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Workers' responses to managerial driven change: the case of Modernisation in the Royal Mail.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the recent and high profile modernisation agenda within the Royal Mail, where a well organised union facing a unified employer has proven able to challenge market-driven change at both national and local levels (see Gall, 2003; Lyddon, 2009). Much of the study's focus concentrates on the locus of the shopfloor itself by way of an in-depth, qualitative analysis of four individual Royal Mail workplaces which differ in terms of task, age, size and geographical setting. Of particular concern here is how restructuring is perceived by workers and how this is reflected in their collective and individual responses to managerial attempts to change established working practices and intensify workloads.

While such a focus is best understood through a consideration of labour process theory, research draws heavily upon Edwards' (1988) study of conflict and accommodation, which addresses the scope for individual and collective responses to a range of structural pressures in a detailed analysis of variety of workplace settings. It will be recalled that in the case of Royal Mail, a set of relatively uniform industry-wide pressures have evoked a range of localised workgroup responses. Accordingly, a greater understanding of workers' responses to managerial driven change is sought through a consideration of Batstone et al.'s (1977) workplace study of shop stewards. This provides an evaluation of the nature of local workplace organisation and the types of worker behaviour to which it may give rise. Together these form this study's analytical framework.

The findings highlight that postal workers and their union have, on the whole, been extremely effective in limiting the downward pressures of modernisation upon workplace organisation within the UK postal service and that, as with the wider public sector, market-driven models of labour management have been mediated by both service context and worker agency (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 689).

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List of Abbreviations

BT (2010)	Business Transformation Agreement 2010
CWU	Communication Workers Union
DO	Delivery Office
DRAS	Difficult Recruitment Area Supplement
FBU	Fire Brigade Union
FTO	Full Time Official
GMB	General Municipal and Boilermakers (Union)
MLO	Mechanised Letters Office
NHS	National Health Service
NIRFA	New Industrial Relations Framework
NPM	New Public Management
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
OPG	Operational Postal Grade
PHG	Postman Higher Grade
PFI	Private Finance Initiative
POEU	Post Office Engineers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TQM	Total Quality Management
UCW	Union of Communication Workers
UPW	Union of Post Office Workers

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Chapter One: Introduction

In recent decades the UK public sector has become the focus for a modernisation programme which Bach (2010: 151) argues was intended to boost efficiency and effectiveness of the provision of state services. This has involved reform in the shape of radical changes to staffing structures and payment systems, and the organisation of work through labour management policies based on the unilateral principles of scientific management (Ironside and Seifert, 2004: 58). Whilst this may have served to de-grade and disempower many groups of public sector workers (Worrall et al., 2009; Mooney and Law, 2007; Whitfield, 2006), its effects have been mediated by a range of actors who are able, as Ironside and Seifert (2004: 69) note, to resist its logic. Such a perspective underpins the central aim of this thesis, namely a consideration of the ways in which workers have met managerial-driven change within an increasingly marketized Royal Mail.

Both Beale (2003) and Gall (2003) have noted the effectiveness of postal workers as an occupational group in tempering market-driven change in recent years. However, there have been important local differences with regard to this (Gall, 2003) in an industry where one relatively uniform group of workers are employed by one single employer. This means that an adequate analysis of worker reaction to market-driven change within the Royal Mail must be extended to examine a range of workplace settings and the context-specific factors that may give rise to particular forms of action. Accordingly, this study's research covers four individual Royal Mail workplaces which differ in terms of size, nature of work organisation, age and geographical setting. This provides a fertile environment in which to evaluate the effect of what Edwards (1988) refers to as a cluster of factors which shape the ways in which workers in their respective workplace settings respond to market-driven change in the way that they do.

While such factors are important, they are not, as has already been suggested in the case of Royal Mail, determinate and are interpreted by the main sets of actors within the workplace themselves (Edwards, 1988: 201). Particular attention, therefore, focuses on the variety of responses through which workers mediate structural pressures and the factors which, in turn, shape the nature and efficacy of these responses. Central to this is

an analysis of the dynamic relationship between structure and worker agency and the ways in which this produces particular sets of social relations, understandings and modes of worker adjustment within the workplace itself. For Batstone et al. (1977) the outcomes of this process, which they refer to as the negotiation of order, are related to the manner in which workers and their representatives are organised within the workplace. This calls for an evaluation of power relationships and how these are created and maintained within the workplace itself (ibid). There is considerable focus throughout this thesis, therefore, on the interaction and relationships between workers, their union representatives and the wider network of their parent branch and its officials.

In terms of its academic value, the study's shopfloor-level analysis addresses what has been a dearth in qualitative, empirically-based research in recent times (Whitfield and Strauss, 2004: 145; Brown and Wright: 1994). It is this depth of detailed workplace focus that sets the study apart from the extant data relating to modernisation within the Royal Mail (see for example, Gall, 2003; Beale, 2003; Beale and Mustchin, 2013). In doing so it explains, in significantly more detail, the complexities of workplace relations in a range of Royal Mail sites. The study's fieldwork took place throughout 2013-2014. As such, it is the first of its kind to carry out an analysis of industrial relations within what was a transitional phase, during which the Royal Mail moved from a nationalised industry through to privatised entity.

Finally, the study's exposition of a range of effective worker responses both to technological-driven workplace change and methods of surveillance provides, in line with Belanger and Thuderoz (2010: 136), a counterweight to a narrative that is currently vogue in the world of social science. This is that confronted with the inexorable forces driving and supporting management control, workers have no choice but to comply and submit. This means that it makes an important contribution to the current industrial relations discipline and in particular on-going debates relating to the inevitable weakening of public sector trade unionism in the face unfettered marketization. The principle methods through which this research is conducted are discussed later in the following section which provides an overview of each of the study's main chapters.

Chapter Two: The state, the public sector and modernisation

This first substantive chapter outlines the wider Marxist framework that this thesis adopts which both shapes its central arguments and provides a foundation for conceptualising modernisation. Particular attention focuses on the role played by the state with regard to the marketization of public services and how this fits with regard to its wider objective of securing an economic structure to meet business needs. From this viewpoint, it is argued that public sector reform within the UK has been driven by the essential maxim of the state within a capitalist economy; that of providing an infrastructure that facilitates the extraction of surplus value and generation of profit. Accordingly, this chapter seeks to understand worker responses to modernisation within a wider evaluation of the state as employer, provider of public services and what Allen (1960: 113) refers to as regulator in chief of a capitalist society.

While this study is primarily concerned with the current and on-going marketization of the Royal Mail, it is important to consider that contemporary trends do not exist within a vacuum (Corby and White, 1999, 3). Consequently, this chapter traces the historical development of industrial relations within the public sector within the context of the state's inherent objectives within a capitalist economy. A longer range perspective here provides scope for a critical analysis of those more popular narratives which point to the traditional image of the State as that of 'model employer' (see for example Carter and Fairbrother 1999). It is argued here that the periodic presence of more pluralistic approaches towards public sector management were borne more from political expediency than an acceptance of collective worker organisation, namely the avoidance of conflict. This sets the scene for a critical examination of the state's modernisation programme which focuses on the ideology of neo-liberalism from which it has emerged and the tenets of new public management to which it has given rise. Such an analysis provides a sound basis from which to analyse the central theme of the following chapter. This concerns an in-depth investigation into labour management and the factors which influence the ways that workers respond to this within the locale of the shopfloor itself.

Chapter Three: The management of labour, trade unions and workplace industrial relations

In following on from a more macro-level perspective, much of this chapter adopts a workplace-based focus to investigate how change is met by workers at the point of production or service delivery. It begins however, by locating the logic of market-driven reform within a wider debate about the capital-labour relationship. This takes place within the framework of labour process analysis which recognises that the central job of those in control of the means of production is to tighten control over workers' labour in order to realise maximum output and profit. It is argued here that managerial-driven attempts to reform long-standing working practices within the public sector, in tandem with a free market mechanism of service provision, is a proxy for capital accumulation (Mather et al., 2007: 109). Nevertheless, there is a recognition that such reform has been far from straightforward and has been mediated by the dialectic interplay between management action and worker reaction in different public sector settings (Worrall et al., 2009: 120). Considerable attention is given therefore, to the different approaches that management might adopt when attempting to maximise output and the variety of ways in which workers seek to resist this. Of particular interest is the nature of worker organisation and the role played by workgroup leaders in developing and sustaining the collective consciousness upon which effective workgroup action rests.

This chapter then returns to a more macro-level mode of analysis to examine some of the political and economic factors which have weakened the ability of many groups of workers to collectively regulate their workplaces in recent decades. This involves an evaluation of the state's deployment of a raft of neo-liberal based measures such as privatisation, restrictive labour laws, and workplace deregulation through which it sought to restructure employment relations within the UK (Smith and Morton, 1993). The effects of the non-standard forms of employment that this has ushered in, in conjunction with the upsurge in individually-centred human resource management initiatives are then considered. Whilst recognising that such staple features of marketization might serve to threaten the traditional collectivist methods of workers and their trade unions, this chapter moves on to provide a more optimistic prognosis for the future of worker collectivism. In doing so it again places emphasis on role of workplace leaders and their

potential in providing a narrative of common interest amongst an increasingly contingent and diverse UK labour force.

Chapter Four: Examining industrial relations in the Post Office

An analysis of the long-standing relationship between the Royal Mail, its workforce and their union representatives is the main focus of this chapter. Central to this is an evaluation of how labour relations strategies within the Royal Mail have been developed by management, the relationship of these to wider corporate objectives and how in turn they have affected and are affected by union structure, strategy (Batstone et al., 1984:1) and organic worker agency. Historically the Royal Mail formed part of, and came under the jurisdiction of, the wider Post Office before becoming a stand-alone business unit in 1986 (Gall, 2003: 24). As part of the wider public sector, the Post Office itself fell under the ambit of central government. This chapter, therefore, examines the ubiquitous influence of government policy upon industrial relations within the Post Office which it argues has been shaped by the political and economic imperatives of the wider state. It does so by adopting a historical perspective beginning with the emergence of early trade unionism and worker organisation within the Post Office. From here, attention moves on to focus upon the main political, social and economic factors that have shaped both early and post-war developments within the Post Office before finally assessing the current effects of full liberalisation more specifically on the Royal Mail itself.

Having set the scene for a discussion of the current marketization of Royal Mail, attention turns to what have more recently been a succession of new HRM-based employer initiatives and their impact upon the working practices, behavioural patterns and organisational characteristics of postal workers. It is argued here that the significant success of postal workers as an occupational group in mediating the effects of these (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 5) is in part down to their capacity to mobilise on a national scale to secure meaningful and sustained influence over the modernisation process. In a workplace context however, levels of workgroup efficacy has varied being crucially, in line with Batstone et al.'s (1977) study of shopfloor organisation, dependent upon the presence of a well organised active cohort of experienced workplace representatives, and in many cases the use or actual threat of immediate union-sponsored action by the

workgroup itself. The issue of shopfloor agency and how worker action both shapes, and is shaped by, a host of structural factors is the central concern of this study's next chapter which discusses the overall analytical framework. Again, this will be located within the wider debates relating to worker organisation and market-driven change within the context of the Royal Mail itself.

Chapter Five: Analysing workplace industrial relations

This chapter presents a discussion of the study's analytical framework which integrates Edwards' (1988) study of conflict and accommodation and Batstone et al.'s (1977) study of shop stewards in action. It is argued here that such a model offers a robust medium through which to analyse the central question of how workers react to market-driven change within an increasingly marketized Royal Mail. Edwards' focus on how structural forces both impact upon, and are mediated by, workgroup agency contributes to an understanding of the manner in which traditionally well organised workers within the Royal Mail react to the pressures of modernisation. However, unlike the case of Royal Mail, Edwards' account is based on different groups of workers in a number of industries subject to a range of forces relating to their respective product market and technical organisation of work. It cannot, therefore, provide a comprehensive means to an understanding of why a relatively homogenous group of workers, covered by a uniform agreement and facing a single employer, have displayed a variety of patterns of behaviour in response to market-driven change within their industry (see Gall, 2003). Such a situation calls for an analysis of the subjective processes through which similar structural forces are mediated at workplace level. This is provided by Batstone et al.'s study *Shop Stewards in Action* (1977) which examines the nature of local shop steward organisation and its effect on worker agency. Again, this is related to a wider discussion of industrial relations within the Royal Mail.

Chapter Six: Researching Modernisation in the Royal Mail

This chapter sets out and discusses the study's methodology. In doing it seeks to justify the rationale of a qualitative analysis of four individual Royal Mail sites that focuses on the actions and viewpoints of postal workers and their representatives at the level of the shopfloor itself. Following Edwards (1988, 188) this is central to this study's main area of

concern with the way workers react to market-driven change at this level, since an understanding of worker behaviour must focus upon struggles between workers and management at the point of production itself. Further support comes from a range of research (Beale, 2003; Gall, 2003; Beirne, 2013: Beale and Mustchin, 2013) which has identified the shopfloor as a key location where Royal Mail has, in recent times, attempted to restructure its relationship with its employees and their union. As has been already argued, resistance to this, particularly that involving the use of the strike weapon, has varied amongst workgroups within the Royal Mail and has been dependent upon a range of context-specific factors. These include management approach and its interaction with the union, nature of task, workplace size and workplace tradition (Gall, 2003: 149-163). This highlights the case for a qualitative, comparative and in-depth case study mode of enquiry, which this chapter then moves on to evaluate.

The choice of an in-depth, comparative workplace analysis leads logically on to a consideration of the case study approach to research which was this study's central means of inquiry. As a research strategy, case study research often uses techniques such as semi and unstructured interviews and observation with regard to phenomena which require the close observation of the researcher and sensitivity and awareness of the facts from interviewees within the process (Webb and Webb, 1932: 41, 136). It will be argued that the on-going popularity of case study in the field of industrial relations reflects its suitability as an approach which provides insight into complex social phenomena (Kitay and Callus, 1998: 101). Whilst this might be the case, attention will also be drawn to what has been regarded as a shift away from such qualitative forms of research in recent years towards more quantitative managerial-focused methods (Whitfield, 2000: 145; Brown and Wright, 1994: 154). This is, to some extent, a reflection of the reduction in trade union influence in workplaces (Brown and Wright, 1994: 160-161). However, it is argued here that in an industry in which trade unionism remains strong and reminiscent of a period in which qualitative, empirically-based research enjoyed significant success in providing insights into strike proneness, shop steward activity and restrictive practices (ibid., 1994: 158), the use of qualitative case study research remains a relevant tool of analysis.

This chapter then provides an overview of the two main areas of Royal Mail's operation from which the samples were drawn before providing details of each workplace under investigation. This includes workplace biography and the contractual situation, trade union status, gender, and numbers of those interviewed in each workplace. This is followed by an evaluation of the validity and reliability of the study's research methods within the context of the workplaces themselves. Included here is both a recognition and evaluation of the researcher's time spent working within the industry and the threats and opportunities that this potentially posed to the research's objectivity. The individual workplaces under investigation are subsequently examined in the following findings chapter.

Chapter Seven: Modernisation and workplace industrial relations within the Royal Mail - findings from four case studies

This final substantive chapter of the thesis analyses the main findings from the four workplaces under investigation which are set out in two main thematic sections. The first of these looks at the extent to which the workgroup in each workplace can be categorised as collective-militant. Here attention initially focuses on the degree that each respective workgroup has, in spite of accelerating marketization, been able to exercise the significant levels of collective job controls that have long been associated with postal workers (Gall, 2003: 29). This is followed by a consideration of the degree to which worker commitment to the Communication Workers Union (CWU) within each workplace remains resistant to the growing presence of a raft of managerially-driven initiatives that seek to incorporate postal workers into the modernisation of their industry (Beirne, 2013: 123). Of particular concern here is the effect that new technology and non-standard forms of employment have had on the frontier of control in each of the four cases as compared to how this existed in the recent past.

The second main category of findings involves an evaluation of the extent of non-union based forms of individual and collective job controls within each workplace. While these workers may well have long-established collective shopfloor control mechanisms, Gall (2003) identifies sectionalism and unevenness in the quality of collectivism on the part of postal workers. This needs to be considered alongside the host of Employee Involvement

initiatives that have emerged within Royal Mail in recent years which are, according to Beale and Mustchin (2013), aimed at increasing management control vis-à-vis that of local workplace unionism. The findings themselves provide a reliable and valid basis from which to draw a number of conclusions regarding the state of workplace organisation within a fully liberalised Royal Mail. While these are discussed at some length in the conclusion to the findings, they are briefly summarised below.

The empirical research provides evidence that on-going marketization within the industry has not served to erase many of the long-standing mechanisms through which postal workers have both regulated their workplaces and created space from their labour process. Much of these continue to be collectively-based, union-centred and both informal and formal. Moreover, their longevity has in many cases rested upon the capacity of the workgroup in question to exercise action which is collective, unofficial and direct. Across the workplaces studied, such patterns of behaviour tended to be more prevalent in those establishments where an institutionally central (Batstone et al., 1977: 10) local union was able, through a network of experienced representatives, officials and influential workplace opinion formers to foster a particular set of workplace values, beliefs and procedures that operated in its favour (ibid, 10). In turn these particular views and patterns of workplace behaviour were to an extent reflective of past workplace actions which here can be characterised as combative and solidary-based. As Hyman (1975: 154) notes traditions of solidarity like this highlight the efficacy of collective action amongst workers and in doing so reinforce their collective strength. In the case of Royal Mail such a situation would help to provide a bulwark to stem the latest and most virulent of a succession of employer change programmes that have sought both structural and attitudinal change amongst its workforce (Beirne, 2013).

On the other hand, the findings also highlighted that, in some cases, reaction to managerial-driven change amongst some workers within the Royal Mail has been non-union centred and largely individual. The incidence of this was, in terms of the workplaces under investigation, more prevalent where the local union itself was less centralised, removed from its parent branch's cohort of senior officials and subject to a range of structurally-specific influences which militated against effective solidary-based action. Ironically, in some instances, individual behaviour which contravened the objectives of

the workplace union was provided with scope to thrive by the collective ability of its local membership to veto managerial initiatives that sought tighter control over worker behaviour.

At the same time, most workers who carried out such practices still held union membership and had appeared largely not to have 'bought in' to a set of employer-driven Employee Involvement initiatives which sought to strengthen the role of management vis-a-vis the CWU (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 14). As was the case with many collectively based, union-centred practices, individually-based action often involved recourse to tacit intimate occupational knowledge (Marchington, 1992: 155) which management were both operationally reliant on and at the same time found difficult to monitor.

New technology, in the form of host of sophisticated surveillance mechanisms and the latest mail processing methods, had impacted unevenly upon each workgroup's capacity to retain existing levels of shopfloor control. Again, this was related to the nature of worker organisation within each workplace and the degree to which each group might potentially respond this through negative sanctions. All workgroups had, to some extent, been affected by an increase in non-standard forms of employment. This had presented management in some instances with the opportunity to make in-roads in to some long standing areas of union control such as intra-workplace cooperation (Drago, 1996), job demarcation and the going rate for overtime. Here too there were variations from workplace to workplace, with some groups proving better able than others to defend against such initiatives.

The above may raise questions as to the longevity of strong workplace jobs controls within a Royal Mail characterised by ever increasing levels of non-standard employment and market-driven forms of technology. However, some degree of cooperation with management extended to all workgroups within this study and will continue to be an inherent feature of work relations within the Royal Mail and for that matter the wider capitalist labour market. As Edwards (1988: 188) notes workers are reliant on firms for their livelihoods, while employers need to secure workers' continued willingness to work. In the case of this study, although some of the means through which workers attempted to redefine their effort bargain may have infringed formally defined standards of

behaviour, they were often tolerated by management since they contributed to, and at times accelerated, the achievement of organisational goals. At times this took the form of an informally agreed set of arrangements through which local management and union at workplace level were able to mediate market-driven change that, in line with Beirne's (2013: 123) findings, carried for both parties the threat of work intensification and increasing job insecurity.

This thesis now focuses more closely on the subject of marketization within a wider evaluation of the role of the UK state as both employer and regulator in chief of a capitalist economy (Allen, 1960: 113). This forms the main theme of what is the opening substantive chapter of this thesis examining public service modernisation within a Marxist framework of analysis. From this viewpoint, on-going liberalisation of the public services is viewed as a means through which the state provides an infrastructure to facilitate the extraction of surplus value and profit. Such a perspective shapes this thesis and provides a conceptual basis from which to analyse modernisation.

Chapter Two: The state, the public sector and modernisation

This chapter adopts a Marxist approach to examine a crucial aspect of modernisation, namely the role of the state in supporting the capitalist class in securing an economic structure to meet business needs. In the case of the public services, this has involved the provision of an infrastructure to facilitate the extraction of surplus value and profit which has included the transferal of public services into private ownership. Attention focuses upon the British state both in its role as employer and provider of public services within the UK. Central to this is an evaluation of the state, and its role in supporting the capitalist class in securing an economic structure to meet business needs. This calls for a consideration of the manner in which successive governments, as part of this institution, have recently attempted to fundamentally reform the way in which public services are delivered and the consequences of this for its workforce within what has traditionally been referred to as the public sector.

Such a focus involves an examination of modernisation and restructuring within the public sector, and how organisational and economic change are setting the context for and defining the roles of management at the level of the shopfloor. This is crucial to an understanding of some of the pressures that currently shape managerial action within Royal Mail and how this, in turn, affects and is affected by worker behaviour. As Gall notes (2003) governmental policies toward modernisation have been critical in focussing the minds of Royal Mail executives in ways of improving financial health and greater commercialisation. These objectives have, more recently been brought more sharply into focus on the shopfloor where local management have been charged with achieving ever greater market-driven change. This is supported by a range of academic data which point to this location as a key area where Royal Mail has in recent times attempted to restructure its relationship with both its employees and their union representatives (Beale, 2003; Beale and Mustchin, 2013; Beirne, 2013).

