprise may move from a position of good to poor industrial relations because of the impact of the general economic climate. However, this may not affect the traditional structures which give support to the company's industrial relations practices. In summary, our experience in constructing this sample shows that the prevailing quality of industrial relations is not necessarily synonymous with the quality of these established industrial relations practices.

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the quality of certain industrial relations practices in MNCs in Ireland and our findings allow us to draw various general and specific conclusions. A key finding was that no evidence was found to support the contention that MNCs are materially different from home-based companies. On the issues addressed they do not appear to deviate from the national norm, a finding which does not conflict with the conclusions of a study of the experiences with MNCs in seven major industrialised countries [Morgan and Blanpain, 1977]. In general MNCs are regarded as no different than Irish firms and the trend seems to be one of conformity with the host country's institutions, values and practices. This is probably easier for MNCs in Ireland where, on the issues examined in this study, there are no specific legal obligations which foreign enterprises might otherwise regard as particularly onerous. Neither is there any evidence of an attempt to introduce certain practices in the areas studied, which might be regarded as alien to Irish traditions. While there were instances during the 1960s of attempts to impose certain foreign traditions, particularly in the area of trade union recognition, there seems now to be a general accommodation between MNCs and local customs and practices. This conclusion has also been reported by Kassalow (1976) and Kujawa (1980), and Liebhaber (1980) concludes on this subject by saying that "the literature . . . provides no definite evidence of any sort of cultural or industrial imperialism on the part of multinationals taken as a group."

Our various specific conclusions provide general support to the foregoing observations. Concern about job security is not an issue unique to MNCs, and our findings reinforce the observations of McAleese and Counahan (1979) and O'Hagan and McStay (1981) in regard to the matter of disinvestment, with the consequent impact on employment. There is no evidence, nor a widespread belief among trade union representatives, that MNCs are more precarious than Irish-owned industry.

Practices regarding the disclosure of information and the provision of various consultative arrangements place MNCs in Ireland in a comparatively favourable light. Unlike the situation in countries such as West Germany or France, MNCs in Ireland have no need to respect legal

obligations as there are no such regulations. Yet, our evidence shows that Irish employees of MNCs have access to substantial amounts of information, although following the international experience such information is more likely to be limited to local subjects and rarely to transnational operations [Blanpain, Ety, Gladstone and Günter, 1979]. Also, consultative arrangements appear to be widespread. Finally, on the matter of trade union recognition, the Irish experience with MNCs is broadly similar to the general European experience [ILO, 1976a; Morgan and Blanpain, 1977; Liebhaberg, 1980]. It is unusual for MNCs to overtly contest the legitimacy of the trade union in the workplace. In summary, taken together, the evidence from our survey of selected industrial relations practices in MNCs shows a clear tendency towards convergence with Irish traditions and practices. While a thorough examination of the whole range of industrial relations and personnel management practices is beyond the scope of this paper, the empirical analysis reported here suggests the existence of a comparatively stable industrial relations environment, at least in structural terms. There is no evidence of major violations or non-compliance by MNCs in the areas studied.

NOTES

¹ It is interesting to note that this perception of Irish firms offering greater job security was also found among the majority of the 224 shop stewards interviewed in the study conducted by Wallace (1982).

² See, for example, *Dispute Between the ITGWU and the EI Company, Ltd., Shannon, during 1968*. Report of the Committee of Inquiry. Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1969.

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