The contemporary context

Public service reform has been a high priority amongst policy makers in most OECD countries over the last 25 years or so. Bach and Kessler (2012: 3) argue that his has been brought about by a combination of factors including demographic shifts, increasing user

expectations and economic constraints on governments in supplying these services. In the case of the UK, significant change in the nature of the management and organisation of the public services, has led to changes in the composition and structure of the public sector workforce along with shifts in the relations between public sector employers and their workforce (ibid., 5). Whilst more latterly successive (New Labour) governments have emphasised the importance of highly motivated front-line staff in bringing about reformed and improved public services (Cabinet Office, 2008) the experience of this has often been mixed. In addition to concerns about its effect upon staff morale (Bach and Kessler 2012: 5), the type of managerial approach that has been associated with the implementation of public service reform has, according to Worrall et al. (2009: 118), led to an intensification of work for some workers and a reduction in control over their labour process.

For some this amounts to the continuation of a process which, from the 1980s onwards, has involved the collapse of a traditional pattern of public sector industrial relations based on fairness, involvement and equity of its workforce centred upon the model employer aspirations of the state (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 287). From this viewpoint, the government's attitude from 1979 onwards changed radically becoming increasingly opposed to industry-wide collective bargaining and placing more emphasis upon market forces and individual performance as opposed to its previously long held principle of the criterion of pay comparability (Fredman and Morris, 1989: 142-3).

Alternatively, commentators such as Coffey and Thornley (2009:109) caution against the risk of assuming a golden age of state employment practices that predate public sector reform. The argument here is that, a longer view of public sector industrial relations indicates governmental concessions relating to the terms and conditions of its workforce have, when enacted, been essentially driven by changes in trade union membership and militancy and associated changes in the economy and global environment rather than its aspirations of good employer (ibid.: 92). This suggests that the nature of public sector employment ensures that the relationship between employees and government is essentially predicated upon and shaped by the government's role of regulator-in-chief (Allen, 1960: 113) of an essentially capitalist economy. Any thorough understanding of recent reform must therefore involve a longer view of public sector industrial relations

and an analysis of the role of government within the wider context of its position within the capitalist state.

In seeking to define public sector employment, Corby and White (1993: 3) note that it comprises those organisations providing public goods to citizens and public corporations. The main UK public services that fall within the ambit of the public sector (the terms public services and public sector will be used interchangeably here) are central government, which is broadly referred to as the civil service, local government, health, education, the police, fire services and the armed forces. With regard to public corporations, the current privatisation of the Post Office signifies the end of one of the last of a number of what were broadly termed nationalised industries which, although exposed to commercial markets, had traditionally been subject to a large degree of governmental control over finances (Kessler and Bayliss, 1998: 132; Allen, 1960: 92-93). Despite fluctuations over time, the public sector has for much of the last 100 years employed a considerable proportion of workers within the UK labour market (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 305). Having declined during the 1980s, public sector employment increased to around 20% of the UK's workforce by 2010 (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 3-4). For commentators such as Fredman and Morris (1989: 25) the significance of the state as an employer stems from these large numbers of workers that it employs and the distinctive set of employment practices which, they argue have set an example for the private sector. It is these employment practices within the wider context of the long-standing structure of the public sector and its traditional model of industrial relations to which this chapter now turns.

Early industrial relations within the public sector

Until 1918, public sector employment largely related to that of those employed in the civil service which at this time stood at around 221,000 (Fry, 1995). It consisted of industrial workers employed on munitions, in dockyards, in the Office of Works and the Stationary Office; and non-industrial workers in the Post Office and Government administrative departments (Allen, 1960: 71). From then on, the government first became a large employer of labour in peacetime, taking temporary control of the railways and coal industries. This took on a more meaningful vein when legislation passed between 1945

and 1951 placed the coal industry, transport industry, the gas electricity, iron and steel industries in the public sector of the economy. This meant that, the civil service notwithstanding, more than 2.5 million people came under the control of the government and were employed in industries that were national in scope and basic ones within the British economy (ibid:90). Additionally, public sector employment was further swelled by a rapid growth of employment in health, education and the social services as part of the development of the welfare state (Bach, 2010: 153). Trade unionism within the latter area of employment was encouraged echoing the climate within the newly nationalised industries which were already heavily unionised (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 100) and covered by well-established negotiating procedures. Whilst these were altered when the employer changed to that of the government, the practice of free collective bargaining continued (Allen, 1960: 90). For Bach and Winchester (2003: 308), this is indicative of the state's position as an employer from after the First World War. From this perspective, sick benefits, job security, procedures aimed at dispute resolution and a willingness to recognise trade unions was a central feature of public sector employment.

Early indications of an approach which, for some, centred upon the government's recognition of the need to promote stable industrial relations (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 308) are evident in the case of the civil service. Here, recommendations for joint councils (Whitley councils) at local and national level where trade unions negotiated over terms and conditions of employment were established in 1919 (Allen, 1960: 73; Bach and Winchester, 2003: 308; Clegg, 1979: 104). Whilst wages and working conditions were negotiated at national level, the remit of the local level councils included the systematic resolution of minor grievances (with large issues again being settled at national council) thereby emphasising a commitment to reconciling differences without reverting to overt conflict (Allen, 1960: 76; Winchester, 1983). It has to be said that trade union pressure for such a system of worker representation was, for some time, met with resistance from government (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 97) and, furthermore, failed to prevent the government from at times using the civil service as an easy way of cutting public expenditure (Allen, 1960: 73-83) Nevertheless, this Whitley model of collective bargaining later spread to local government and the NHS and helped to reinforce the

institutionalised position of trade unions within the public sector (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 308).

In a similar vein, the philosophy of joint regulation and an emphasis on conflict resolution flowed through to those industries which were nationalised. Each industry was put under the control of a public corporation which, unlike the civil service departments, had a wide area of freedom from government intervention. That said, their respective managements were broadly accountable to the relevant government ministers and through them to parliament and ultimately the public (Pendleton and Winterton, 1993:2). The corporation's industrial boards were the bargaining counterparts to the trade unions and were responsible for applying governmental labour policies. This was assisted by statutory provision for joint consultation (Pendleton and Winterton, 1993: 3; Allen, 1960: 93) with machinery varying between industries but uniformly covering health, safety and welfare. In all cases negotiations relating to conditions of employment and consultation were separate processes (Allen, 1960: 93). As with the civil service, the so called 'good employer' obligation, coupled with procedural formalisation and centralised bargaining, resulted in a centralised well-developed personnel and industrial relations functions within management (Pendleton and Winterton, 1993: 4). A key concern of these managers was the generation and enforcement of agreements as to how labour was utilised and control over the labour management activities of line managers (ibid.). A governmental policy of internal recruitment and promotion ensured the prevailing culture of a consensual and bureaucratic approach towards industrial relations was maintained amongst senior management within this area of public employment (ibid.).

For Pendleton and Winterton (1993: 2), nationalisation served to ensure that strategic industries operated in the national interest and benefited the public at large whist diluting the long-standing demands of the trade union movement for workers' control (Clegg 1979: 153). Ironside and Seifert (2000: 36-37) take this a step further by adopting a Marxist perspective regarding governmental approach towards the wider subject of public sector employment and argue that; as well as meeting the demands of its citizens for health and security, protection from crude exploitation and a democratic system of government, government action is firstly driven by the following imperative; for government to meet the demands of sections of British industry and commerce to

maintain conditions for them to operate within a secure infrastructure to support profit-making. Unlike the private sector, therefore, public sector relations contain an essential interaction (Corby and White, 1999: 3) which is inescapably influenced and directed by overarching political values and objectives (Storey, 1992: 55).

Public sector relationships then, are unique in the degree of political control to which they are subject (Corby and White, 1999: 4). Whilst it is clear that the private sector is still subject to the legislative, social and economic initiatives of government, private sector employers remain largely free to regulate the employment relationship as they choose (ibid.). In the final analysis however, public sector mangers are governed by the political objectives of their masters who, in a democracy, will normally change from time to time (ibid.). This being the case, it would appear reasonable to argue that, government, as a result of their objectives and mandate, will at various times be concerned with changing its structures and organisation to resemble a manner which reflects the way in which it seeks to administer goods and services in society. Massey and Pyper (2005: 3, 80) argue that this has in recent times been expressed by successive governmental initiatives aimed at *modernising* their structures and organisations which signifies a change in, and has had important implications for, the way in which public services are managed. They go on to argue that throughout this process there has been a redefinition of the state and its proper size and function, as well as the rights and duties of ordinary citizens (ibid.). When referring to the state Massey and Pyper are alluding to government itself within the wider context of an elaborate state apparatus composed of Parliament, the Monarchy, the Cabinet, the Civil Service, the Armed Forces, the Police and the Judiciary which together govern the citizens of the UK (Harvey and Hood, 1958: 11). It follows that any understanding of the role of government as an employer of public service workers must take place within a wider analysis of its position within the state and its relationship with the other parties and actors who make up this entity.

The nature of the capitalist state

The nature of the British state, how it works, who runs it and in whose interests (Harvey and Hood, 1958: 9) is subject to strong debate resulting in rival theories. In spite of this divergence of opinion, what would seem indisputable is that the British political system,

which forms a central part of (and moreover acts on behalf of) the state, exists on the basis of a capitalist economy in which the greater part of industry, trade, finance and land is the private property of a small minority (ibid.: 9). The ownership of what can be termed here as the means of production arguably gives the capitalist owning class a grip over the lives of millions of wage earners who have no choice but to work for them and constantly enrich them. Whilst often accepting the basic tenets of this argument, proponents of this system argue that in such societies citizens enjoy universal suffrage, free and regular elections, representative institutions and effective citizens' rights, including the right to free speech and freedom of opposition which are taken advantage of under the protection of the law, an independent judiciary and a free political culture (Miliband, 1969: 2). As a result, the argument goes; no government acting on behalf of the state can fail in the long run to respond to the wishes and demands of competing interest groups. This model is often referred to as democratic pluralism. This is a political system in which all of the active interest groups within a society can play part in the process of decision making (ibid.: 2-3). Power in this instance is seen to be competitive, diffused and fragmented with no single interest group viewed as being over influential in terms of state policy and action (ibid.). In doing so it thus rejects the notion that the state might be an institution whose main purpose is to defend the predominance in society of a particular class interest.

While the above viewpoint does not necessarily preclude the idea of state reform, it believes that any such reform should involve the strengthening of system itself (Miliband, 1969: 4). Similarly, supporters of what is termed as a social democratic model whilst sometimes critical of the unequal distribution of wealth and power inherent within capitalist society, view any necessary redistribution through existing political processes and institutions (Harvey and Hood, 1958: 10). This view of the state was to find favour-no doubt unconsciously - amongst the early trade union movement within the UK (ibid.: 12) and explains the historical legacy of reformism which fails to address the fundamental relations of production between capital and labour. This has, in itself, according to Hyman been a key source of ruling class power and dominance within contemporary British society where political leaders have seldom expressed disagreement on the validity of the capitalist system (Miliband, 1969: 68-70). This raises questions as to whether a seemingly

ideologically consistent pattern of executive power within the UK is the reflection of value consensus within liberal democratic societies or an expression of an instrument of the capitalist state which has evolved to preserve the interests of capitalism (Harvey and Hood, 1958: 14).

If, as Harvey and Hood suggest, the state exists and functions primarily to serve the interest of capitalism, then it follows from a Marxist perspective that, a key requirement of the state is that of the domination of society on behalf of the class who own the forces of production (Miliband, 1969: 24). This should not detract from some of the important gains such as voting, freedom of speech, and freedom of association that have been achieved by the working class within what Marxists would term "bourgeois states" such as the UK. However it is argued that these are concessions by the ruling class which do not weaken both its political power and subsequent rights to accumulate wealth via the ownership of the means of production (ibid.). Moreover, the Marxist argument that the ruling class has been able to maintain control of the entire machinery of the state, in which they as a class have historically occupied and ideologically controlled in the form of an elitist strata of officialdom (Miliband, 1969: 23, 66-68), highlights an important point: that although the government does speak in the name of the state and is formally invested with state power, it does not necessarily effectively control that power (ibid.: 50). In contrast, therefore, to those who view contemporary capitalist society in terms of pluralism, Marxists would question the levels of control governments actually hold within such societies.

Whilst Marxist analysis questions the objectivity and efficacy of the state, such approaches, as Jessop (1990: 145) notes have generated a body of critical literature. Its critics argue that Marxist theory often overlooks the fact that capital is accountable to the rule of law and in doing so Marxists are presented with a major theoretical problem. This is that the form of the state in modern capitalist society ostensibly constitutes an increasingly impersonal public authority with definite formal channels of representation and accountability that are tied to more or less developed notions of popular rather than class sovereignty (Jessop, 1990: 145). By starting from the assumption of the classical polarisation between reformism and revolution, Marxists have at times faced charges of narrowly evaluating the role of the state. A preoccupation here with only the negative

(and of course non-revolutionary) roles that the state carries out, renders such theory, for some, as an inadequate means of carrying out a thorough political economy of state apparatus (Frankel, 1982: 258).

The 'complex relations between the rule of capital and the modern state' (Jessop, 1990: 144) evidently provide problematic ground for the application of a Marxist analysis of the state within contemporary capitalist society. However, a range of theories which seek to examine the influence of structural, political and economic pressures upon state policy and action have emerged over recent decades. These take their cue from Marx, and begin from the premise that state policy is shaped and constrained essentially by the interest of capital. This is due to the economic dependence of the state on capital investment and its potential withdrawal by the ruling class. As such, what are effectively 'veto powers' here serve to reinforce the dominance of the ruling class and its ability to direct state policy and action (Jessop, 1990: 146).

Alternatively, it is argued that there is a particular instrumentalist relationship between the ruling class (capital as a whole) on the one side and state apparatus on the other (Offe and Ronge, 1982: 249). From this viewpoint, the capitalist class employ, through the affiliation of the state elite and through those involved privately in the formulation of government policy, the state as an instrument to promote their interests at the expense of other groups (see Miliband, 1969). This instrumentalist model of the relationship between capital and the state is according to its proponents equally accessible, in principle, to all political forces and can also be feasibly used for any governmental purpose (Jessop, 1990: 145).

For commentators such as Offe and Ronge (1982: 250-5) the key concern of the capitalist state within modern society is the guarding of the general interests of all classes on the basis of capitalist exchange relationships. Since the state is excluded from the productive core of the economy (Jessop, 1990: 148), it is reliant on the revenue from taxes, which are indispensable for the use of state power, brought about by the process of accumulation (Offe and Ronge, 1982: 250). It follows that every occupant of state power is fundamentally concerned with promoting those conditions most conducive to accumulation (ibid). Frankel (1982: 262) adds weight to this argument by drawing

attention to the role of particular organs of state apparatus in helping intensify, and provide legitimation to new commodity exchange relations, and thus, the accumulation process (for example, in areas of art, food and capital intensive industries).

Offe and Ronge's account of the on-going requirement for the capitalist state to foster conditions which sustain and furthermore, maximise exchange relations and the commodification of value finds favour amongst those who argue that the over-extension of public services leads to the 'crowding out' of the wealth-creating private sector (Ferner, 1994: 52). Worse still, from this viewpoint, is the charge that an 'overloaded' state sector providing welfare services (such as health, education, and social security) has been historically responsible for fiscal crisis and worsening public sector deficits (ibid.). The sentiments of this logic have underpinned successive governmental attempts to restructure public services in recent decades which, whilst by no means a new phenomenon, have since the 1980s led to the penetration of the 'market' to the very core of the state (ibid.: 53).

The introduction of 'market discipline' with its emphasis upon competition and budgetary constraints, its proponents have consistently argued is a key means of engendering efficient performance into what has been (and from some quarters continues to be) viewed as a largely inefficient bureaucratic public services within the UK (Fredman, 1999: 54). Ironside and Seifert (2000: 6-7) identify the above discourse as part of a wider neo-liberal approach towards the political economy of advanced capitalist nations which advocate the liberalisation of trade and finance in which the market sets the price and government 'gets out of the way'. In a broader context, the main features of neo-liberalism and its core concern with removing all fetters on capital's search for profits might be viewed as a set of policies and processes whereby a handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximise their personal profit (McChesney, 1999: 7-8).

Ironside and Seifert (2000:7) go on to argue that the adoption of neo-liberal policies by government amounts to the argument that the state should act to support the interests of large companies at the expense of its citizens. In doing so the state must promulgate the myth that there is no alternative and that profit seeking free competition is the only

guarantor of efficiency (ibid). The continuing rhetoric of this approach therefore, has been that of a concern with shrinking the public sector which, and is reflective of the approaches adopted by both Conservative and Labour governments since the 1980s (Shaoul, 1999: 29). Attempts to introduce reform into the public services via the application of private sector free market ideas (Fredman and Morris, 1989: 142-143) have been accompanied by significant changes in employment relations (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 285) in an area of employment where the political sensitivity of the quality of public services had arguably encouraged stable relations (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 310; Freedman and Morris, 1989) characterised by extensive union involvement (Corby and White, 1999: 18). Furthermore, government have sought to introduce these changes in a variety of ways (Fredman, 1999: 54) that have reflected a profound shift in wider labour market ideology and employment practice (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 14). This has included initiatives such as privatisation, public sector cuts, public sector restructuring and anti-trade union legislation (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 9).

Modernisation and managerialism

Privatisation can take a number of forms and shapes including: the total or partial conversion of a public corporation or nationalised industry into a limited company; government disposal of some or all of its shares it holds in specific bodies; or breaking the monopoly held by a state concern (Massey and Pyper, 2005: 46). This may further include the introduction of competitive tendering or market testing into public services (ibid.). Bach and Winchester (2003: 286) remind us that this was the most visible part of an on-going public sector reform programme of successive post 1979 Conservative governments based upon the following logic: state control and public sector organisations were inefficient organisations, over dependent upon subsidy, and unaware of, and unable to meet, the demands of their customers. Privatisation, it is argued, would directly address this problem and alleviate the strain on public borrowing by transferring large numbers of the workers from the public to the private sector whilst providing revenue through the sale of assets to the Treasury (Massey and Piper, 2005: 83). The commitment to privatisation not only brought about the blurring of private and public sector boundaries (Cabinet Office, 1995: 127) but also appeared to cut across and arguably blur previous party political divisions as to the role of the state within contemporary society. Whilst the

privatisation of swathes of the public sector began tentatively, signifying as Coffey and Thornley (2009: 62) note a massive divestiture of state assets, it was to gather pace with an implementation process that proved to mature over time through (amongst other processes) the New Labour-inspired Private Finance Initiative (PFI) (Massey and Pyper: 2005: 108).

The Private Finance initiative (PFI) refers to the arrangement where the public sector contracts to purchase services on a long term basis 'so as to take advantage of private sector skills incentivised by having private sector finance at risk. This includes concessions and franchises where a private sector partner takes on the responsibility for providing a public service, including maintaining, enhancing or constructing the necessary infrastructure' (HM Treasury, 2000: 10). The public sector thereby engages the private sector to not only finance but also to design, construct or refurbish facilities as well as providing related support services under what is typically a long-term contract (Pollock and Price, 2004; Sawyer, 2003).

Bach and Kessler (2012: 82) identify PFI as one of three externalisation streams favoured by New Labour which, whilst symbolising a shift from ideology to efficacy in terms of service provision, have continued and indeed extended the involvement of private and 'third sector' contractors in the public services. PFI was introduced alongside a 'softer' form of outsourcing (Best Value process) which nevertheless intensified pressure to contract out ancillary or back office activities, along with (thirdly) the situating of publicly funded core services beyond the boundaries of the public sector to be delivered by private or independent sector organisations. Again, as with earlier privatisation programmes, there would appear to be a clear predisposition here which favours private sector over public sector organisation and a working assumption that private sector management *is* better management (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 77).

Programmes such as privatisation and market testing are recognised as part of a wider paradigm including globalisation, and the hollowing out of the state, in which the state itself has contracted out its traditional responsibilities to others. This represents a move away from the long-standing manner in which the state has sought to administer services based upon notions of sense of duty, hierarchical arrangement of tasks, functional

division of labour and recruitment on the basis of profession and qualification (Corby and White, 1999: 9). Such an approach is often generically referred to as a public administration approach towards public services and public service employment (ibid). By contrast, the great tranche of reforms and deep-seated changes that have taken place within the public sector over recent decades may be seen as essentially management-centred and often management–led (ibid).

This new managerialist approach has been dubbed 'new public management' (NPM) (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994) and contains a neo-liberal ideological belief in the primacy of market principles (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 25). Here private sector managerialism is seen as key in the transforming of what are perceived as bureaucratic, paternalistic and democratically passive public services into efficient, responsive and consumer-orientated ones (Ransom and Stewart, 1994). Corby and White (1999: 6) note the on-going preference for a managerial, as opposed to administrative type, approach within the contemporary public sector which not only finds favour amongst practitioners but also permeates party political boundaries. Thus, New Labour, whilst advocating in some ways a more interventionist role than its Conservative predecessors, largely accepted the values and assumptions of neo-liberal reform and the principle that public service provision and policy are not the exclusive concern of government (Bach and Kessler: 2012: 29).

New Public Management then is operationally central to the on-going attempts to bring about public service reform over recent decades and is founded on a critique of the classic model of public administration discussed earlier. However, whilst it is clear that its approach originates from three theoretically linked schools of thought (as in the Virginia, Chicago and Austria schools) all of which advocate a more privatised civil dominated society (ibid), there would appear to be disagreement as to just how novel and innovative NPM actually is. Commentators such as Pollitt (1990: 1) condemn NPM and its associated practices of performance measurement as Neo-Taylorist. They evoke a culture which, as Corby and White (1999: 38) note, rather than developing a responsive customer-focussed organisation, establishes a stultified climate of auditing and monitoring.

The effects of what has been viewed as a variant of scientific management have, according to critics, resulted in some public servants believing that they were being subjected to work intensification, with employees in some services reporting that they were working harder and longer hours (Edwards and Whitston, 1991; Lloyd and Seifert, 1995; Sinclair et al., 1995). It is important to recognise that this evidence stems from the latter years of a Conservative administration which consistently proved to be preoccupied with cost minimisation in contrast to a succeeding New Labour Government which was ostensibly committed to (albeit individual) workforce involvement and partnership (Bach and Winchester, 2003: 292). However, the following point should be considered; for its critics New Labour's programme of public sector reform, or rather its preferred term of 'modernising government' (Cabinet Office, 1999) represented a continuation and indeed intensification of previous Conservative governments' embrace of new public management (Bach and Winchester, 2003).

The arguments so far presented point, in some respects, to a party political convergence in approach over recent decades towards the restructuring or (to use more recent parlance) 'modernisation' of public services. The assumption that ideological differences between left and right had lost their potency and that government was judged on the basis of results rather than sentiment was to prove an important tenet for the prominent role afforded to performance management in New Labour's modernisation agenda (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 48-9). During its period in office New Labour relied on a series of target indicators, reward systems and performance appraisal to strengthen individual and organisational performance (ibid.). This was accompanied by an increased interest in flexible working reflected in the increased preference for varying employees' working hours, the rapid and contingent change in worker numbers employed by public service organisations, and outsourced activities by contractors (ibid.: 75).

Whilst the above was integral to a wider HR agenda and discourse in which government committed to valuing rather than denigrating public service public service reform under New Labour would appear to have continued to impact negatively upon the terms and conditions of public sector workers. As Coffey and Thornley (2009: 106) note, New Labour governments, despite introducing legislation around public sector equalities, during their time in office, presided over, amongst other things, a very sizable and badly

underestimated gender pay gap in its role as employer (ibid.). It is this latter point, in particular, which provides an example of the significant employment of state rhetoric in the creation of a narrative in which public sector employment has long been associated with providing superior terms and condition when compared to those in the private sector.

In a similar way that it has used the model employer narrative to neutralise worker action, the capitalist state, Miliband argues, through a variety of means and institutions has played a notable and ever growing part in the fostering of a view of national allegiance eminently functional to the existing social order which rejects 'alien' and 'extreme' doctrines which may pose a challenge to it (1969: 209). The capitalist state itself through the process of 'political socialisation' plays the essential role of persuading subordinate classes to accept the whole structure of political and economic domination and to confine their aspirations and demands within its limits (ibid.: 178). This situation is reinforced by the ability of capitalist big business, by virtue of its economic power, to wield vast ideological, political and, in its broadest sense, cultural influence on society at large (ibid.: 211). The capitalist class, it would appear, is thus able to effectively promote free enterprise, and business needs in the face of potential reformist governments by shifting the ideological and political parameters in which debate over issues such as state ownership of resources takes place (ibid.: 212-213)

With Miliband's argument in mind, it would seem evident that the pressures that have given rise to the privatisation of public services in advanced capitalist economies emanate in no small part from the desire of a relative handful of private interests to be permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximise their personal profit (McChesney, 1999: 7-8). That such a free market approach towards public service delivery has been allowed to thrive despite often being at odds with public opinion (Hall, 2010: 115), further emphasises the economic power of the capitalist class to use the state and its government as its instrument for the domination of society (Miliband, 1969: 23). Privatisation and liberalisation have generated easy sales, windfall gains for the buyers of shares and quick profit and large rewards for those organisations involved in arranging the privatisations and management of public services (Coffey and Thornley, 63: 79). In light of this, it is unsurprising to note that the capitalist class has often articulated through

its influence over governmental policy, and ownership of the mass mediums of communication, the case for public service reform and the free-market logic which accompanies this.

Conclusion

This chapter has adopted a Marxist perspective to analyse the nature of the British state as both employer and regulator of a capitalist economy. In doing so, it has argued that a key requirement of state is that of fostering conditions which sustain capitalist exchange relations (Offe and Ronge, 1982: 250-255) in a manner that is favourable to the interests of the capital class. Public service reform over the last 30 years can therefore be viewed as an attempt by the state to provide an infrastructure to facilitate the extraction of surplus value and profit. This has involved the transferal of public services into private ownership in the context of enhanced competitive and performance pressures and changing organisational structures.

This is part of a wider paradigm including globalisation, and the hollowing out of the state, in which the state itself has contracted out its traditional responsibilities to others. According to some commentators, this has been ushered in through a managerial approach that is representative of a shift in traditional models of public sector management. This is predicated on the neo-liberal ideological belief in the primacy of free market principles and has altered employment relations in the public services between the workforce and their employers (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 5, 25; Bach, 2010: 169). A key feature here has been that of a more financially accountable management invested with greater local autonomy to pursue, through comprehensive systems of performance management, ever greater workforce efficiency and increased performance. While this may have been the case, Worrall et al. (2009: 120) have noted that it has not necessarily meant a straightforward shift in control from workforce to management. On the contrary, change has been the mediated outcome of the dialectic interplay between management action and worker reaction (ibid.).

Such a context is essential to any analysis of contemporary shopfloor relations within the Royal Mail and the pressures which have influenced the actions of both management and workers here. In line with this chapter's argument, government policies have been critical

in focussing the minds of the organisations senior executives in a context of accelerating competition (Gall, 2003). Like the wider public services, top-driven change has been applied almost continuously to the UK postal services since the late 1980s. Again, concerns to rationalise have stimulated and underpinned new management techniques for overseeing and communicating with staff (Martinez Lucio et al., 2000). More recently, a series of restructuring agreements between the Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union have, like other areas of the public sector, devolved responsibility for realising ever greater market-driven change to actors at locus of the individual workplace (Beirne, 2013). Attempts to affect change here too have been far from straightforward and have often run up against robust and combative unionism (Gall, 2003).

The complexities of shopfloor worker management relations form the basis of a detailed discussion in the following chapter. Much of this initially takes place through the lens of labour process theory (Braverman, 1974) and involves a consideration of how managerial strategies are both perceived and met by workers at the point of production itself. This provides the basis for an in-depth investigation into the nature of shopfloor struggle and the factors which affect the efficacy and form of worker agency that individual workgroups might exhibit.

Chapter Three: The management of labour, unions and workplace industrial relations

The majority of this chapter adopts a workplace focus to investigate worker management relations at the point of production. In doing so it provides an important contribution to this study's later analysis of shopfloor relations within the Royal Mail. In recent years the shopfloor has become a key area where an increasingly market-sensitive Royal Mail management have attempted to restructure working practices and increase the output of UK postal workers (Beale and Mustchin 2013; Beirne, 2013). This has evoked a range of responses in an industry where one relatively uniform group of workers are employed by one single employer (Gall, 2003). Insight into the factors which shape both this variety of responses by postal workers and, more generally, the actions of their managers in the workplace is gleaned here through an investigation of the following. Firstly, an analysis of management's profit driven imperative within a capitalist economy and its subsequent pre-occupation with countering, what is perceived as, low productivity in labour intensive public services (Worrall et al., 2009: 118). This is followed by an evaluation of the factors which influence both the form and efficacy of shopfloor worker agency. Central to this is a consideration of the means through which management might try to maximise output and the variety of ways in which workers resist this.

Attention then turns to an investigation of the impact of political and economic factors upon collective forms of worker regulation within both the private and public sector in recent decades. This involves an evaluation of the relevance of strike action as means of defending terms and conditions within a contemporary setting of restrictive trade union legislation and union decline. From here, this chapter moves on to examine the impact of non-standard forms of employment on trade union organisation. Again, such context serves to enhance the subsequent discussion of the extent to which UK postal workers have tempered the impact of both market-driven technological change and a growth in insecure workers on established job controls.

Labour management and public sector reform

The previous chapter highlighted the on-going attempts by successive UK governments to reform public services. These have gathered pace dramatically in recent years accentuating a pattern of persistent organisational change within the public sector since

the 1980s (Ironside and Seifert, 2004: 58). A key feature of this shift has been an attempt by government to introduce into public sector organisations a regime of assertive managerialism with a view to running public services along the lines of sound business principles (Mather et al., 2005). This has encouraged widespread experimentation with Human Resource Management-based practices that are ultimately concerned with reducing labour costs through a general process of skill mix changes, intensification of effort, and the tightening of work controls (Worrall et al., 2009).

For its critics, the increasing reliance on HRM-based practice by public sector management has been viewed as being detrimental to public sector employees in all sectors (Worrall et al., 2009: 128-9). From this viewpoint, HRM involves a whole range of techniques designed to strengthen managerial control over staff performance and costs including: job evaluation, tighter workforce supervision and labour flexibility and employee participation schemes designed to weaken trade union influence (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 11). These methods are often associated with Taylor's principles of scientific management in which managerial sovereignty in all areas of the labour process serves to ensure that work done at the point of production meets the needs of the employer (ibid.). Such an approach has brought about a shift in the locus of control of work for many public sector workers. This involves control over pace, quality and volume of task shifting from well organised-often professionally qualified- employees to managers, and the unilateral transferral of aspects of work to less qualified, less unionised and cheaper workers (Corby and Symon, 2011; Worrall et al., 2009: 131; Mather et al.,2005).

Some commentators have viewed the above as an on-going process of the degradation of labour within the public sector (Mooney and Law, 2007; Whitfield, 2006). Such arguments mirror those of Miliband (1969) who notes that the government, as part of the state, is essentially concerned with maintaining the capitalist economy at the expense of wage earners. It follows that a clearer understanding of the market-driven logic of public sector labour management is best achieved through an analysis of the relationship between capital and labour within the framework of Braverman's approach to the labour process theory. This, as Edwards (2010: 35) notes, fundamentally concerns recognition of the labour process itself, not as work in general but as a form of human activity which takes a particular character under capitalism.

The labour process, management, workers and shopfloor struggle

Braverman (1974), drawing on Marx, argues that the labour process within a capitalist society has transformed from one of a general process of creating useful values to one of creating surplus capital and profit. From this perspective, workers, within the context of a capitalist free market system, are both perceived and legally adjudged to freely enter into a contract of employment with employers; in doing so they agree to do work in exchange for wages from their employer. However, a combination of powerful economic and social forces (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 9) effectively compels workers to enter work in order to gain a livelihood (Braverman, 1974: 51-53). The extent to which the contract of employment in which they enter into is fulfilled is largely indeterminate. This means that workers in most employment situations bring to the workplace their capacity to work; the actual amount of work and the actual quality of work are not specified (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 9). When purchasing the services of the worker what the capitalist employer buys is not an agreed amount of labour but the power of the worker to work over an agreed period of time (Braverman, 1974: 54). Ironside and Seifert (2000: 13) note that under a capitalist mode of production it is the capitalist who owns the means of production and that production itself rests on one fundamental purpose, to enrich the owners. This is achieved by paying workers less than the value of the work that they produce.

For Ironside and Seifert (ibid.) the extraction of surplus value from workers by employers amounts to exploitation. Workers, however, are not only exploited by this process they are alienated from the product of their work because they produce services and goods for the employer rather than themselves. That they do not own the means and organisation of production, and are, by virtue of their contract of employment, easily dispensable, means that they surrender their interest in the labour process itself (Hyman, 1975: 76) with the labour process itself becoming the responsibility of the capitalist. In this setting of antagonistic relations of production, the capitalists' essential requirement to realise the full usefulness of the labour that they have acquired is hampered by the opposing interests of those whose purposes the labour process is carried on, and those who, on the other side, carry it on. It follows that the central task of those in control of the means of production, namely employers and their managerial agents, must be that of seeking

tighter control over the labour process in order to realize maximum output and profit (Braverman, 1974: 56). While Braverman locates this argument within the very nature of industrial capitalism, it is, as this chapter has already suggested, equally applicable to the requirements that face management within contemporary marketized public services; that of how to counter low productivity within what are labour-intensive services (Worrall et al., 2009: 118).

Judged from a labour process theory perspective, public sector modernisation with its emphasis upon managerial sovereignty, progressive job fragmentation and deskilling, is underpinned with the requirement that has been historically inherent within the capitalist mode of production; that of ensuring that control over the labour process pass from worker to owner (Braverman 1974: 58). Central to the inherent necessity for capital to increase the yield of surplus value from workers is the requirement that its production techniques are constantly revolutionised (Nichols 1979: 29) Integral to this is the sub-division and fragmentation of tasks, through which skilled work is destroyed and labour power cheapened to a commodity status (Braverman, 1974: 82).

While it can now be argued that technology itself is part of the labour process, it in itself is decisively shaped by particular actors, forces and social factors. Workplace technologies are appropriated, deployed designed, implemented and even invented by management in the interests of capital accumulation and the organisation of work (Hall, 2010: 164). Similarly, managerial strategies such as Taylorism are essentially concerned with securing total control over alienated labour (Braverman, 1974: 89-90). Central to this is the assumption that management should exclusively dictate the precise manner in which work is organised. The scope of this ranges from the simplest to the most complex of tasks (ibid.: 90), essentially through the medium of work measurement and job fragmentation (Rose, 1988: 26). These principles form the bedrock of all modern work designs and effectively strip workers of knowledge thereby reducing them to undifferentiated labour (Braverman, 1974)

The essence of the above argument is that there is a long-running tendency through fragmentation, rationalisation and mechanisation, for workers and their jobs to become deskilled. As a consequence, workers, regardless of their personal abilities, are more

easily and cheaply substituted in the production process (Zimbalist, 1979). However, labour process researchers have, in recent times, become more sensitive to a broad range of outcomes when it comes to the question of the impact of technology on skills. From this viewpoint, the shift from a relatively simple story of technology as de-skilling to a more complicated story of diverse skill implications mirrors the increasing complexity of technologies at work and particularly the rise of information and communication technologies. However, though this may emphasise the unsustainability of the deskilling thesis in its original form, the control imperative aspect of labour process theory has according to Hall (2010: 166) proved more durable. Enhanced systems of technological resourcing planning have, for example, been seen to extend management control by imposing standardised business processes on workers and the labour process. The development of such IT-based methods of company-wide business processes are critical to the control regimes of organisations that seek to coordinate activities across teams, business units, divisions, sites and indeed countries (ibid.: 176).

Again, though Hall may be referring to companies within the private sector, some commentators would regard this process as being particularly relevant to the on-going reform and modernisation of the public sector (Mather et al., 2005: 5). State employees too, since they must sell their labour power are subsumed under the authority of their employer. Such a focus on what is essentially the long-term degradation of work must not however detract from the ways in which workers might resist or modify capitalist systems of control (Edwards, 1988: 187). In particular, the public sector is essentially labour intensive and still associated with comparatively high levels of worker organisation (Gold and Veersma, 2011). Here the inherently conflictual attempts by management to redefine effort bargain (Edwards and Scullion, 1982) and thereby threaten long-standing working practices, have often been a contested area of workplace relations (Worrall et al., 2009).

The notion of the workplace as a terrain upon which workers and managers compete for control is analysed most effectively by Goodrich (1920). He places emphasis upon the dynamic way in which regulation over effort levels and work organisation is played out between management and groups of workers (ibid.). The shifting point where workers and managers struggle to influence the way in which work is organised and rewarded is referred to by Goodrich as the frontier of control and often involves accepted custom and

practice rather than stated principle. Edwards (1990) terms this the negotiation of order, where struggles between workers and employers create understandings as to how work is performed, the result of the structured antagonism between capital and labour. The capacity of groups of workers to shape their own situation and, thus, shift the frontier of control, can not only vary but also involve the deployment of numerous strategies. Apart from the withdrawal of labour, these may include output restriction, rigid task demarcation, and withdrawal of cooperation (Goodrich, 1920; Edwards, 1990).

There are, however, a variety of other ways that, while constituting a response to the nature of capitalist work relations, do not necessarily suggest a collective attempt to shape the way in which work is organised and rewarded. Absenteeism, labour turnover, sabotage, or quitting for example have all often been regarded as expressions of conflict within the workplace (Kerr, 1964: 232; Knowles, 1952: 10). Such responses at times represent the only available means through which some workers can influence their work situation in the absence of more collectively centred control mechanisms (Lupton 1963; Edwards and Scullion, 1982). The propensity of workers to act in the ways that they do is related to two main and interrelated sets of factors. Firstly, the micro political nature in which the frontier of control has developed. And secondly, the way in which product market forces and other external factors have affected this (Edwards, 1988).

In order for workgroups to both challenge and collectively influence the actions of management they must first be aware of their ability to, and the legitimacy of their right to, question managerial decision making. A prerequisite for collective worker action is an awareness of what Brown (1973: 144) refers to as their potential bargaining power which is sustained through a network of workplace contacts espousing particular sets of values (Batstone et al., 1977: 100). Whilst this awareness is essential in strengthening the effectiveness of worker action, the bargaining power of a workgroup depends upon external factors over which the group often has little control such as the product market and production process (Brown, 1973: 144). Added to this, Lupton (1963) argues, is the influence of wider union policy towards workplace organisation, workplace size and particular mode of payment system. However, while such factors influence relations between workers and managers, they are as Edwards (1988: 201) argues not determinate, since they have to be interpreted at workplace level.

Edwards and Scullion (1982) identify a range of factors inherent within the structure of controls within workplaces. These include historical, occupational, and managerial characteristics that can militate to prevent workers from being aware of their bargaining power and thus nullify collective expressions of conflict and control. Similarly, systems of production including the layout of machinery and equipment, can be viewed as setting limits to the social solidarity, collective consciousness and effectiveness of workgroups (Lupton, 1963: 16; Batstone et al., 1977). That said labour as a factor of production, is problematic (Batstone et al., 1977). Workers themselves often possess tacit on the job skills that may be used as a means of making work more tolerable. These skills contain both physical and attitudinal elements and can be deployed to either thwart or support managerial objectives (Marchington, 1992). This means that its inherent necessity to constantly renew the production process (Nichols, 1979: 29) forces capital to seek some level of creative cooperation from labour (Hall, 2010: 162).

It follows that management must identify conditions under which workers are most likely to cooperate in order to increase or maintain marginal wage disparity short of manifest conflicts (Baldamus, 1961: 126; Braverman, 1974: 110). From a more contemporary perspective, Belanger and Thuderoz, (2010: 141) identify the increasing prevalence of a range of 'softer strategies' which for example, in calling upon employees to become actors within a team, project or so on, seek to strengthen worker association with the requirements of production. Sturdy et al., (2010: 116) term these as normative models of control which help exploit workers through the indoctrination of corporate values rather than traditional methods of direct coercion.

The issue of worker consent is central to Burawoy's (1979) study of factory piecework systems. From this viewpoint, worker consent is elicited at the point of production where workers, often with tacit supervisory support, manipulate and subvert formal rules and relationships. In doing so they attempt to both limit the deprivations of the labour process whilst at the same time striving to achieve levels of output that earn incentive pay (ibid.: 51) Burawoy (1979: 82) goes on to argue that such actions nevertheless at times might be key in facilitating managerial objectives. By participating in the above process workers are both distracted from exploitative nature of their own labour process and helping to reproduce the general control of capital over labour (ibid.). Moreover, the

degree of autonomy that workers might enjoy with regard to pursuing earnings can bring about a level of individuality amongst them. This leads to the conflict between capital and labour being translated from that of hierarchical domination into lateral antagonism on the shopfloor (ibid.: 65-7).

Shopfloor organisation: workers and their stewards

This chapter has so far examined a range of structural factors which influence worker agency. Such a focus does not answer the question as to why some groups of workers might be more effective than others in similar sets of industrial circumstances. As Edwards (1988: 209) notes, the influence of structural conditions is important but these have effect only because of the ways in which they are mediated by experience. Worker action does not merely fill in the gaps left by structural forces, it interprets and gives meaning to them (ibid.: 205-6). From this viewpoint, an appreciation of some of the key characteristics of workgroups which might facilitate their ability (and, importantly, their representatives' ability) as active agents to build up job controls (Terry and Edwards, 1988) can only be gained by revisiting what Edwards (1988) identifies as the dynamic and dialectic theme of shopfloor relations.

The ability of workers and their unions to advance their interests is critically dependent on the power resources that they have at their disposal (Simms and Charlwood, 2010: 128). Unions (and employers) can be thought of as being able to draw on two types of power resource The first, legitimacy power, refers to power that unions have because employers (sometimes through legislation) accept the legitimacy of a union's representation and bargaining roles. The second is coercive power, the expression of which may take the form of job control by workgroups and refers to the power to force someone to do something because they fear the consequences of not doing it (ibid.). Job control might be defined as all the means used by workers and their unions to influence the pace and the timing of work, the balance between effort and reward and the conditions impinging on the immediate effort bargain (Scullion and Edwards, 1988: 125). This may find expression in worker influence over workplace issues such as the division of tasks, allocation of overtime and the application of discipline (Edwards: 1988). Such

controls are dependent upon the establishment and maintenance of strong shopfloor organisation (Edwards, 1988; Edwards and Scullion, 1982).

Collective worker activism is a social process and is directed by values and systems of belief (Beynon, 1973) that must be developed and, due to the ever present threat of adverse forces from inside and outside of the workplace, sustained. Rather than being determined by technological factors, the expansion of workers' margin of discretion is realised through their own consciousness, social activity and organisation (Belanger and Evans, 1988). Workgroup organisation is developed, in part, through processes of socialization which are, according to Batstone et al. (1977: 225), created and maintained within domestic organisations by those with the ability to identify, shape and direct issues in the manner required. From this viewpoint, the collective aims of workers are dependent upon and inextricably linked to workgroup leaders or spokespersons without whom they would find difficulty in effectively using their power (Brown, 1973: 132; Batstone et al., 1977: 225).

When discussing leadership in terms of workplace trade unionism, Brown (1972: 132) notes that the power of shop stewards stems from the workgroup that they represent and, in particular, the willingness and ability of that group to act collectively in pursuance of its interests. This means that stewards' power is limited by, and concomitant upon, the support of its members (Batstone et al., 1977). While this might be the case, steward leadership involves an ability to undertake certain courses of action without direct resort to the membership and crucially the capacity to influence membership attitudes (ibid.: 99). The legitimacy of such types of strong leadership can often be located within its role in past shopfloor struggles and achievements (Beynon 1973: 29; Batstone et al.: 1977) and is essential in forming an ideological base upon which effective workplace trade unionism can be built (Batstone et al., 1977: 122).

If shop stewards are able to influence the perspectives which their members adopt (Batstone et al.; 1977), it must be borne in mind that their leadership is not permanent. The members who elect them have specific expectations of their stewards. This dictates that the latter must acquire adequate resources which allow them to negotiate with the same members upon whose support their power, and indeed existence they are

dependent (ibid: 105, 129). A key means by which shop stewards achieve this is through their relationship with other workers whom Batstone et al. (ibid.: 100) term as 'opinion-leaders'. From this viewpoint, it is argued that stewards are able to gain support for particular courses of action through the maintenance of a supportive network of social relationships (Hyman 1975: 161) with fellow workers who are influential in terms of shaping opinion within the wider workgroup (ibid.: 102). The essence of shop steward leadership in this context is the development of such networks of opinion leaders, and moreover, co-stewards. Such contacts can help espouse particular sets of values which justify decision making and reaffirm a level of collective awareness that is deemed to be essential for effective workplace action (Brown, 1972; Hyman, 1975).

In his study of shopfloor workers in a car plant, Beynon (1973: 102) highlights the crucial role that shop stewards can sometimes play in shaping and maintaining collective worker consciousness. Stewards in this instance, through an ongoing structural and moral critique of management, were able to engender amongst their membership, a highly developed awareness of the class structure within the factory. They were crucially assisted here by an established and highly developed workplace committee whose history of involvement in workplace struggle provided a legitimate basis from which to argue (ibid, 102-103). This notion of workers understanding class relations in terms of the direct manifestation of conflict between themselves and management is sometimes referred to as factory consciousness (Lane, 1974; Hyman, 1975; Belanger and Evans, 1988) Whilst this at times might be considered somewhat parochial (Belanger and Evans, 1988: 184), it encapsulates the inherently oppositional nature of the exercise of job control within capitalism (Hyman, 1975: 159).

The above suggests that the collective consciousness of workers and stewards in the past can facilitate the maintenance of such consciousness in the present (Batstone et al., 1977). Furthermore, it provides support for the argument that, the perceived efficacy of collective control by workers is not only learned through experience, but is essentially rooted within shopfloor tradition (Hyman, 1975: 154). In this sense, previous action, can act as a wellspring that provides workers with credible examples of collective remedies through which to pursue the sense of collective grievance that is central to the success of strong shopfloor control (ibid.: 154). When operating against such a historical backdrop

therefore, stewards are able to draw on past images to create a range of vocabularies which can be employed in relation to collective action (Batstone et al., 1978).

The effects of countervailing pressures on worker outlook and action

So far, it would appear that there are number of key factors that are central to the maintenance and success of shopfloor organisation and action. These include the presence of workforce leaders, a developed worker consciousness and a tradition of shopfloor action. However, as this chapter has earlier highlighted, workers are subject to countervailing pressures both outside and within the workplace which serve to legitimize managerial authority within the workplace (Beynon, 1973). Attention now turns some of these pressures and how they might militate against collective worker action and the sense of grievance that gives rise to this (Kelly, 1998). This provides the basis for a debate about the process through which workers move towards collective shopfloor action. As Hyman and Brough (1975) note, what is at issue here is the ideology and social imagery held by workers which is generated not only within work itself but in social life generally.

For Marx and Engels, consciousness from the very beginning is a social product (Hyman and Brough, 1975). Knowledge here is regarded as socially produced on the basis of particular structures of economic relationships and a given ideology that reflects and supports the interests of specific section of society (ibid.: 187). From this viewpoint, dominant values originate among and reflect the interests of, those with power and advantage. They are embodied in the institutional order (i.e. the state and education) and, in the case of a capitalist economy, serve to legitimise inequality and its institutional expression. It is this dominant ideology of capital, which Hyman (1975) identifies as shaping worker perceptions of themselves and their world). Workers then bring to the workplace a learned set of norms which accept the authority of management and its right to manage.

This chapter has, nevertheless, highlighted that there is a conflict of interest that lies at the heart of the employment relationship (Kelly, 1998) meaning that the hegemony of capitalist ideology is never absolute (Hyman, 1975). Workers' ideologies, according to Hyman and Brough (1975), are inconsistent. They predominantly fail to question the dominant and generalised philosophies of society yet are cynical of those in positions of

power. In such indeterminate and ambiguous circumstances, the presence of individuals with a more developed and oppositional ideology can increase the likelihood of challenges to managerial authority (ibid., 174-7). This aligns with Hyman's (2001) argument that unions cannot escape their role as agencies of class, and highlights the role that workplace leaders might play in translating residual and latent worker impulses into collective activity and a trade union consciousness (Moore, 2010).

Worker mobilisation and strike action

Kelly (1998) adopts a Marxist perspective when exploring the factors which give rise to collective mobilisation in the form of oppositional action by workers at workplace level. Central to this process are interrelated themes of perceived injustice, worker identity and, as this chapter has highlighted, the crucial role played by workplace leaders. Again, the capacity to act collectively is seen to require a degree of class consciousness or worker solidarity (Klandermans, 1997). In order that such consciousness might translate into action (what we might term the mobilisation process), workers firstly must acquire a sense of grievance and injustice (Kelly, 1998). They must also feel entitled to their demands and believe that there is a chance that their situation can be changed by collective agency (Gamson, 1992; Klandermans, 1997). Although in the first instance mobilisation is based upon a sense of injustice, emergent shopfloor organisation requires conflict sponsorship (Beynon, 1973). This takes place essentially through the medium of workplace leaders who, through their use of ideology and discourse, might engender group identity. In such circumstances, workers coalesce from a set of individuals into a social group with a collective interest (Kelly, 1998).

Kelly focuses the issue of worker grievance to highlight the ways in which ideologies might be used by workplace leaders to identify the most salient features of the employment relationship. Crucial to this is the cultivation of a set of emotionally loaded categories for thinking about this exchange in terms of the interests of one's own group. Such categories are central to the notion of social identity, whereby a group's collective identity and interests are reinforced by comparisons with members of other groups, sometimes referred to as out groups (Kelly, 1998). In addition to promoting group cohesion and identity by drawing on particular terminology, workgroup leaders must also

frame issues which engender a sense of injustice amongst workers. What is also particularly important here is that workers attribute their perceived sense of injustice to their employer. These attributions of blame both derive from, and reinforce, a sense of distinct group identity, which Kelly notes is an essential element in the process in which workers become collectivised. This most blatant form that this can take is that of strike action

Hyman (1972: 53) defines strikes as a temporary stoppage that serve as a means of organised conflict and part of a conscious strategy to change a situation which is identified as the source of discontent. Strikes are not homogenous and can range from a massive protracted confrontation to a half hour protest by half a dozen workers (ibid.). However, whilst strike action involves processes of influence and power, the circumstances in which it might prevail as opposed to alternative expressions of worker unrest must contain a minimum of worker solidarity and organisation (ibid.: 54). Strike action is a collective act and implies a certain amount of understanding and belief in the efficaciousness of mass action. It follows that those workers with no feeling of solidarity or common interest would be unlikely to undertake a strike (Griffin, 1939: 98).

To continue along Marxian lines, strikes occur as a result of the contradictory interests of the two main actors within the employment relationship (Grint, 2005: 169). Not only does conflict centre on the wage effort bargain and the price of labour, it stems from the commodification of labour, its subordination to managerial control (Blackburn, 1967: 38-9), and the resultant powerlessness and job insecurity that workers experience (Hyman, 1984: 91). The greater the degree that managerial objectives fall outside the more narrowly defined interests of workers, the more probable they will be perceived as being illegitimate and thus resisted by those workers (ibid.: 93). This means that strike action, can only be understood through a wider analysis of all persons and groups significantly involved in the relationship between labour and management (Kornhauser, 1954: 75)

The evidence so far suggests that rather than being explained away in terms of an irrational act, strikes may well be viewed as one of a number of reactions to situations that conflict with the expectations and aspirations of individuals (Hyman, 1984: 135). Indeed, by comparing this chapter's earlier focus on the variety of forms of alternative

response to conflict and the deprivations of work (Baldamus, 1961) such as absenteeism, sabotage, and output restriction (Kerr, 1964: 171), it is possible to differentiate between the varying degrees of rationality that underpin worker action. For example, purely individual forms of what may be perceived as conflict activity like absenteeism and turnover bring only temporary relief from an uncongenial job and therefore, along with other individual worker responses, reflect a low level of rationality (Hyman, 1984: 136). Since the ability of employees individually to evade managerial rules is in most contexts rigidly circumscribed, it would appear wholly rational that they act collectively in order to marshal sufficient power to affect their work situation (ibid.). Therefore, while collective action in forms such as mock aggression and horseplay (Roy, 1960: 167) may be in some instances regarded as adaptations to workplace drudgery, it can be evidence of a higher level of rationality particularly when explicitly attempting to exert some control over the employment relationship (Hyman, 1984: 136).

Touraine (1965: 22) takes up the issue of workers deploying strike action as a means of restructuring power relations within the workplace. He contrasts this with an alternative strike orientation whereby workers take action to uphold the interests of a group or category within an organisation. The former of these orientations in particular, especially when it involves unofficial strike action, has been seen by some writers as a means of generating heightened consciousness (Cameron and Eldridge, 1968: 90) during which workers become more than usually aware of the oppressiveness of their industrial lot. Others have argued that strike action may in fact raise the focus of worker consciousness to the point where it questions the very nature and structure of capitalist society (Lenin, 1964). However, the idea of strikes as functioning as an explicit challenge to the structure of control within industry and society would seem questionable when considering the historical form that working class response to capitalism within the UK has traditionally taken. (Grint, 2005: 157).

The last point supports the argument that that trade unions as organisations do not challenge the existence of a society based on class division but, since they reflect the difference between capital and labour, merely express it (Anderson, 1967). As such they can never be viable vehicles for the advancement of socialism itself since they are tied to capitalism, which is a framework that they can bargain within but never change (ibid.).

Hyman (1975: 158-159) seeks to explain the factors that have shaped union expression in this sense by locating it within an account of the development of the early formal institutional relationship between trade unions and employers. From this viewpoint, the legitimacy and security of trade unions was historically very much dependent upon their role in helping to achieve the managerially driven goals of regularity and predictability in industrial relations. This often involved raising the levels at which collective bargaining took place, setting definitions of the subject of negotiation and the adherence to protracted procedures for the avoidance of disputes. Again, this has taken place largely within a framework in which existing forms of material inequality and of capitalist control have been taken for granted (ibid.). The role of trade unions within this process of the institutionalisation of conflict with UK industrial relations, is sometimes regarded a means of emasculating worker action (Anderson, 1967: 276). Alternatively, it may be viewed as an essential part of the mechanism of social control (Fox and Flanders, 1969: 159) which serves to resolve conflict through negotiation (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 16).

Writing at a time when it was vogue to view industrial unrest as best mediated through the pluralist maxim of joint institutional regulation, some commentators posited the notion of a continuing decrease in strikes (Ross and Hartman, 1960). From this viewpoint, dwindling in strike action at the time was indicative of a decline in industrial conflict (ibid.). This proved to be somewhat premature, in that it preceded a period during which strikes appeared to flourish (Cameron and Eldridge, 1968). That said in recent decades, the number of strikes fell to the extent that of they were, by 2000, close to a minimum level (Edwards, 2001). Quite apart from those that predicted this as a result of the institutionalisation of conflict, (Grint, 2005: 176), levels of contemporary strike action would appear to have been influenced by a range of other factors. This chapter now examines these factors before returning to the issue of strike action and an evaluation of its appropriateness as a trade union tactic in the contemporary industrial relations environment.

Contemporary trade unions: decline and revival; moderation versus militancy

As the previous chapter suggested, the conditions and circumstances, under which trade unions operate, changed decisively during the 1980s (Fairbrother, 1996: 115). Change

here included: the contraction of manufacturing employment, the privatisation of public services, the growth of non-manual workers, a doubling in part time work (to over seven million), a growth in small, less bureaucratised firms and high levels of cyclical unemployment (Ackers et al., 1996: 7). This took place against, and was moreover facilitated by, the backdrop of a free market governmental economic policy that was dominated by a concern to reduce inflation through tight control of money supply and the abandonment of the objective of full employment. Smith and Morton (1993: 100) identify this as part of a wider state-initiated programme aimed at restructuring work and employment relations which served to deny workers in both the public and private sectors access to resources of collective power. Central to this was the continuation of a trend towards the increasing juridification of employment relations but with an emphasis suggestive of a marked shift towards the repression of union activity by the state (Williams and Adam-Smith, 2010: 84-85).

Ackers et al. (1996: 17-20) argue that such legislation has reduced trade unions freedom to take industrial action, and paved the way for both management and government to bring about structural change in the form of new working practices and resultant high unemployment. Nowhere have these initiatives been more bitterly contested than in areas of employment which have traditionally been associated with high levels of strike proneness such as manufacturing, coal, and transport which, as Lyddon (2009) notes, resulted in a number of crushing defeats for unions. Along with the subsequent decline in 'unionised jobs', the 'demonstration effect' (ibid) of this upon other workers provides important additional insight into the decline in reduction in the strike weapon in recent times.

More recently, in the public sector itself, there has been series of strikes which for Kimber (2012) serve as evidence of resurgence in workplace power in areas including education, local government and the civil service. However, while Bach (2010: 169-170) argues that trade unions have had remained important national institutional actors able to articulate membership concerns around politically sensitive issues such as privatisation, he is more circumspect about their potency at workplace level. Here their capacity to organise, to regulate terms and conditions of employment and to influence managerial decision-making has diminished significantly against a backdrop of overall decline in trade union

density in the public sector from 84% in 1980 to 56% in 2012 (ibid.: 169-170). This was brought about, in no small part, by the ongoing fragmentation of services and the dispersal of members into outsourced private sector workplaces. Bach and Stroleny (2013: 350-351) argue that weakness here has been exacerbated by a number of other factors. These include; membership fear of taking action within the wider climate of austerity; a degree of acceptance by members of the legitimacy of austerity and subsequent doubts about the ability of their unions to alter governmental policy; and finally, difficulties amongst public sector unions in securing sufficient workplace representatives to build workplace organisation and develop a collective sense of grievance against employers.

Local trade unionism in both local government and the civil service has more recently been further threatened by unprecedented job losses (job losses were in excess of 14% in local government and the civil service between 2008-213) and an aggressive cadre of management that have sought to implement austerity measures by cutting allowances, reviewing starting salaries and challenging incremental pay progression (Bach and Stroleny, 2013: 354). The inability to stave off, what have sometimes been regionally-driven, initiatives have led some unions within the public sector to make concessions at a national level. As a consequence, in areas such as the NHS for example, some earlier gains that the unions achieved in the 2004 Agenda for Change agreement have recently been reversed (ibid.: 346). In contrast, some unions have managed to retain significant influence and established job controls at the level of the workplace itself (Beale and Mustchin, 2013).

For Kelly, any such decline is temporary and must be viewed as a cyclical process (1998: 100-105). From this viewpoint, the power of trade unions and their members has repeatedly been affected by use of counter–mobilisation strategies by the state and employers. This has particularly been the case during times of economic restructuring and has been carried out in a manner that would appear to be a recurrent theme throughout the history of capitalism (ibid.: 122). However, the presence at certain times of particular structural factors such as employer and state concerns with profitability, labour market conditions and general changes in worker attitude, have helped to nurture, develop and maximise the efficacy of more combative forms of worker action. Any such action again,

however, is crucially dependent upon the emergence of worker consciousness which is stimulated by employer violation of workplace conventions and social values (ibid.: 108). Viewed from Kelly's perspective therefore, severe membership decline, restrictive legislation, low levels of strike action and the potential dilution of a "traditional" class identity are problems from which unions have managed to historically recover. Rather than being hostage to an irreversible trend of de-collectivisation, what would once more appear to be crucial to the effectiveness of trade unions is the ideological messages and mobilizing tactics of their leaders (Touraine et al., 1987: 286-290). This contrasts with the post-modernist assertions that class politics and organised labour are components of a decaying labour movement which is both reflected in, and has given rise to, less adversarial industrial relations and the terminal decline of trade unionism (Kelly, 1996).

To continue with the theme of the efficacy of trade unions and the value of more combative forms of action, it will be recalled that this chapter earlier discussed the effects of a string of high profile defeats on the part of trade unions (Lyddon, 2009) and the period of coercive pacification (Hyman, 1984: 225), that this has ushered in. However, evidence suggests that within certain areas of the UK labour market, strikes have remained important both as bargaining levers in pay negotiations, and as a means of signalling discontent over new working arrangements (Edwards, 2001). Lyddon (2009: 317-339) points to the on-going use of the strike weapon within the public sector, transport, communication and distribution which, because it involves protracted planning and the tactical use of ballots, can both prolong disputes and widen the group of employees who are prepared to take action (Edwards, 2001). Such circumstances mean that unions can be on a conflict footing for long periods meaning that current historically low levels of strike action may well mask a high level of industrial unrest (ibid.).

Not only are strike levels at times unrepresentative of underlying industrial conflict they can also provide a misleading view of the potential power of some groups of workers. Thus, Lyddon (2009: 317, 339) notes that there remain various groups of reasonably secure strategically well placed, but dissatisfied, groups of workers, facing employers whose 'just in time' supply systems render them quite vulnerable to worker action. Such a situation again raises questions as to the attractiveness of partnership based approach that has been associated with non-negotiable change that is deleterious to the interests

of workers (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2005; Danford et al., 2004, 2005) among those more well positioned unions. Thus, commentating some twelve years after Kelly (1996), Buttigieg et al., (2008: 263) maintain the argument that, in contrast to notions of partnership and social cooperation, worker mobilisation and collectivist orientation enhance the opportunity of a union to achieve its bargaining objectives. What is more, successful worker mobilisation in pursuit of this is still based upon the attribution of problems to agency and a 'them and us' concept of the employment relationship (ibid.). Again, such a viewpoint suggests that notions of partnership may do little other than to mask the antagonistic interest of workers and employers (Kelly, 1996: 102), and moreover, that prognostications of the "death of the strike", the dissolution of the working class and the demise of trade unionism appear somewhat unfounded (Lyddon, 2009: 339).

It would so far seem that arguments relating to worker consciousness, and the role that workplace leaders might play in bringing this about, might go some way towards off-setting more deterministic approaches which seek to explain worker behaviour. However, stress on the actors' subjective definition of a situation should not allow us to play down or ignore objective properties of the situation in which action occurs (Rose, 1988: 271). Evidence points to a clear tension between the external pressures shaping worker behaviour and the factors affecting the way that these are mediated in the workplace Thus, whilst objective features do not rigidly determine the subject's action they can provide a framework that more readily facilitates some forms of action while excluding others, and encourage some forms whilst discouraging others (ibid.). This raises a number of questions including the potential effects of external factors such as the political and economic climate upon worker action, the way that workers approach managerial attempts to introduce change, and, perhaps more fundamentally, the willingness of workers to identify with the aims of trade unions. Greater understanding of such issues is gained by refocussing upon the shopfloor and in particular the effects of governmental and by extension, managerial quests for increasing forms of worker flexibility on workplace organisation.

The growth of flexible working and its effects upon shopfloor organisation

This chapter began with a brief account of the economic and political doctrine of Neo-Liberalism. It will be recalled that this attributes almost mystical powers to the free market (Moody, 1997: 120) and contains, at its core, the principles of free trade and a thorough intolerance towards trade unions. A key component of this approach has involved the pursuit of the central labour market aim of restoring employer initiative by reducing, as much as possible, all restrictions on the deployment of labour. In recent decades, governments who have been wedded to such an approach have created a legislative, ideological and discursive framework that has encouraged the flexible alignment of workers to match employer requirements (Crouch, 2003: 119).

Flexibility in this sense takes on two distinct but interrelated streams. The first is functional flexibility, which refers to a type of work organisation which its proponents argue is based upon mechanisms that provide organisationally committed employees with multi skills. These can be redeployed relatively quickly from one task to another resulting in gains for both firm and worker (Kalleburg, 2001: 481-482). The second is numerical flexibility where employers attempt to reduce costs by using workers who are not their regular employees (ibid). In Britain, a number of types of work groups have been seen as constituting the growing (numerically) flexible workforce including part-time workers, agency workers and short term contract holders (Kalleburg, 2001: 483; Gallie, 1998: 152).

Most recently, the on-going quest for ever-greater forms of worker flexibility on the part of employers has found expression in the proliferation of what has come to be termed as the 'zero-hour' contracts. Under such an arrangement an individual is not guaranteed work and is paid only for the actual hours of work offered by the employer and carried out. According to Brinkley (2013: 7), employers may often favour these types of contract where work is erratic and highly unpredictable, varying from day to day and week to week. They offer an effective and cost efficient way of matching labour demand and supply. The Office for National Statistics estimates that there were approximately 1.8 million zero-hours contract that provided work in August 2014 (Pyper and Dar, 2015: 3).

The increased usage of non-standard types of employment (Edgell, 2006: 126) such as zero-hours contracts, temporary and part time contracts as well as agency workers by employers has led some commentators (Atkinson, 1984; Mangum et al., 1985: 599-561; Osterman, 1994) to identify the simultaneous presence of two distinct groups of workers within many organisations. The first of these are sometimes referred to as core workers, who tend to be full time, often skilled employees who enjoy fringe benefits and who are (arguably) committed to their employment (Kalleburg, 2001: 484). The second group are often termed peripheral, or contingent workers (Heery and Abbott; 2000; Kalleburg, 2001), who occupy insecure non-standard types of employment. Whilst non-standard work often falls into a number of categories it seems to be commonly underpinned by a number of certain features which clearly indicate that it is inferior to standard forms of work (Edgell, 2006: 141; Robinson, 2000: 32). These include high levels of job insecurity (Gallie, 1998: 185), a greater likelihood of low pay, no sick pay, and no pension or access to career progression (McGovern et al., 2004). Those workers 'employed' on a zero-hour basis are entitled to no protection against unfair dismissal, maternity rights, redundancy rights and rights under TUPE (Brinkley, 2013: 7). Despite the sometimes stark differences between them, core and peripheral workers often work side by side (Smith, 1994) with the increasing utilisation of peripheral workers via organisational networks leading in some circumstances to dual internal labour markets (Harrison, 1994: 196).

The juxtaposition of core and non-standard staff might act, in line with Burawoy's (1979) account of the internal labour market, as a means of laterally dispersing the conflict that is inherent within the capitalist employment relationship. In particular, management's recruitment of peripheral workers can give rise to conflict and tension between temporary and permanent employees due to some of the conflicting and divergent interests that these groups hold in the workplace (Heery and Abbot, 2000: 158). Barnett and Miner (1992: 272-274) provide an example of how this might play out in the workplace by highlighting how the insecure nature of peripheral workers can at times actually enhance the internal job mobility opportunities of regular workers by reducing the number of such permanent employees who are competing for promotion. Research also emphasises the chasm and concomitant interests that can exist between a mobile 'first class' core group of workers and an expendable 'second class' of peripheral workers

(Heckscher, 2000 cited in Blyton and Turnbull, 2008). It also raises questions that are underpinned by a social dimension related to the labour market rights and opportunities associated with low-skilled disadvantaged contingent work (Godard and Delaney, 2000: 492; Kalleburg, 2001: 492-5).

Evidence so far suggests that, though it may be a staple feature of modern employment practice, the growing utilisation of a disadvantaged, disenfranchised stratum of contingent workers is at odds with principles of fashionable HRM-based models of labour management. Both Sisson and Purcell (2010: 88-89) and Nolan and O'Donnell (2003: 493) note that such models champion high commitment and high involvement style management systems which place emphasis upon team working, workplace wellbeing and employee development. More accurately, the popularity of casualisation lies in the obvious cost benefits that a low paid disposable group of workers might bring to an organisation and its value as a means by which employers can dilute worker control. Its effectiveness in this sense is particularly evident in the case of functional flexibility. Here rapid deployment of workers between tasks (Kalleburg, 2001: 481) can be more easily achieved in the context of what Drago (1996) refers to as 'management by fear' in the low-job-security environment characteristic of the disposable workforce. Unsurprisingly, this changing structure of workforce composition has in recent times been perceived by trade unions as posing a threat to their power and the security of their existing members (Heery and Abbot, 2000: 158).

Growing insecurity might stimulate workers' demands for union protection and there are examples of a number of historically successful union campaigns that have sought to regulate unpredictable employment. These have been undertaken in industries including mining and docks and the car industry (Durcan et al., 1983). However, surveys indicate that insecure workers themselves are less likely to join unions than their full-time, substantively employed counterparts (Heery and Abbott, 2000: 155). In addition to their susceptibility to managerial and organisational whim, the insecure nature of their work means that peripheral employees are also difficult to organise (ibid.).

Demand for union membership is often attenuated by three considerations: fear, reflecting individual employee vulnerability that is associated with non-standard work

(Poynter, 2000; Edgell, 2006: 141); ignorance, with migrants and young workers (who are statistically over-represented in this area of employment) often having never encountered a trade union (Haynes et al., 2005); and calculations of cost relative to anticipated benefits (Galenson, 1994). Furthermore, the decentralised direction of industrial relations in recent decades has arguably done little to encourage trade unionism amongst insecure workers with the resultant workplace level bargaining and organisation proving implausible for workers who are in some cases not tied to a particular workplace or a particular employer (Heery and Abbott, 2000: 168).

The growth in contingent forms of employees and their coexistence among more secure core groups of worker suggests that strategies based around, supporting a standardised group of workers pursuing the same aims has become increasingly difficult for unions to sustain (Bacon and Storey, 2000: 43). As Heery and Abbott (2000: 170) note, peripheral workers' interests conflict, at least in part, with those of full-time permanent employees which present unions with difficulties in maintaining membership level and workplace organisation. The difficulties that unions face have been compounded in recent times by the upsurge in managerial approaches that emphasise the individual employee and in doing so threaten to shatter the collectivist past and traditional methods of trade unionism (ibid.). The notion that group identity, commonality of interest (Kelly, 1998) and an ideology based on workplace collectivism (Beynon, 1973) are prerequisites for group action (and thus shopfloor control) would, as such, appear to be potentially compromised or diluted by the presence of disparate groups of workers within the workplace.

Perhaps conversely, due to the disproportionately high make-up of minority groups, there is a greater likelihood for contingent workers to experience discrimination. Race, ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality are all integral dimensions of a fundamentally unequal employment relationship located in the workplace (Moore, 2010: 118). Trade unionism may, through both structural and discursive channels, be able to serve as a context in which multiple and contingent identities are collectivised and subordinated to union or (implicit) class interests (ibid.). The important point here is that for work group organisation to thrive within the reshaped context in which activists operate, trade unions must be able to assert and frame the common interests that emerge from the experience of wage labour under the capitalist mode of production. At the same time,

they must reflect, mediate, and shape the social identities (Moore, 2010: 119) of contingent groups within the workplace.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the management of labour and the ways that workers respond to the labour process within context of a capitalist economy. Much of this has focussed on the loci of the shopfloor itself and the actions of workers at the point of production This has involved a consideration of the employment relationship through the medium of labour process theory which Braverman (1974: 54) argues is dominated and shaped by the accumulation of wealth. From this viewpoint, modernisation of the public services has been driven by the primary aim of increasing productivity for the purpose of increasing private wealth. The vehicle for change here has been a set of managerial practices which advocate managerial sovereignty which are underpinned by the Taylorist principles of scientific management. For Worrall et al. (2009: 118) this has resulted in work intensification, job alienation and loss of control over the labour process for public sector workers in general.

An investigation into shopfloor relations and the pressures which shape both management and worker action in a capitalist economy is a vital component of this thesis' overall concern with worker-management relations within the Royal Mail. Here, management have become increasingly charged with introducing market driven change at the locale of the shopfloor itself. This chapter has shed light on the methods through which management seek to achieve this and the free market profit imperative that underpin these. An appreciation of the effects of such initiatives on the autonomy of public sector workers helps bring insight to the factors which continue to shape the on-going levels of resistance by UK postal workers to workplace reform (Beale and Mustchin, 2013; Beirne, 2013).

In concentrating on events at the point of production this chapter has also focused on the processes through which workers collectively mobilise (Kelly, 1998) to defend their terms and conditions. As such, it provides insight into what has been a key feature of workplace Post Office industrial relations in recent decades as well as the roles that the local union and workers play in this process. Since this is contextualised in an analysis of the current

historically low levels of industrial action in the wider labour market, it helps to accentuate what is the special case of the Royal Mail, where high levels of industrial action have in recent decades bucked this trend. This provides an effective lead-in to this thesis' next chapter. This is a detailed discussion of worker management relations within the Post Office and the historical, political and economic factors which have shaped these.

Chapter Four: Examining industrial relations in the Post Office

This chapter examines the long-standing relationship between the Post Office, its workforce and their representatives. In doing so it concentrates on that aspect of the organisation that is concerned with the processing, collection and delivery of mails (Gall, 2003: 24) which is currently known as the Royal Mail. This, for much of its existence, has fallen within the generic parameters of the wider Post Office before eventually becoming a separate autonomous business unit in 1986 (ibid.: 40). The earlier part of this chapter will, therefore, refer to this entity in terms of the wider Post Office before moving to concentrate more specifically on its term as a stand-alone business unit. From here on it will be referred to as Royal Mail. While the Post Office has throughout its long history employed a number of categories of worker, the focus here is upon those that have been historically referred to as postmen and postwomen.

For much of its existence the Post Office has, as part of the public sector, fallen under the ambit of central government. As such, the influence of state policy upon relations within the Post Office features throughout this chapter which adopts an historical analysis, taking as it starting point an investigation of initial trade union recognition and emergent organisation within the industry. From here, attention moves on to focus upon the main political, social and economic factors that have shaped both early and post-war developments within the Post Office before finally assessing the current effects of full liberalisation.

A key area for analysis here are the forces which have influenced labour relations strategies by Post Office management, and how these have affected and been affected by union structure, strategy (Batstone et al., 1984: 1) and organic worker agency. Such a focus provides important insight into the factors which have both shaped, and helped sustain the significant levels of shopfloor job controls which continue to be exhibited by many groups of postal workers (Gall, 2003). The attention here to management strategy and logic is particularly important in compensating for this study's absence of first-hand accounts from Royal Mail management as to what pressures might drive their behaviour on the shopfloor. For these reasons it brings essential context to the later empirical account of management and worker action in a range of Royal Mail workplaces.

The ongoing liberalisation of the UK postal services

The postal service within the UK has in recent times experienced broadly similar processes of deregulation and marketization to those throughout many western economies (Gall, 2003: 277). This has, in line with many other public services and utilities, involved exposure to market forces in the form of private capital and competition and the consequent relentless pressure to commercialise (ibid.). At first glance this initiative might appear to have come a little late in the day when compared to the manner in which other long-standing public utilities within the UK have been subject to such reform (for a discussion on this see Kessler and Bayliss 1998: 147-159). However, as this study has earlier suggested, modernisation of the postal services has been just one aspect of a sustained New Labour pro-market, liberalisation programme which appears to have retrospectively endorsed the swathes of privatisation which took place in the 1980s (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 58). A major theme of this was the (albeit fiercely resisted) de-centralization of public sector pay and the degradation of relatively well paid unionised jobs (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 16).

Given what is known of the contemporary industrial make-up of Royal Mail and its employees (which will be looked at more closely later on in this chapter), it would appear logical to conclude that the increasing prevalence of such initiatives have served as a catalyst for unusually high levels of industrial unrest within the Post Office in recent times. Here, a relatively well organised and militant group of workers (Beale, 2003; Gall, 2003) have sought to repel market-driven change which poses both an ideological and material threat to their terms and conditions (Beale, 2003). Kelly (1996) argues that militancy is based on widespread membership mobilisation with the intention of confronting the employers as a collective body to impose costs on them. However, such a perspective has a tendency to overlook a consideration of what Gall (2003: 12) refers to as labour militancy. This is used to denote behaviour that is sub-national and is concerned largely, but not exclusively with workplace-based action. Obvious examples are walkouts and strikes over immediate concerns such as sackings victimisation (ibid.) and changes to long-standing ways of working. When examining militant behaviour on the part of postal workers, this chapter will largely be focussing on these principally economic forms of militancy. That they differ from forms of behaviour which may encompass a political

dimension, should not, detract from the union's long-established tradition of pursuing its aims through political processes

Again, as with debates relating to the wider public services, there is a suggestion here that in its quest to usher in the principles of marketization, Royal Mail has moved from a consensual form of industrial relations, to a more unitary private sector-style model. However, by adopting a similar approach to that advocated by Coffey and Thornley (2009), a longer term perspective on the relationship between the Post Office and its workers provides a somewhat different picture. From this standpoint, the Post Office has historically behaved in a manner which has followed the contours of that of the state in its wider role as an employer. In this sense, as Allen notes (1960: 71) the approach of the state towards its workforce have not been a consistently comfortable one. Like the relationship between trade unions and private employers it has been subject to variations (ibid.).

The Post Office and the origins of trade union organisation

Harvey and Hood (1958: 186) employ a Marxist perspective to identify the origins of modern state employment which they suggest developed in response to the bourgeoning requirements of an economy based upon monopoly capitalism. Central to this was the growth of an enormous administrative apparatus whose chiefs, in conjunction with cabinet, exercised for much of the late nineteenth and twentieth Century considerable jurisdiction over the Treasury, Foreign Office, Home Office and all other governmental offices (ibid.). This apparatus overseeing the different functions of state employment has been historically termed as the Civil Service which, according to Harvey and Hood (1958: 186-7) has been widely (but in their view falsely) regarded as class-neutral and politically impartial. One of the largest of these numerous governmental departments that helped form the early Civil Service was the Post Office (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 93) which was, prior to industrialisation, controlled by the crown. By 1902 this organisation employed 77,035 persons out of total of 105,888 established in the civil service and working for central government (Allen, 1960: 72). Its transformation into a state owned and controlled service from this period on in many ways supports the image of the civil service as that of key in helping to service the requirements of capitalism. Thus, the

growth of national markets and, particularly, the demands of business, were seen to require cheap, efficient and reliable means of communication (Batstone et al., 1984: 22-3). This must, however, be viewed in relation to concurrent humanitarian demands at the time for expansion as a means of compensating geographical dispersion and raising literacy levels (ibid.). This last point perhaps helps to highlight some of the complex and often contradictory pressures faced by the state in its role as employer, service provider, and arbiter within a capitalist economy.

These dual pressures for the provision of a low-cost universally available postal service were to help define the early parameters within which the Post Office, historically, had to conduct its operational role. This has traditionally taken the form of a universal pricing structure and, until recently, the monopoly of letter carriage, which have been important features of the service irrespective of levels of business activity (Batstone et al., 1984:78). Such features have determined both basic levels of staffing and frequency of collection and delivery with the former being affected at least by change in the number of delivery points (new houses etc.) as levels of business (ibid.). Within these fixed parameters however, the Post Office has sought on-going changes to delivery patterns in response to the introduction and wide spread availability of more rapid forms of communication (for example the telegraph and telephone) (ibid.). This suggests that the current pressures facing the contemporary postal service and its employees may represent less of a departure from its long-standing situation as a service provider than it would at face value appear. It would, therefore, seem reasonable to assume that the prevalence and frequency of such pressures, and the consequent need to restructure its workforce's labour process, have over time shaped both the manner in which the Post Office as an employer has approached its employees and how they have responded. From this viewpoint, the more assertive model of managerialism associated with the restructuring of the postal service and moreover, wider public sector reform (see Mather et al., 2005) may be nothing new.

Early evidence indeed suggests that far from being perceived as a more recent symptom of modernisation, managerial hostility towards trade unionism was a key feature of early industrial relations within the Post Office. Following the elimination of patronage and the advent of open recruitment, the government opposed early trade unionism within the

Post Office until 1906 whereupon recognition of a raft of associations and federations of postal servants and consent to negotiate with their full time officials was granted (Allen, 1960: 72). This change in approach with regard to recognition by the Post Office is representative of a wider shift in labour relations strategy by the state. This was shaped in no small part by the growing political and industrial influence of trade unions and the rise of the Labour Party during this period (Batstone et al., 1984: 109). In the interests of political contingency therefore, the state accommodated growing demands by Post Office staff for union recognition to ensure worker and union commitment to organisational aims. Operating in conjunction with this was a selection and socialization process in which Post Office workers were increasingly recruited from young males fresh into the labour market and secondly ex-military personnel. In these ways management achieved a labour force which was disciplined, committed to public service and, since additionally isolated from market pressure, less likely to cause political embarrassment (ibid.).

This shift in approach by the Post Office as an employer perhaps represented for some the first steps towards the idealised image of model employer which it appeared to enjoy for much of the twentieth century. It also followed a number of initiatives deemed to facilitate the goal of a cheap and reliable postal (and subsequently telegraph and telephone) system (Batstone et al., 1984: 108). These included the subdivision of postal work into less skilled tasks (Swift, 1929); the on-going attempts to employ cheaper types of labour (as in temporary staff and the employment of 'boy labour' and women) (Shepherd, 1923: 113); the intensification of work and the nullifying of collective organisation through the use of victimization and (among other agencies) the use of blacklegs (Swift, 1929: 134-135; Bealey, 1976: 18). It is clear that a number of these measures bear a resemblance to some of the more contemporary flexible-based managerial practices which have arisen out of the pressures of preparing for privatisation within the Post Office and moreover modern day wider public services (see for example Martinez Lucio et al., 2000; Fairbrother, 1994; O'Connell Davidson, 1993). In doing so therefore, they help to expose the key aims of modernisation as that of a concern with cost cutting, de-skilling and the weakening of terms and conditions. Since they were ushered in by the state's desire to achieve a cheap postal service without drawing

resources away from the private sector (Batstone et al., 1984: 108), they also highlight the long-standing sacrosanct position of private capital within capitalist society.

Another factor which led to the relatively early recognition of trade unions within the Post Office, when compared to the wider civil service, was the occupational nature of its workforce. The manual nature of postal work was conducive to trade unionism (Batstone et al., 1984: 109) with workers being amongst the first to organise (by 1902 there were nine Post Office unions, see Allen, 1960: 72) and impose political pressures upon the state (Clegg et al., 1964: 215-22; Shepherd, 1923: 198). The state in this instance was, therefore, spurred into attempts to incorporate postal worker representatives into a structure which encouraged 'moderation' and responsibility, in an attempt to limit the extent to which they associated with the wider labour movement. Allied to this was an early attempt to cultivate a "model employer" approach towards industrial relations, in which strong responsible trade unionism, the then Post Master General argued, would be more likely to facilitate satisfactory outcomes between workers and employer (Clinton, 1984: 86). That this approach by the state in its role of employer was borne out of necessity is apparent when looking at the much slower development and establishment of trade unionism in other areas of the civil service (Allen, 1960: 72). For example, although by the outbreak of the war in 1914 trade unionism within the wider civil service was widespread it was largely ineffective with no officers, offices and staff (Allen, 1960: 73) and with their spokesmen enjoying no real negotiating rights. Again, recognition here may have been largely to do with governmental attempts to shield its employees from the period's growing mood of industrial militancy brought about by the failure of either parliamentarianism or orthodox trade unionism to secure any improvement in the working class standard of life (Cole cited in Pelling, 1988: 195). This further suggests that governmental acceptance of trade unionism was based more upon pragmatism than representing an irrevocable change for the good (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 95).

The war, as Allen (1960, 73) notes, altered the whole character of the Civil Service. Normal practices were abandoned, women replaced male labour, and the Civil Service recruited a huge raft of temporary workers who knew nothing of, and cared little for, its traditions (ibid.). Imbued with a growing insistence upon pay comparability, impulses to combine during a period of low unemployment were strengthened amongst these

workers (Phelps Brown, 1959: 360-361), with trade union membership within 5 years doubling (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 95). The propensity of the state to attempt to nullify trade unionism through incorporation in times of economic and political crises was in these circumstances apparent. This took the form of increasing industry wide bargaining and the use of arbitration which provided the foundations for the Whitley Committee system (Coffey and Thornley, 2009: 95). Within the Whitley system codified national agreements are supplemented at regional, employer and local level. Both formal and informal bargaining takes place over a wide range of procedural and substantive issues including holiday, pay, hours of attendance grievance and discipline. Trade union officials, workplace bargainers and lay activists are all mobilised around collective bargaining and individual representation (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 16). Although not initially intended for the Civil Service (Allen, 1960: 73) Whitleyism, after pressure from its unions and more than a small amount of opposition from the government in its capacity of employer, was introduced into the Civil Service becoming operational from July 1919.

The complex and hierarchical nature of the Whitley system forced civil servants to reorganise their own organisations which were too numerous and divided in opinion (amounting by 1919 to around 200 hundred different associations) to undertake effective negotiations with the official side (Allen, 1960: 75). The formation of the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) brought together most of the significant unions (ibid) and organised all indoor and outdoor manipulative, non-engineering grades of postal workers (Clinton, 1984: 322). These included postmen, postmen higher grade (PHG) telephonists, sorters, and postal officers. Its structure was inherited almost directly from what was the Postman's Federation (ibid.) with its officers being elected by its members for life; they were the general secretary, and his assistant (or deputy from 1948), assistant secretaries, together with treasurer, organising secretary and editor (ibid.). Members, whose density levels in posts and telecommunications stood, by 1921, at 64.2%, almost twice the national average and above the figure for national government (Bain and Price, 1980), were represented by an executive. Within this structure, which was to remain largely unchanged for many years (Clinton, 1984: 321), delegates and members historically expressed their views at annual conference, special conferences and district committees (ibid.).

While commentators such as Clinton (1984: 321) extol the democratic traditions of the UPW, it has historically been regarded as operating with a high degree of centralization (Batstone et al., 1984: 191). Again, as with much of the public sector, this was shaped by the nature of pay determination, Whitleyism, and public accountability (Boraston et al., 1975: 156). Despite the provision of Whitley committees at lower level, major issues tended to be handled exclusively at the national level (Gladden, 1943: 27) with, for example, wage negotiations always being directed by the general secretary (Moran, 1974: 26). These modes of negotiation not only reflected the structure and power of the employer, they helped to foster and lay down a tradition of strong bargaining relationships between general secretaries, senior Post Office management and politicians (Taylor, 1980: 428; Parris, 1973; Bealey, 1976). The importance placed by the UPW on political influence as a means of satisfactorily maintaining the institutions of industrial relations as well as defending and promoting both union rights and the civil rights of members (Humphreys, 1958; Gladden, 1943; Parris, 1973) has been reflected in its long-standing association with the TUC and close relationship with the Labour party (Moran, 1974:32). This highlights the means by which the UPW was, when circumstances were favourable, able to gain wider support for its aims and to exploit for itself the concessions which the state has at times been forced to make to the union movement (Batstone et al. 1984: 189).

From its early days then the UPW, with its close relationship with the Labour party, differed from other trade unions within the civil service. Humphreys (1958: 227) identifies the latter as being characterised by 'a special sort of trade unionism, strong and active, yet in harmony with the traditional political neutrality of the civil service in a democratic state'. However, in a similar vein to other unions within the civil service, a reliance on political action and the need to maintain a public service identity as a means of justifying relatively reasonable wage levels undermined (at least up until the 1950s) any serious resort to strike action for the UPW and its members (Batstone et al., 1984: 189-90). Nevertheless, important differences did remain particularly with regard to what Moran (1974: 23) refers to as the organisational goals of the union. From this viewpoint, in addition to pursuing economic goals involving the provision of remunerative benefits for its members, trade unions may pursue what Moran (1974 :6) refers to as cultural goals.

Cultural goals are pursued if a union commits itself to the support of some form of social philosophy, and most British unions when they have pursued cultural goals have committed themselves to some left wing political philosophy (ibid). In this sense the UPW inherited from preceding postal unions support amongst its ranks for (and thus pursued, initially through the vehicle of guild socialism) some form of workers control in the industry. The notion of workers control in this instance was predicated on a long-standing interest in joint control of the Post Office between its authorities and its employees. As Moran notes (ibid.: 27) this implies an interest in non-economic issues and may posit a challenge to the conventional structure of authority relations between management and worker within the workplace. Whilst it was to lose steam after the general strike in 1926 (ibid.: 28), the issue of worker control within the Post Office has periodically been a much contested area of workplace relations. Nowhere has this been more acutely evident than within the recent and on-going restructuring of the postal service (see Beale, 2003).

Moran (1974: 33) notes that despite the best efforts of the UPW, the Post Office remained unwilling throughout the twentieth (and it might be added here the early years of the twenty first) century to consider sharing authority with grades of workers organised by the UPW - apart from a brief experiment with industrial democracy in 1978 (see Batstone et al., 1984). That said, labour relations within the industry were dominated for long periods by strategies designed to engender cooperation through the fostering of job security, individual welfare and joint consultation on virtually all operational matters (ibid.: 183). A strong internal labour market, Whitleyism and the notion of 'fair comparison' in terms of pay (an issue which was however to prove the subject of long-standing contestation within the wider Civil Service) provided a material underpinning to what appeared to be a high degree of consensus between management and unions (ibid.). However, the state's concern with maintaining low-cost public services which do not contradict the principles of the private sector has periodically created pressures for organisational reform within the Post Office. Put another way, the state's ultimate dependence upon private sector revenue for its very survival within a capitalist economy (Offe and Ronge, 1982: 250; Lindblom, 1979) has operated (and indeed continues to act) as a fundamental influence upon the nature of industrial relations within the Post Office. Rather than being seen as a symptom of current marketization then, strong

recommendations that the Post Office should be seen to pursue the principles of private sector rationalisation were advocated from some managerial quarters from as early as the inter-war years (Pitt, 1980; Hannah, 1976). Consequently, from 1932 the Post Office, under the recommendations of the Bridgeman Committee, was tasked with introducing changes which included a degree of decentralisation and clear distinctions between its postal and telecoms functions whilst retaining a proportion of its 'profits' (Batstone et al., 1984: 25).

Historically, employers have not been the only parties within the sphere of public sector industrial relations to look to examples from private industry as a means of attempting to achieve their objectives. Civil Service unions consistently claimed from the late 1920s onwards that the wages of their members lagged behind those in outside industry and, in the main, their claims were justified (Allen, 1960: 86). This situation became all the more acute in times of high unemployment as the government, in its role of employer, began to extend the criteria of fair wage comparisons by including non-monetary advantages of government employment (ibid.). Non-monetary advantages in terms of employment within the Post Office referred to internal benefits such as, prospects for promotion, access to pensions and high levels of job security (Batstone et al., 1984: 112). The latter of these was particularly important during the interwar years when working conditions became better regulated, more benevolent and therefore relatively attractive within the Post Office (ibid.). While commentators such as Allen (1960: 86) point to the relative deterioration of pay within the Civil Service from the years 1932-1953, the provisions of such benefits resulted in the same period in significantly and steadily increasing labour costs for the Post Office (Batstone et al., 1984: 112-3). This must be viewed in relation to what Moran (1974: 28) refers to as the general radicalising process of the UPW within this period (specifically around the early years of the Second World War) in which the union's interest in worker control was revived. Again it would appear that the state was prepared, and at a time of sectoral growth able, to move away from an earlier emphasis on efficiency in order to achieve a committed labour force which posed no threat to parliamentary authority and the notion of public service (ibid.).

The early post war years and the advent of commercialisation

As this chapter has earlier suggested, industrial relations within the Post Office, must be viewed within the wider context of how the state attempts to its manage a range of contradictory pressures brought to bear upon it within capitalist society. What may be viewed as a decline of the traditional labour relations strategy of the Post Office, particularly from the late 1950s onwards (Batstone et al., 1984: 114) can be seen as part of a wider shift by the government through which it sought to address the solution of national economic problems created by inflation and the adverse balance of foreign trade (Allen, 1960: 64). Central to this was the pursuit by government of a policy of wage restraint which, as the nation's largest employer at the time, it attempted to enforce on its own employees (ibid). This was reflected in increasing governmental breaches of the norms of fair wage comparisons an example of this being the Post-Master General's refusal to implement an arbitration award in the late 1950s (Batstone et al., 1984: 114). For their proponents the introduction of such measures were an attempt to curb labour costs which, despite technological innovation, as with the public sector as a whole (Gough, 1975), were increasing within the Post Office. This was to provide the backdrop for the drive to economy and efficiency within the Post Office from the period 1957 to 1964 (Clinton, 1984: 299) and highlights how the government is, when it deems necessary, prepared to allow its relationship with the representatives of its employees to deteriorate. As Allen (1960: 67) notes in relation to this period during which there was pressure from the business sector and elsewhere for the refinement of the means of economic planning; 'the government was involved in the relationship in three ways: as a conciliator and arbitrator, as the nation's largest employer, and as the overseer of the community's interest'. When it came down to it, priority was given to the last (Allen, 1960: 57).

The move away from its traditional labour relations strategy was regarded by the Post Office as an essential component of its journey towards operating within a commercial paradigm. As Batstone et al. (1984: 116) note, existing within such a context would increasingly require major changes in managerial approach. The implication here was that market criteria should become more central with pay being more closely determined by performance and profitability rather than fair comparison. This carried important

implications for the way in which work was organised and was underpinned by the argument that joint regulation should not obstruct adjustments to the dictates of the market. In that it initially found early expression in the area of wage restraint, this shift in approach served as a catalyst which provoked the first official industrial action by the UPW and the Post Office Engineers (POEU) in the history of the Post Office (Bealey, 1976: 342-43). This was followed by a growing readiness amongst the rank and file to challenge managerial authority and to engage in industrial action at the local level (Batstone et al., 1984: 115). Whilst the mood among postal unions was symptomatic of both wider unrest within the civil service (ibid.) and a reflection of a militant industrial relations policy that was adopted by the TUC during this period (Allen, 1960: 67), the following point should also be considered. A number of years earlier, but certainly within what would conceivably be the working life span of a significant number of its members, the UPW had suffered considerable membership loss (from 120,000 down to 52,000 in a few short months) when proposing its intention to adopt the strike weapon (Moran, 1974: 103). On the one hand, it may be argued that this upsurge in the willingness of members to engage in strike action stemmed from the move to a less conciliatory approach on the behalf of Post Office management. However, Hyman (1975: 154) reminds us that recourse to strike action (and a concern with workplace control in the above sense), tends to be dependent upon a tradition of collective workplace consciousness, and an awareness that grievances can be remedied by collective action; a tradition that had been historically absent within Post Office industrial relations. This, of course, raises the question as to what other factors helped bring about these cultural and operational changes within the UPW and its membership with regard to how they sought to both defend and further their interests from this period onwards.

As Clinton (1984: 302) notes, a new problem for the postal system from the late 1950s, particularly in the larger cities, was an acute labour shortage. This was influenced in no small part by the relative decline in earnings of Post Office workers compared to outside industry and a corresponding increase in other benefits such as job security and pensions in the latter (Batstone et al., 1984: 115). Labour turnover was thus increasing, and moreover, with a reduction in the telegram system (and subsequent decline in messenger boys) and the reduced volume and availability of ex-military entrants the nature of the

workforce began to change (ibid.). This had the effect of eroding the traditional spirit of the Post Office and reduced the efficacy of the process of socialization into the traditions of Whitleyism (ibid.). Conversely, it was argued that this influx of new labour brought with it attitudes towards management and work from other industries that had developed throughout a period in which there had been an upsurge in rank and file militancy (Lane, 1974: 164). This arguably helped to bring about what might be regarded as reversal of the traditional socialization process, as long–serving staff appeared to feel growing dissatisfaction with their terms and conditions and the quasi-military system of discipline within the Post Office. Moreover, they became increasingly prepared to challenge managerial decision-making (Batstone et al., 1984: 115)

It would appear that a change in the composition of the workforce and general erosion of the material underpinnings of consensus were largely responsible for the worsening in shopfloor relations within the Post Office from the late 1950s. What was a growing trend towards more economically-based forms of militancy was not restricted to workers, activists and their representatives on the shopfloor. Union leaders also became increasingly prepared to use the Whitley system to obstruct management and defend members' interests (Batstone et al., 1984: 114). This served to constrain the freedom of management as greater levels of consultation (presumably at times resulting in union veto) over technical and staffing arrangements (ibid.) emerged. From this viewpoint, a traditional reliance on political favour and consensual bargaining on the part of the UPW may have been borne more out of the pragmatic awareness of long-standing membership timidity (Moran, 1974) than its ideological leanings as an organisation. As Ironside and Seifert (2000: 17) note, trade union bargaining strength is, in part, dependent upon its ability to mobilize its membership to potentially harm, disrupt and distort the employer's business. Without such means the leadership of the UPW up until the late 1950s may, it might be argued, have had to look to more moderate ways of achieving its objectives. These had been reasonably successful up until this period. However, worsening terms and conditions and the importation of more militant attitudes into its changing constituency fused to provide a channel through which the UPW leadership's long-held, commitment to a more combative style of unionism began to find expression.

The consensus under strain

This period of growing industrial unrest within the Post Office towards the end of the 1950s is recognised by Clinton (1984: 301) as a General Election boom period of 'go' that was to be quickly followed by one of 'stop'. A growing balance of payments deficit during 1961 was thus followed by a period of recession which ushered in governmental initiatives that included wage pauses amongst its workforce and a concomitant reduction in public spending (ibid.). It was against this backdrop that a new Post Office Act was passed in 1961, which increased its financial independence and was intended to bring about greater efficiency. Here, perhaps, was the first clear example of the Post Office's move towards operating in a more commercial paradigm as it was from 1961 onwards required to conform to the rules for nationalised industries (Gall, 2003: 25). This involved the introduction of conventional commercial accounting, cover costs, and amongst other measures, the achievement of specified financial targets under the day-to-day auspices of a more autonomous Post Office management (Clinton, 1984: 302; Gall, 2003: 25). The roots of this more commercial approach were to be found within the Conservative government's attempt to infuse greater commercial spirit into the Post Office (Batstone et al., 1984: 200) an important strand of which involved the 'overcoming of the dictatorial attitudes of the unions' (Bevins, 1965: 72-8). This greater emphasis upon market-related considerations contrasted sharply with traditional notions of 'just' and 'fair' employee rewards. Furthermore, it served to heighten the bargaining awareness of the Post Office trade unions who increasingly engaged in their own *quid pro quid* form of bargaining (Batstone et al., 1984: 201).

This chapter has earlier outlined how the government in Britain, from the Post War period in particular, occupied an anomalous position of that of large scale employer, conciliator and regulator in chief of the economy (Allen, 1960: 113). As such, it has periodically attempted to limit pay increases in order to deal with economic crisis and has often taken the easiest option of applying this to its own employees (ibid). For Postal workers therefore, discussions relating to wage rises were from the early 1960s to become more clearly and predominantly shaped by government policy (Clinton, 1984: 533). This affected the nature and contours of bargaining within the Post office leading to direct bargaining and industrial confrontation that was without precedent (ibid.). While

their leaders may have been constrained within the parameters of government wage restraint, postal workers at shopfloor level were exploiting the period's climate of full employment. They were beginning to engage in the practice of local bargaining that was by the 1960s spreading out beyond its original stronghold in engineering (Lane, 1974: 160). A shortage of labour within the Post Office was supplemented by high levels of overtime which boosted earning levels and affected bargaining patterns (Clinton, 1984: 302). This growing reliance on overtime as a means of coping with increasing mail volumes and fluctuations in traffic flow was to become a staple operational feature within the Post Office that would serve to reinforce local and often unofficial bargaining for a number of decades that followed (Gall, 2003: 29).

As they moved into the 1960s a more industrially confident UPW membership continued to express their growing dissatisfaction towards the governments wage restraint measures and its impact upon their falling wage relativities through increasing incidences of industrial action. Unlike other public utility workers whose similar experiences increasingly forced shows of wage militancy at national level (Lane, 1974: 160), postal workers demonstrated that they were prepared to take the type of immediate localised and unofficial action that was to later set them apart from other groups of workers in the 1990s and 2000s (see Gall, 2003). Clinton (1984: 540-2) provides numerous example of widespread wage-related unofficial unrest (some of which involved the important tactic of the ban on overtime) throughout the early 1960s in a host of Post Office depots including many parts of London, Crewe, St Helens, Leicester, Nottingham and Ipswich. Although the union at a national level had generally tended to support the economic planning efforts of government during this period, it did not support the restriction on members' incomes. In 1964, therefore, the union's executive for the first time in the history of the union announced its intention to strike nationally (ibid.). This failed to stem further outbreaks of localised industrial unrest but (after a one-day national stoppage) resulted in a rise in pay which was regarded as a victory for postal workers and their union (ibid.).

Strike action within the Post Office during the 1960s was in part then a symptom of the UPW being as Clinton (1984: 545) so eloquently states, 'pushed from the carpeted corridors of the civil service into a more rumbustious bargaining market place'. In addition

to changing economic pressures such action, particularly when local, was influenced by the changing nature of the workforce and the attitudinal values that new workers brought with them (ibid). Therefore, it represented the nascent development of a cohesive and confident shop steward movement within the Post Office that, due to labour shortages, was able to begin to apply pressure at the crucial point of production (Darlington, 1994: 34). However, whilst such arguments may go some way to providing an explanation of the increasing recourse to strike activity amongst the membership of the UPW, they would not appear to be so directly applicable to industrial relations within the wider Civil Service. In particular, although other areas of the civil service were at the time experiencing similar problems in terms of labour turnover and one would assume subsequent cultural change, the postal strike of 1964 was regarded as something of a novelty amongst this category of workers (Clinton, 1984: 545). This raises questions as to what other factors may have influenced postal workers to periodically take industrial action which at the time appeared to have been in contrast with other workgroups in apparently similar circumstances.

Manual grades of postal worker have traditionally carried out work that whilst being largely routine has tended to facilitate a significant level of workgroup communication. These workgroups have also often been housed in occupationally specific work areas, wearing standard uniforms and all working under a common authority (Moran, 1974: 18-20). For Moran, these are factors that potentially foster relatively high union involvement and a militant approach towards trade unionism (ibid). As Kelly notes, the strong social workgroup identity that such circumstances foster, are crucial to the realisation of effective mobilisation (Kelly, 1998). Judged from this viewpoint certain staple features of postal work provided an effective framework upon which to import and then build a more militant method of trade unionism by a more belligerent UPW and its membership. Ironically, whilst this was a response to the waning consensual style of industrial relations within the Post Office, its protagonists were often able to reconstitute the bilateral vestiges of this system to effectively build an oppositional workplace culture to managerially driven change.

The loss of civil service status and increasing pressure for reform

It was partly in response to the ways in which the Whitley system was being allowed to operate in ways that hampered effective management (Fulton Committee, 1968: 88-89) that the Post Office in 1969 moved to Corporation status. This built upon earlier commercial edicts introduced in 1967 and involved the further adoption of market principles and the removal of the Post Office from the Civil service (Gall, 2003: 25). The Post Master General, a position which dated back to 1660 (see Robinson, 1948: 48), was replaced by a Minister of Posts and Telecommunications with fewer powers and fewer day to day responsibilities for the running of the service (Clinton, 1984: 308). These changes made it possible for some Conservative politicians to argue for the separation of the postal and telecommunication side of the service. This might now be viewed as a precursor to a weakening of the monopoly and the handing over of sections of the service to private enterprise (ibid.). Moreover, they were a harbinger of the present and dominant free market narrative of present day which views the market as the most efficient way of allocating goods and services. As this study has earlier highlighted, such a viewpoint advocates the subjecting of public services to market disciplines with government services carried out by the private sector should this be the most cost effective means of their delivery (Corby and White, 1999: 8).

The postal business - for this is what it now increasingly took the form of - came into the 1970s against the backdrop of further governmental policies aimed at wage restraint (Corby and White, 1999: 7) and increasing pressure to implement new strategies that were in line with the commercial paradigm of the period (Batstone et al., 1984: 174). As with other areas of the public sector, the effect of this on wage negotiations further eroded the old consensus and increased industrial action (Elliot and Fallick, 1981). This found expression in the 1971 postal strike which began in January of that year, was to last for seven weeks and involved all grades of the membership (Moran, 1974: 82). The dispute's final settlement was widely regarded as a traumatic defeat for the UPW and a watershed which transformed those who worked for the Post Office and its successors into the type of trade unionist recognisable within the movement as a whole (Corby, 1979: 115; Moran, 1974: 82; Clinton, 1984: 507). Nevertheless, the dispute did provide an indication of the union's apparent ability to secure membership compliance to its

objectives (Moran, 1974: 83). Here Moran (1974: 149-53) again looks to the union's structure, in terms of the high ratio of members to full time officers. From this viewpoint, the manner in which they were elected as opposed to appointed helped maintain and give credence to a radical kernel of local activists who were able to convey the pursuit of more radical cultural goals.

Despite the outcome of the 1971 dispute, managerial approaches remained unsure and cautious displaying a willingness or inability to convert victory into managerial sovereignty in the workplace. For commentators such as Corby (1979: 123) this related to management having no real experience of a major dispute before. However, there remained on-going recruitment and retention difficulties within the Post Office. Additionally, technical developments in the way in which postal work was processed had begun to erode what had traditionally been the stabilizing effect of job security for staff. This may help partly explain why management in the early 1970s at least, continued to seek union approval (often resulting in veto) in the implementation of labour relations policies (Batstone et al., 1984: 170). Examples of this approach could be found in the slowing down by management, in the face of union opposition, of the introduction of productivity deals and new efficiency enhancing machinery which the postal business was under considerable political pressure to introduce (ibid.). As the decade unfolded management within the Post Office was coming under growing pressure to satisfy two frequently contradictory objectives. On the one hand there was pressure to maintain the stability of the service upon which the relationship between business and the State largely depended. On the other hand, it was increasingly required to reduce labour costs without the option of financial inducements to the workforce (ibid.).

The 1970s and a growth in shopfloor power

As Marchington (1992: 153) reminds us, at all times management remain dependent upon the actions of employees to ensure that production or service is maintained at a satisfactory level. While this is most apparent when skilled work is being undertaken, it principles are equally applicable to the managerial challenges within the Post Office throughout the 1970s where the recruitment and retention of labour continued to be a problem (Batstone et al., 1984: 169). As a consequence, Post Office management faced

with an insufficient supply of labour, turned to more covert ways of securing worker compliance in its search for greater operational efficiency (ibid.: 179). In particular, workers in some areas were allowed to develop localised practices which enhanced levels of overtime, reduced workload and protected jobs. Custom and practice along with unofficial bargaining became a staple feature of Post Office workplaces which, as well as securing better terms and conditions, provided branches with a strong basis from which to exercise considerable power over management (Gall, 2003: 29). Reinforcing this source of union power was the long-standing system of 'seniority' whereby job allocation (as in hard or easy, good or bad, worse or better paid work.) was determined on the length of worker service and organised through the local union. This, along with worker and union determination over the allocation of holidays and overtime allocation, served to enhance the workplace control enjoyed by postal workers since it prevented managerial victimisation and the targeting of activists (ibid). Despite the implications, management regarded, or were at least prepared to tolerate, these arrangements. As Batstone et al. (1984: 170) note, this served a means of developing loyalty through indulgency patterns within the traditional framework of an internal labour market (Burawoy, 1979) rather than via the less available incentive of direct wage rise.

Ironically, the growth in local power which this situation brought about not only led to an increase in local industrial action, it also provided a position from which left-wing factions found some influence (Batstone et al., 1984: 209). These groups sought to increase their influence by obtaining changes in union constitution and practice. Perhaps an indication of the growing presence of such groups was to be found in the long standing opposition of the UPW both locally and nationally to the Post Offices Mechanisation plan. Under the plan mechanical sorting equipment was scheduled to be installed into 120 offices by 1976 thereby reducing the number of dispatching offices (as in those that sorted and sent mail into the Post Office network which transferred mail around the country into depots for delivery) from 1,600 to 120 then further down to 80 (Corby, 1979: 196). From its viewpoint, the Post Office believed that this would lead to a considerable reduction in manpower requirement whilst producing a unified system of mails circulation (ibid.). However, by 1975 only 12 offices had been equipped for these changes largely due to the opposition of the UPW and its subsequent embargo on the initiative (ibid.). While this

opposition was bought out in the form of a £1.15 a week pay rise for the workforce, savings from the project were not great, with the final agreement precluding the use of part time labour and largely blocking the use of female labour in mechanised tasks (ibid.).

Not only did the mechanisation programme of the 1970s fail to bring about the level of efficiency savings which it had hoped to yield, it also served to strengthen the power of the UPW particularly in those areas in which it was introduced. In particular, the concentration of mail sorting and dispatch into larger Mechanised Letter Offices served to increase and widen the vulnerability of mail services to industrial disruption, not just from postal operatives but furthermore, from other groups of workers such as the equally well-organised Post Office Engineers (Corby, 1979: 208). According to Gall (2003: 131-2) the above is one of a range of features of the mail system and the way in which the Post Office operates which combine to add to the potency of strike action by its workforce. These include the personalised (and therefore non-substitutable) nature of the product, the time-sensitive manner in which the system works, and the necessarily continuous interdependent manner of a network of operational components (as in its delivery, sorting and distribution operations). Such factors make the organisation susceptible to disproportionate levels of disruption by workers from any of its functions. Adding further strength to the industrial confidence of the UPW at the time was the monopoly which the Post Office had historically held over letter delivery. This effectively served to prevent any credible alternatives to mail delivery that might be used to undermine the union's position.

It would seem that for much of the 1970s the postal business was characterised by a political status quo which was reflected in its labour relations strategy. This involved a commitment to provide stable employment and working flexibility in exchange for union and worker commitment to maintaining service to the public (Batstone et al., 1984: 250). That this took place within an increasingly commercial paradigm called for an increasing degree of devolved autonomy for local management which served to enhance the local power of some workgroups. However, such was the mood of the time, from the late 1970s the autonomy of the Post Office and in particular the monopolies which it held were continually threatened (Batstone et al., 1984; Clinton, 1984: 595). In response to this, and particularly the implications for the industry and thus its membership, the UPW

again looked to political action through its traditional political networks and involvement on government bodies as a means of influencing the opinion of the state. At other times this political activity took the form of a coalition with management and a more meaningful commitment to the introduction of local productivity deals. This reflected a change in strategy by UPW to meet the challenges posed by the incoming Conservative government of 1979 (Batstone et al., 1984: 199).

As well as harking back to its traditional method of political action, the UPW in the late 1970s after many years of campaigning achieved (albeit briefly and in diluted form) its early objective of industrial democracy (Corby, 1979: 126; Clinton, 1984: 388). This took the form of an experiment between the union and the Post Office which would automatically lapse after a two-year period unless the legislation which helped bring it about was renewed (Batstone et al., 1984: 13). Again, its achievement in 1978 was due in no small part to, and highlights the adept political manoeuvring of, the UPW which was able to further its case to the then Labour government (who had electorally committed to the pursuit of such arrangements). Central to this was the latter's appeal for and reference to state prescriptions for 'good industrial relations' enshrined in The Post Office Act 1969 (Batstone et al., 1983). Under the scheme members of the UPW along with representatives of other unions from the postal industry sat on the Post Office board and were involved both formally and fully in its collective decisions and collective responsibility (Batstone et al., 1984: 13; Corby, 1979: 127). This was mirrored at regional and local level by consultative committees comprised of management and union representatives. However, although management had hoped that it would act as a means of reducing worker opposition to change, they argued that the experiment was being used by the union to obstruct business initiatives and changes to working practices (Batstone et al., 1984: 144). In light of this Post Office management successfully demanded its cessation at the end of the trial (ibid.). This, according to Clinton (1984: 595) coincided with the onset of a period which from the 1979 General Election onwards saw changes in attitudes towards industrial relations perhaps greater than ever before.

Ongoing commercialisation and the threat of the free market

Although the Post Office had long been successful in resisting the substance if not the form of commercial practices, the changes pressed by the Thatcher administration proved less resistible (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 4). The government from 1979 onwards were able to shift the debate on the economy in terms of the argument that that the private sector was on the whole as good as, if not better, than the public sector at providing public services (Corby and White, 1999: 8; Ferner and Terry, 1985: 4). Changes in line with this strand of the government's ideological approach were brought about by a major programme of the privatisation of national assets including British Aerospace, British Airways and British Gas, and the weakening of public service monopolies (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 4). Whilst the Post Office did not form part of the governments immediate privatisation programme it was not immune from the pressures which it gave rise to. For example, the Post Office's monopoly over air courier and electronic mail services was removed in 1980. Additionally, its telecommunications arm became formally separated and exposed to competition from 1981 (Batstone et al., 1984: 55; Ferner and Terry, 1985: 4) before eventually being privatised in 1984. Potentially more important were the assumed powers by the Secretary of State to remove the Post Office's monopoly if it failed to respond adequately to new market demands and to provide adequate service as a result of industrial action.

These developments brought about significant reactions from both the Post Office's management and its unions. In June 1980 the UPW became the UCW (Union of Communication Workers) with new regional structures and greater powers for separate executives covering posts and telecoms (Clinton, 1984: 596). The membership also (narrowly) accepted a national productivity scheme, which the union had recommended arguing that it would lessen the pressure for regionalised pay and a subsequent reduction in union power (Gall, 2003: 37). For its part, Post Office management throughout the early to mid1980s sought greater cost savings through plans to introduce greater part time working, increased labour flexibility and the further implementation of new technology (ibid.). While the UCW recognised and accepted the requirement for restructuring as a means of obviating the need for further government intervention, it could not agree to a package of measures in 1984 which sought to link these initiatives to

that year's annual round of pay bargaining (ibid.). As a result, in a clear example of its preparedness to abandon the consensual approach, Post Office management in early 1985 unilaterally extended the use of technology in its largest depot in Mount Pleasant, London (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 10). Additionally, notice was served on the cessation of established procedures and custom and practice arrangements in Northampton's main depot (Gall, 2003: 40). Although both disputes led to unofficial industrial action, the UCW shied away from a national strike, reluctantly agreeing to an efficiency scheme which involved greater use of part time workers and increased mechanisation (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 10-11; Martinez Lucio, 1993: 31; Gall, 2003: 42).

The localised nature of strike action in the disputes of early 1985 was indicative of a growing trend of worker reaction to managerial attempts to introduce unilateral change within the Post Office (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 7). Days lost due to industrial action increased from 3, 900 in 1981-2 to 10, 200 in 1983-4 and 90 000 in 1984-5 as local management came under increasing pressure from above to cut back on overtime levels and to alter the allocation of staff to duties (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 7). What the disputes also signified was a growing willingness amongst Post Office management to take on the UCW via local set piece showdowns. Consequently, this shifted power to the base of the union rendering the UCW's method of political exchange within this new political environment even more difficult to maintain (Gall, 2003: 45). In truth, what might be termed here as a bifurcation of power within the union had actually began some years earlier with the onset of commercialism in the 1960s and 1970s. This had given rise to some devolved bargaining and the adoption of industrial tactics amongst some workplace activists (Batstone et al., 1984: 208-209). Nevertheless, the nature of the action was almost entirely unofficial which contained the added element of solidarity walkouts (Ferner and Terry, 1985: 15) and often ended in favourable outcomes for the union. In a period of declining and often unsuccessful national strike activity this cumulatively served to increase the industrial confidence of postal workers (Gall, 2003: 84).

At this point, it is worth pointing out that the Post Office underwent significant restructuring during 1986. Under government instruction to commercialise the Post Office created a number of so called autonomous business units creating separate counter service (Post Office Counters with 12,000 workers), parcel (Parcel Force with

12,000 workers), and letters (Royal Mail with 170,000 workers) division (Gall, 2003, 45). This aimed to allow more rapid and effective corporate response to market pressure whilst establishing the necessary structures for privatisation (ibid.: 45). Given that this study is primarily concerned with industrial relations within the Royal Mail division of the organisation attention will largely focus upon this division of the wider Post Office. The term Royal Mail will now. Therefore, refer to that specific aspect of the postal industry.

Evidence of both the increasingly commercialised nature of the Post Office and the confidence and willingness of postal workers to resort to industrial action was to be found in the first national postal dispute in 17 years in 1988. This centred on the unilateral implementation of Difficult Recruitment Area Supplements (known as DRAS). Under this scheme new recruits in areas of the South East which were experiencing high labour turnover were to be paid an extra premium during their first year of recruitment. Such a scheme, from their perspective, posed a threat to the integrity of the UCW and the future of national collective bargaining. Whilst this action took the initial form of a one-day national strike, it escalated into a series of unofficial walkouts in response to the introduction by the Royal Mail of casual workers to clear up resultant mail backlogs (Gall, 2003: 82). The reaction of workers to this latter issue emphasised its potential threat to existing notions of job security and earning levels which had long been central to the fabric of industrial relations within the Post Office. The fact that localised action carried on in contravention of talks aimed at settling the dispute indicated that industrial relations within the Royal Mail were becoming more decentralised (Martinez Lucio, 1993: 37). As far as Royal Mail management were concerned, it highlighted that the industrial relations system within the service had not been sufficiently reformed to facilitate the kinds of development desired in the long term. Moreover, it served to prove that there existed deep enough levels of workforce uncertainty and discontent as to pose a significant threat of future protracted industrial action (ibid.). In light of this the Royal Mail looked toward the use of alternative personnel approaches within existing formal, if decentralised, industrial relations mechanisms.

From the late 1980s onwards Royal Mail attempted to implement a wide range of new HRM based management initiatives (Darlington, 1993; Martinez Lucio, 1993; Martinez Lucio et al., 1997; Martinez Lucio at al., 2000). These included employee involvement

schemes, employee opinion surveys, quality improvement projects, the widespread distribution of printed business briefings to the workforce and a 'customer first' initiative which focused on the primacy of internal customer relations (Beale, 2003; Martinez Lucio, 1993: 39). It was hoped that this would help engender clearer workforce commitment to managerial goals and significant change in organisational culture. This would pave the way for Royal Mail's pursuit of more flexible working practices which could be aligned to the increased use of automation (Gall, 2003: 50; Martinez Lucio, 1993: 40). In an attempt to increase labour flexibility, Royal Mail during the early 1990s sought (often without success) to substantially increase its use of part time temporary and casual employment- an area which had tended to be strongly contested by many workgroups and the local and national UCW. This was accompanied in 1992 by a major restructuring exercise in which Royal Mail decentralized its operation into nine geographical divisions, each with its own managerial structure and each operating as separate business units. This separation of function flowed down to workplace level with the processing, distribution and delivery of mails all independent from one another with their own workforce and cohort of local management (ibid.). It was hoped, that these changes would curb the multi-functional and temporal flexibility that had been traditionally controlled by postal workers (and displaced onto the newer peripheral recruits). This in theory would make close supervisory scrutiny, team working and eventual franchise more easily achievable (Beale, 2003: Martinez Lucio, 1993: 39).

These developments within Royal Mail necessitated a reform in its industrial relations system at local level which had remained resilient to change (Martinez Lucio, 1993: 40). A new system of worker representation based along the lines of functional splits within a regional structure was subsequently agreed between the UCW and Royal Mail in 1992. The New Industrial Relations Framework Agreement (NIRFA) as it was termed sought, in the spirit of decentralisation, to involve a newly recognised stratum of workplace (unit) stewards. These were part of a wider representational framework of area and divisional representatives that mirrored Royal Mail's new managerial structure. Whilst it offered, the somewhat cautious, UCW the scope to negotiate with management at the new appropriate levels, NIRFA was underpinned by the principle of shifting local negotiating power away from local branches, whose officials Royal Mail saw as instigators of disputes

and strikes (Gall, 2003: 49). In doing so, the new system sought to isolate local representatives in order to create an enterprise type of union based on cooperation and the avoidance of conflict. Should issues prove difficult to resolve they were to be progressed to area then if necessary divisional levels thus excluding local 'less reasonable' branch officials (ibid.).

The inadequacy of such measures as a means of curbing local worker action were soon demonstrated; in 1993 the UCW through local strike action and non-cooperation (see Beale, 2003) staved off managerial attempts to substitute traditional rotational methods of job resourcing (whereby workers autonomously alternated between shifts and jobs) with a system of fixed managerial determined duties. Not only did this initiative threaten an arrangement that had allowed workers to temper the monotony and unsociability of some aspects of postal work, its underlying logic (with its implications for the seniority principle) was to reduce worker control over how work was allocated within Royal Mail workplaces (ibid.). The ability of the UCW to defend the terms and conditions of members in the face of a new managerialism, which sought to create an industrial relations climate that was compatible with marketization (Gall, 2003: 51) was further demonstrated in 1996. Here the union, which was by now the Communication Workers Union (CWU) engaged in what was the largest strike in Britain in terms of days lost in the 1990s (ibid.). This was in response to Royal Mail's attempts to introduce an initiative that came under the heading of the Employee Agenda and sought to resolve issues such as flexibility, grading and participation within one framework (Martinez Lucio et al., 2000). Central to this was the introduction of team working with its staple features of team leaders, self-assessment and team responsibility for holidays and sickness cover. As Beale notes, such measures threatened worker control over local terms and conditions. In evaluating the 1996 dispute and the 8 national days of action which ensued, Gall (2003: 100-30) argues that it was on balance successful (for the CWU) and served to maintain the industrial confidence of postal workers to continue using industrial action as the *modus operandi*.

The UCW/CWU's relative success in both the national 1996 Employee Agenda dispute and the 1993 localised (although on Royal Mail's part, nationally coordinated) disputes over fixed duties again highlighted that power within the union was still located simultaneously at national and workplace level (Batstone et al., 1984: 254-262). During a

period of general worker acquiescence, a wide range of factors including, increased volumes of work, monopoly status, public support and changing political contingency, served throughout the 1990s to bolster this power (Beale, 2003). Additionally, in a similar vein to their predecessors from the 1960s, union leaders, particularly at a local level, were able to successfully reconstitute and then exploit a number of internal organisational features as a means of rebuffing managerial driven change. The New Industrial Relations Framework 1992 became a medium through which workplace representatives were able to gain status, industrial know-how and strengthen shopfloor organisation while the new stratum of area representatives assumed the de-facto role of works convenors (ibid.). Other examples of the subversion of internal control mechanisms were to be found in the hijacking of team briefing sessions by the local union to address members (ibid.) and functionalised work becoming the focus for demarcation arguments.

Perhaps though the most important factor which helped sustain strong workplace control at this time, was the on-going reduction of the union's branches (from around 800-900 in the late 1980s to 90-100 branches by the early 1990s) which was accelerated by the need to meet the requirements of the NIRFA (Gall, 2003: 144). As a result, more moderate quiescent groups of worker were incorporated into larger branches that were better organised and more active in defending members' interests. This meant that previously isolated workers were now integrated to some degree with other workgroups who were more strategically well placed within the mail system and held more oppositional workplace attitudes. In effect the potential for striking was much more extensive than before, since action did not have to cross branch borders to spread (ibid.). Ironically therefore, the NIRFA, a mechanism which had been introduced to engender a more cooperative type of unionism, was the centrepiece of a complex array of interlocking factors that allowed postal workers to strike more easily and more effectively than many other workers (ibid.).

In providing an overview of the period, Gall (2003: 61) argues that compared to other workers, postal workers throughout the 1990s took relatively high levels of both unofficial and official strike action. He goes on to argue that they were probably from the period 1995-2001 the most strike-prone group of workers in Britain. This culminated in 330 instances of unofficial action and 25 of official action in the year to March 2001 including

‘knock-on-disputes’ in which CWU members refused to do work resulting from industrial action elsewhere (Sawyer et al., 2001: 11-2). These statistics clearly point to the capacity of the CWU leadership, both locally and nationally, to mobilise its membership during a period of historically low levels of strike action (ibid.). Moreover, they point to an upsurge in action that was symptomatic of an industrial relations climate within the Royal Mail which had, with its increase in court injunctions and unofficial action, become increasingly conflictual (Martinez Lucio et al., 2000: 272). A further feature of this decline in relations was Royal Mail’s increased readiness to suspend union representatives during local conflicts (a strategy which had begun in the late 1980s) throughout the 1990s (ibid.) and 2000s (Lyddon, 2009: 325). Since this was often met with strike action (Gall, 2003: 174, 185), it would appear that Royal Mail were at times seeking to provoke and spread immediate workplace action which detracted wider attention from the fundamental provenance of conflict within the postal industry. This was an underlying discontent amongst the workforce caused by commercialisation pressures and workplace restructuring (Williams and Adam Smith, 2010: 276).

As this chapter has earlier argued, a number of factors combined to strengthen the industrial confidence of postal workers to confront both employer and indirectly government throughout the 1990s. Central to this was the postponement of plans to privatise Royal Mail due to opposition from within and outside the Conservative government (Martinez Lucio, 2000: 270). The avoidance of job losses and protection from competition thus provided fertile terrain for the CWU to limit and control the introduction of a variety of market-driven initiatives the workplace. However, as the postal industry moved into the 2000s, pressures for the introduction of more efficient ways of working remained. Evidence that the New Labour government of 1997 had explicitly adopted much of the neo-liberal inheritance bequeathed by the outgoing Conservatives (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2000; Crouch, 2001; Leys, 2001) manifested itself in the deregulatory thrust of The Postal Service Act 2000 (Gall, 2003: 299). This ushered in a staggered timetable of liberalisation of the postal industry, in which Royal Mail’s monopoly was to be progressively eroded until full marketization from 2009 (ibid.: 299-300). Accompanying this was the establishment of the regulatory body Postcomm charged with enforcing the provisions of the Act. These provisions concerned

maintenance of the long-standing USP (Universal Service Price) and setting of service quality levels through the provision of licences to collect process and deliver mail (ibid.). In a similar vein to privatisation then, this effectively meant licensing competition to either bypass Royal Mail or force it to 'sharpen up' in pursuit of these goals.

The race towards liberalisation

The significant threat that this variant of marketization posed to the interests of postal workers found expression in the high number of localised strikes that took place between 2000 and the summer of 2001 (Gall, 2003: 54). From then on strike activity for a period, fell markedly as the CWU and Royal Mail in keeping with the New Labour espoused theme of (conditional) partnership (Smith and Morton, 2006: 403) entered into a 'peace-keeping' moratorium. Under this arrangement managerially-imposed changes to working practices and resultant strike ballots were suspended (Gall, 2003: 70). However, a raft of initiatives (which were to be later rescinded or diluted) announced by Royal Mail from 2001 onwards including 40,000 jobs losses (in violation of a job security agreement), the reduction of sick pay and contracting out of a number of services resulted in the CWU issuing 21 national strike threats between July 2001 and March 2003 (ibid.: 306). In addition to these developments, the elevation of conflict to the national realms of the CWU was given further impetus by what many considered to be the ascendency of the 'left' within the union. In 2001, the incoming General Secretary had stood on a platform of fighting privatisation and job cuts, increased government funding for the Post Office, greater independence from the employer and the decentralisation of power within the union (Gall, 2003 and Charlwood, 2004). While these events may have suggested that power within the union (albeit with the promise of it being decentralised) and with it the determination of action, had relocated to national level, events in the autumn of 2003 were to suggest otherwise.

Charlwood (2004: 388) identifies a number of high profile disputes during 2003 which centred on workers attempting to defend themselves against management restructuring plans. This involved nationally coordinated official action with regard to disputes between the FBU and the Fire Service and GMB and Amicus with BA (British Airways). A dispute between the CWU and Royal Mail in the October of that year brought about wide-scale

unofficial action which resulted in postal workers halting managerially imposed change and obtaining a favourable outcome on pay and the reorganisation of working practices (ibid). Importantly, this had superseded a ballot in which a call for national industrial action in relation to these changes had been (narrowly) defeated (Lyddon, 2009: 325). This upsurge of grass roots action in response to localised initiatives from a resurgent Royal Mail management again highlights the important role of local activists within the CWU, and the general nature of unofficial action within the postal industry. Rather than being spontaneous, most unofficial strikes are organised and premeditated with the initiative largely coming from lay leadership, or unit representatives, and are seen to provide numerous strategic benefits. Firstly, they cater for redress over 'perishable disputes' where if action is not immediate management would win by default (see Cameron and Eldridge, 1968: 70). Secondly, they serve as a means by which local officials can retain local union control over the issues and outcomes at stake, and thirdly they act as a method of side-stepping the national CWU's inability or unwillingness to support such strikes (Gall, 2003: 166-8).

Royal Mail's on-going restructuring programme saw the introduction of dramatic changes to its delivery system-from two down to one delivery per day from 2003 onwards (Gall, 2003: 304). Since this involved widespread change to local working practices, potential loss of earnings and increased job insecurity, it served to ensure that sporadic official and unofficial action continued (Lyddon, 2009: 325). In 2004 therefore, there were 95 recorded incidents of industrial action (89 of which were unofficial) whilst in 2005 23 incidents were recorded (17 of which were unofficial). Further action in areas including Stoke on Trent, Belfast, South Wales and South Yorkshire were to follow in 2006. This action perhaps highlighted the continuing belief, and capacity to engage, in localised autonomous action amongst the rank and file since it took place against the backdrop of CWU's strategy during this period of engagement in political exchange. The return by the union to its historical means of influencing the political decision making process did achieve some success. This included the putting back the deregulation time table, the revision of the pricing policy and the removal of the regulator (Gall, 2003: 305). However, by the early summer of 2007, in a reflection of the industrial relations climate within the wider public services, what Lyddon (2009: 325) refers to as an 'eventual showdown' took

place between Royal Mail and the CWU over workforce pensions, pay and modernization. Central to this was the historically contested area of worker control within Royal Mail. Here the employer sought the removal of 92 'Spanish practices' on the part of the union and its members (ibid.: 389).

After a number of national stoppages, the CWU was able to recommend an eventual settlement to its members. However, the 2007 dispute had been protracted involving both the targeting of local representatives (in areas which included Stoke on Trent, Bristol, Oxford, and South London) and the use of a court injunction by Royal Mail (Lyddon, 2009: 324). The latter's increasingly unitary approach towards industrial relations goes some way to explaining the short-lived tenure of the 2007 Pay and Modernisation agreement. From the CWU's perspective, Royal Mail management were increasingly breaching the agreement's central tenet of union involvement in the introduction of new machinery and workforce rationalisation (Pay and Modernisation Agreement, 2007). As a result, a clutch of regional and localised strikes took place from June 2009 (The Daily Telegraph, 2009) which again emphasised the union membership's traditional capacity for localised action. This was followed by rolling national action before a settlement was reached in November 2009 (The Guardian, 2009). This took the form of The Business Transformation Agreement 2010 (BT Agreement 2010) which provided an overarching framework within which Royal Mail and the CWU were to bring about modernisation of the industry. The agreement was underpinned by the spirit of joint negotiation and committed both parties to a new more cooperative relationship as a means of managing change within an industry which Parliament in 2010 passed legislation (Postal Services Act 2011) to privatise.

Partnership and cooperation

Commenting around the time of the BT Agreement 2010, Bacon and Samuel (2009: 246) argue that in a period of few alternatives, unions have continued to sign partnership agreements in preference over threats to their long-term role in the workplace. In light of a declining market and growing political pressure for efficiency gains, this more cooperative model of industrial relations constituted an attempt by its leadership to make pragmatic use of available opportunities to influence employer policies (ibid.). Whilst this

helps explain the rationale underpinning the strategy of a union whose members have in recent decades, met managerial change with resistance rather than reluctance or positive acceptance (Gall, 2003: xi), such an approach is not without its critics. For example, partnership is regarded from some quarters as serving to incorporate workers and their representatives into participating in their own work intensification (Bain and Taylor, 2007; Stevenson and Carter, 2009). Moreover, the vulnerability to market forces of promised reciprocal concessions on the part of the employer, may itself threaten union legitimacy and effective worker representation (Jenkins, 2007: 649). The dichotomy of opinions surrounding the effectiveness of partnership as a means through which trade unions might regulate the terms and conditions of their members is better understood by a consideration of its practical implementation (through the BT Agreement 2010) within the Royal Mail.

A study carried out by Beale and Mustchin (2013: 13-16) during the early stages of the 2010 agreements tenure would appear to question the domestic application of its stated aims of bringing about 'more rewarding employment for a more valued and genuinely involved workforce' (BT Agreement 2010: 4). The authors point to Royal Mail's use of employee involvement schemes throughout the period 2009-2010 as a means of bullying staff, promoting privatisation and extending managerial control vis-à-vis the CWU. They also note the use of documentation generated from employee involvement initiatives as being used in the support of disciplinary procedures which were aimed at reducing workforce numbers more cheaply than the statutory redundancy process. This highlights the contrast between the conciliatory rhetoric and confrontational practice (ibid.: 15) of partnership-based initiatives such as employee involvement. In this instance these were being used in an attempt to marginalise the CWU, one of the two central partners of the agreement itself. That said, this chapter has highlighted the strong and entrenched tradition of workplace organisation within the postal industry which acted here as an effective means of resisting such managerial practices (ibid.: 16-7). In particular, the CWU at workplace level were often able to shape the nature of such initiatives and often reconstitute them into trade union forums (ibid.). This more positive account of the advantages that partnership might provide for unions within the workplace itself is built upon by Beirne (2013: 122). From this viewpoint, the agreement provided a mechanism

through which the union could intervene and change management's attempts to alter processes at workplace level. Local action was often assisted by downward pressure from the union at executive level particularly in terms of moderating the decisions of unresponsive local managers (ibid.: 122). This suggests that Batstone et al.'s (1977) characterisation of the union as highly centralised but with considerable autonomy at branch level is still relevant and that this model has proved more effective in responding to new management practices in the general context of decentralised industrial relations (Martinez Lucio and Weston, 1992: 85).

The CWU's ability to positively affect workplace change through the medium of partnership helps to explain why the union has in the face of current on-going rationalisation continued to keep faith in such an approach (Agenda for Growth, Stability and Long Term Success 2014). The CWU's structure and tradition of strong workplace trade unionism (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 17) would appear to provide a bulwark against management's use of partnership as a rhetorical vehicle to implement change which is coterminous with the interests of workers. However, Jenkins' (2007) study of partnership amongst a number of workplaces in south Wales offers a further cautionary note with regard to the CWU's continued faith in partnership (see Agenda for Growth, Stability and Long Term Success 2014). For Jenkins, the communication and information sharing aspect of partnership may, within the context of a competitive environment, be used as a means of highlighting workplace vulnerability and encouraging union focus on the singular interests of the unit (2007: 638). Such a situation may undermine any possibility of wider collective solidarity in the face of broader threats (Lillie and Martinez Lucio, 2004: 175) as workplaces vie with one another for work which the employer uses as leverage to change terms and conditions (Jenkins, 2007: 638). This is particularly salient to the latest settlement between Royal Mail and the CWU which has committed both parties to consensual change (and concomitant job losses) and alternative methods of dispute resolution. The proven effectiveness of the CWU both locally and nationally notwithstanding, the overwhelming difficulties for union negotiators in such circumstances (ibid.) would appear to present potential challenges to membership solidarity. Under the auspices of an agreement in which the existence of some Royal Mail workplaces vis-à-vis that of others is dependent upon factors such as financial cost and

quality of service, the sense of common interests and identity which is central to the process through which workers move towards collective action (Kelly, 1998: 44) may potentially be eroded.

Conclusion

This chapter has located an investigation of industrial relations in the UK postal service in a wider analysis of the range political economic and social factors that have, throughout its history, influenced the behaviours of its main actors. It identified that worker-management relations have traditionally been conducted within a comprehensive framework of bargaining machinery and joint methods of conflict resolution (Batstone et al., 1984). As a more commercially-based paradigm emerged the Post Office's labour relations strategy changed to that of a more market-sensitive approach. More recently, the acceleration of this process has involved the experimentation by management within the Royal Mail with a host of HRM-based initiatives (Jenkins et al., 2003: 88) at 'ground level' and more generally, the adoption of a unitary approach to invoking workplace change that has resulted in significant levels of industrial action.

Such a focus is vital to an understanding both the rational for, and traditions that, underpin many of the working practices still carried out by postal workers, as well as the forces which currently shape both their actions and those of their managers. Its exposition of the organisational and occupational characteristics which have long aided workplace organisation helps to explain the continued presence within the postal service of a labour management model that is still based on the traditional negotiation of order. The emphasis throughout on the growing impact of competition is particularly salient to an understanding of the current state of industrial relations in a fully liberalised postal service. In addressing this, this chapter serves as an effective base from which to which to better understand the findings of the four Royal Mail sites which are the subject of this research.

Finally, it has been the contention of this section that there have been long-standing important intra-workplace differences with regard to the levels of a trade union organisation and job control with the postal service (see Gall, 2003). At present all workers within the industry are employed by a single employer under uniformly agreed

terms and conditions. This means that the case of postal workers highlights two particularly important points with regard to contemporary industrial relations. Firstly, that worker agency is a crucial factor that can mediate market-driven change within the workplace itself. And secondly, that there exists potential for workers within the wider public services to resist a modernisation programme that threatens the means through which they and their representatives seek to regulate their labour process. The issue of worker agency and the ways that workers mediate structural forces by their actions at workplace level forms the focus of this thesis next chapter.

Chapter Five: Analysing workplace industrial relations

There are a wealth of studies which have examined the impact of modernisation and new public management on the labour process of public sector workers in recent years. This study has, up to this point, drawn on both a number of these and a range of literature which focuses on the minutiae of worker action at the point of production. This has formed part of an investigation into the factors which shape the actions of both workers and managers at the level of the shopfloor. Any investigation into current events within the Royal Mail must pay careful attention to the locale of the shopfloor where the implementation of market change is being increasingly devolved to local management (Beirne, 2013). Again, this brings valuable context to this study's empirical findings of worker managerial relations in four Royal Mail workplaces.

However, despite their valuable contribution, these studies are inappropriate in providing a conceptual framework from which to analyse workplace relations in an industry that is quite different from others. For example, authors such as Bach and Kessler (2012) and Massey and Pyper (2005) provide insight into the economic and political driving forces behind modernisation and, the impact that market-sensitive management have had upon the terms and conditions of public sector workers. However, neither study really concentrates on how such factors might be mediated at the level of the shopfloor through robust and organised forms of worker resistance. This, in contrast to most other sectors of the labour market, continues to be a constant feature of contemporary industrial relations within the Royal Mail (Gall, 2003; Beale and Mustchin, 2013) and must necessarily be considered. Fairbrother (1994), on the other hand, does examine modernisation through the medium of local union officials. However, he again does not penetrate the depths of the shopfloor to the extent which would unearth the nature and presence of the type of informal responses to modernisation that are also of interest to this thesis.

The challenge facing the author was to construct a framework that was suitable for a close-up analysis of worker manger relations in an industry that is quite different from most others. The unique levels of worker control still held by many workgroups within the Royal Mail where industrial relations are still based on the traditional negotiation of order

rendered it a special case. To understand such a situation in the absence appropriate contemporary literature called for an approach that was sensitive to a case which first sight seems to be an example of outdated industrial relations. This was remedied through Batstone et al.'s (1977) classic study of shopfloor relations which formed one part of this study's conceptual framework. A key focus here is the effect that domestic trade union organisation has upon worker agency at the locale of the shopfloor.

This thesis is concerned with how this agency is affected by, and in turn affects, managerial attempts to introduce market-driven reform at workplace level. Here the author turned to what is the second component of the overall framework which is Edwards' study *Conflict and Accommodation* (1988). This examines the manner in which patterns of workplace relations are shaped by a cluster of both external and internal influences and their interaction. The two approaches and the value that they bring to a study of worker-management relations in the Royal Mail are discussed at length in this chapter.

Rationale for the study's framework

The Royal Mail forms part of the wider UK public service sector where ongoing widespread structural reform has taken place within a general neo-liberal economic framework (Worrall et al., 2009: 118). This has involved a range managerial initiatives which have aimed to intensify worker performance and behaviour (Worrall et al., 2009: 118; Thomas and Davies, 2005: 685) The enactment of this has, however, been far from clear cut and cohesive and has been mediated by the context of different public services and individual agency (ibid.: 689). In the case of the Royal Mail, far reaching managerial-driven reform- national strikes notwithstanding, has stimulated the uneven emergence of local workplace militancy that is in contrast to that of most other British trade unions of this period (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 2; Gall, 2003).

It follows that a key line of investigation throughout this chapter is how structural pressures emanating from external factors such as modernisation might be mediated by the subjective features of worker agency at workplace level. This will involve a consideration of how management and workers are involved in the dynamic and on-going process of negotiating order at the point of production. Accordingly, this chapter will

open with an evaluation of Edwards' (1998) study of conflict and accommodation. This pays particular attention to the manner in which patterns of workplace relations are shaped by a cluster of both external and internal influences and their interaction (ibid.: 201). Workplace relations here are viewed to be dialectic with patterns of behaviour being social products that arise out of the interaction between management and worker.

Edwards (1988: 102) focusses on a variety of workgroups with differing skills in a range of workplace settings. Significant focus is placed on the effects a range of structural factors such as the nature of technology and the shape of the product market upon each group. While its scope is essential to an understanding of how differing external pressures interact with particular local workplace factors to influence types of worker behaviour, it may only partially answer the main concerns of this study. Workers within Royal Mail can be characterised as working within a relatively homogenous organisation, carrying out similar activities and covered by a uniform trade union recognition agreement. However, as Gall (2003) notes these workers have displayed varying patterns of workplace level behaviour in response to the pressures emanating from modernisation. This suggests that these various responses are better understood via an analysis of the subjective micro-political processes by which similar structural pressures might be mediated at workplace level. Any such analysis within the context of such a densely unionised sector of employment as the Royal Mail must, therefore, essentially consider the nature of workplace trade unionism and its effect upon worker agency.

The nature of shop steward organisation and in particular its effect upon workgroup action is central to Batstone et al.'s study of *'Shop stewards in action'* (1977). By concentrating on shopfloor level union organisation, this study highlights the importance of relationships between stewards and their members and how this influences patterns of worker behaviour within domestic organisations. From this viewpoint, shop stewards in particular positions of influence and power are likely to play a greater role in the determination of behaviour than others (ibid.: 4). Bolstering steward power here is the nature of the work situation and the degree to which this promotes collective cohesive worker behaviour. According to Batstone et al. this is itself concomitantly shaped by the endeavours and actions of the union in the workplace, or, as it will be sometimes referred to here, the domestic organisation (ibid.: 134-135).

It follows that, although external factors may interact with subjective factors to shape worker behaviour, the nature of domestic workplace organisation is an important factor itself in shaping patterns of worker behaviour. In the case of Royal Mail it can now be posited that different types of worker response to modernisation may, in part, be related to the nature of local branch and workplace leadership. The workplace-focused nature of Batstone et al.'s study renders it useful in strengthening the agency aspect of Edwards' argument and as such would appear useful in contributing to the overall conceptual framework of this study. In order to provide a meaningful assessment of their value, these frameworks will be contextualised within a wider debate of the study's main areas of concern and the line of arguments that have been so far put forward. Attention now turns to a consideration of Edwards' study on patterns of conflict and accommodation within the workplace and how this relates to recent changes within both the public sector and more specifically the Royal Mail.

Conflict, accommodation and consent

Edwards' (1988) argues that all workers are engaged in active efforts to make sense of, and to achieve control over, their work destinies and experiences. From this perspective, types of worker behaviour such as output restriction, 'fiddles', 'pilfering' and sabotage are seen as informal means of resisting or modifying managerial control in the workplace. Edwards (1988: 187-188) also recognises the importance of external structural forces in affecting worker action. Attention, in particular, focuses on how the basic structural antagonism between capital and labour within capitalist society places contradictory demands upon both management and workers and how, out of this process, the patterns of workplace order are generated (ibid: 188). This suggests that although structural forces including product market, technology and managerial systems of control do influence workplace action, they do not *determine* events since these have to be in practice mediated and, often in the interest of expediency, accommodated by the actors involved. In other words, given that workers are dependent upon the success of firms for their livelihoods, and that employers need to secure workers' willingness to work, the relationship contains elements of cooperation (Cressey and MacInnes, 1980). In this sense workers may sometimes attempt to subvert their day to day working practices in order to

exert their control within the parameters, and indeed often pursuit, of organisational goals.

The interplay between structure and action is better understood by briefly turning to an earlier study by Edwards and Scullion (1982) which examines worker behaviour in the form of industrial conflict within a variety of factory settings in the UK. A key concern here is how action that might be viewed from certain quarters as conflictual can gain a particular significance and form in a particular environment. According to the authors, conflictual types of worker behaviour such as absenteeism, sabotage and labour turnover must be understood within the context of wider workplace relations and are related to the patterns of control over the labour process (ibid.: 14); that process wherein a worker's ability to work is translated into actual labour, a process involving conflicts of interest over the terms on which effort is extracted from workers (Edwards and Scullion, 1984: 558)

Having identified the broad conflict of interest that lies within the labour process, Edwards and Scullion (1984: 9) go on to argue that its manifestations are far from given and are instead related to their social setting. From this viewpoint, a consideration of subjective influences including the nature of workplace controls, the application of rules, and understandings held by workers and managers provides insight into why certain forms of attitudes and behaviour may or may not be present in workplaces. For example, Edwards and Scullion highlight how factors such as managerial approach, labour flexibility and levels of workgroup control can affect the manner in which activities such as absenteeism might be viewed and indeed undertaken in different workplaces. Again, they note that structural factors such as technology and the basic capitalist organisation of work particularly effect levels of workplace action. However, these are insufficient by themselves in providing a fuller explanation since forms of social control over these structural constraints are crucial in helping to explain how these constraints work in practice (ibid.: 277).

In a similar vein, although the inherently contradictory requirements of management within a capitalist society can help foster the development of informal working practices, these practices, by their very nature, are not uniformly applied across all workplaces. As

Edwards (1988: 188) notes, informal practices are not the same everywhere. The act of pilfering, for example, is not a standard phenomenon but has widely varying forms and meanings. Furthermore, output restriction (the practice of putting ceilings on the amount of work done per day) is by no means universal (see, for example, Lupton, 1963). For Edwards, informal practices like pilfering and 'fiddles' grow out of the traditions of specific occupations, in which workers learn informal understanding as well as formal instructions. Whilst these may find individual or collective expression, group fiddles can be more developed than individual ones and more easily sustained through custom and practice. Although fiddles themselves do not depend on workgroups their character will be powerfully shaped by the extent of group formation and moreover, the conditions, including readiness to discuss earnings and willingness to restrict effort under work study that helps sustain them (Armstrong et al., 1981; Edwards and Scullion, 1982). From this Edwards (1988: 226-36) moves on to identify the following four different types of work groups and the bargaining behaviour.

Firstly, there are non-militant work groups (of which there are two sub-groups). The first of these are subject to tight managerial control and discretion with no developed sense of opposition and lack the resources to bargain with management. Where modes of accommodation exist here they tend to be individualised. The second type of non-militant approach occurs when workers are subject to less tight controls and enjoy reasonable autonomy and relatively high wages. Under this system of sophisticated control the cooperative aspects of work are emphasised and the space for fiddles reduced. Given that work relations (within capitalism) are an inevitable source of dispute (Hyman, 1975: 186), workforce resentment still exists here but with little scope through which to find expression (Edwards, 1988: 195). A case close to this model would be the processing plant studied by Edwards and Scullion (1982), in which management obtained worker compliance through consultation and participation (ibid.: 51).

Edwards' next category of bargaining behaviour is referred to as 'militant individualism', where workers with an awareness of the conflict of interest over the effort bargain actively pursue their own interests (Edwards, 1988: 196). This is followed by a more collective approach in which groups of workers tend to have group norms governing effort standards and engage in a wide range of fiddles. Worker influence here does not,

however, extend to manning levels or allocation of work. Finally, Edwards (1988: 194) identifies an organisational type of behaviour in which worker influence extends to division of task, allocation of overtime and application of discipline. Whilst precise types of job controls may vary according to the exigencies of the work tasks, such work groups share the common feature of the ability to regulate work through the control of manning levels and mobility of workers between tasks.

Again, it must be borne in mind that these categories of workgroup behaviour are not merely a product of their organisational environment, since each respective environment is the product of on-going relationships between its management and workers. It is the character of these relations that plays a key role in shaping worker behaviour. This point gains greater clarity from a consideration of Edwards and Scullion's (1984) later analysis of their seven factory study. Here the authors once more turn to both absenteeism and labour turnover to argue that explanations of what are often ostensibly regarded as individual types of worker behaviour must be viewed within an analysis of the patterns and variations of workplace controls. Thus, Edwards and Scullion (ibid.: 562-563) are able to point to examples of workplaces in the engineering industry where absenteeism and turnover were low due to the level of workplace controls held by stewards and the favourable and generally tolerable conditions that this brought to the workforce. In contrast, two clothing factories where union organisation was weak were typified by high levels of both absenteeism and labour turnover. The authors go onto argue that this was directly related to the intensity of managerial control over work and a lack of collective means of challenging this on the shopfloor (ibid.: 560).

Absenteeism and labour turnover here however, were not a response by individuals to the work environment or a reflection of protest against managerial control. They were the product of a control system whose success rested on the fact that grievances were not collectively articulated as protest. Indeed, absence and turnover were from management's perspective acceptable for the following reasons. Firstly, the absence of workplace controls facilitated flexible use of labour which did not interrupt production. And secondly, given the propensity for potential shopfloor leaders to quit, the lack of collective challenge to this system was reinforced. From this viewpoint it is possible to capture the dialectic and interdependent nature of structure and agency in the following

statement; organisational rules are not independent variables but dependent for their creation and, crucially, for their level of enforcement, on the pattern of worker-management relations (ibid.: 557).

It can now be argued that there exists a wide range of informal workgroup behaviour through which workers attempt to gain control over the effort bargain and which are shaped by the character of workplace relations. In a similar sense to Edwards and Scullion's (1984) observations on absenteeism, Edwards (1988: 192) notes that informal practices are at times not just tolerated by management but can be actively encouraged since they can bring a number of significant benefits to the production process. For example, tolerating 'fiddles' can provide management with a relatively cheap way of getting workers to work, thereby reducing other potentially costlier adaptations such as absenteeism (Lupton, 1963). The acceptance of workforce job regulation by management within the workplace, and the subsequent autonomy of worker organisation over task, may also reduce the required levels of workplace supervision (Edwards, 1988: 192). Other managerial benefits include, particularly in a 'piece work' setting, a speed up in production, as workers learn informal methods to do the job more quickly, whilst at the same time circumventing safe (and slower) systems of working. For Burawoy (1979) managerial acceptance of workers subverting rules within organisationally prescribed boundaries is a means by which worker consent and adherence to wider corporate rules are generated within the workplace. However, despite the benefits that the above might bring to management, the fundamentally conflicting aims of managers and workers means that relations between the two are in a constant state of tension and flux. In particular, the frontier of control, which Goodrich (1920: 66) terms as that shifting line in a great mass of regulation can, as with workers, be advanced by management with worker gains being eradicated when economic conditions dictate (Edwards, 1988: 194). The framework advanced by Edwards argues that conflict and consent are interwoven and that they are an essential aspect of the workplace relations between management and workers (ibid.: 192). Again, such an approach provides a useful framework for an analysis of this study's concern with the ways in which postal workers react to market driven change.

As this study has earlier highlighted, the modernisation of Royal Mail can be viewed as one aspect of the recent and on-going marketization of the wider public services. This has involved an array of managerial initiatives aimed at improved productivity and the intensification of labour (Worrall et al., 2009; Mather et al., 2005). The introduction of these initiatives has been associated increased standardisation, more narrowly defined training and reduced worker discretion with control of the labour process becoming increasingly managerialised (Grugulis et al., 2003; Rainbird et al., 2004: 94; Mather et al., 2005: 5). Though they have remained important in terms of articulating membership discontent, the capacity of trade unions here to influence managerial decision making has diminished significantly (Bach, 2010: 170). Furthermore, as has been examined in chapter 2, there has been a significant reduction in trade union density levels in the public sector, from an overall 84% in 1980 down to 57% in 2010 (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 145), brought about by factors such as outsourcing and privatisation (ibid.: 146). This suggests increasing difficulties for public sector workers and the ways in which they attempt to exert control in the workplace.

The arguments contained within Edwards' study of conflict and accommodation provides an important insight into the implications of modernisation in terms of the ability of public sector workers to influence their labour process. According to Edwards, (1988: 191-2) workers attempt to exert control through informal practices, with the form that these take being shaped by particular circumstances relating to the workplace and industry in question. These influences will be discussed in detail below. It is important at this stage to establish that the development and sustainability of workgroup control is, in part, dependent upon the presence of strong cohesive workgroups that are able to both defend custom and practice (Brown, 1972) and resist managerial punishment (Edwards, 1988: 192). Given the traditionally high levels of union density within public sector workplaces it would be expected that, Whitley notwithstanding, its workforce would be well positioned to successfully realise such controls. It follows that a reduction in trade union density levels accompanied by the concomitant managerial imposition of technologies of control might combine to dilute the ability of public sector workers to exert control over work and how it is performed within the public services (Worrall et al., 2009: 126)

The arguments put forward by Worrall et al. (2009: 126) suggest that there has been a shift in control over "the job" and how it is performed within the public services which contrasts sharply with its tradition of negotiation and consultation (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 139). As a long standing occupant of the public services, the Post Office, or to be more specific the Royal Mail, has historically fitted squarely in to this tradition. This has found expression in deeply embedded systems of workforce consultation and a range of long-standing national and local bargaining arrangements (Gall, 2003: 26). Such a context has provided a basis for its densely unionised workforce to develop a plethora of workplace controls some of which resemble the wider reaching type of workgroup behaviour identified by Edwards (1988: 197). These include worker and union control over overtime and task allocation, the autonomy to rotate on jobs and rigid seniority (Gall, 2003: 29). The nature of such practices clearly serves to restrict managerial prerogative, and, as such, like other areas of the public sector, has within the context of modernisation become a major area of contestation within the Royal Mail. Advances made by management in the arrangement of work within the wider public sector point to the fact that informal arrangements are sometimes covert and their existence can be fragile (Edwards, 1988: 194). However, any power shift is not a straight forward process. Its outcomes are the result of a mediated process of the interplay of management action and worker reaction in different settings (Worrall et al., 2009).

The notion of shopfloor relations as constituting a dynamic mediation process between management and workers is central to Edwards' (1988) model which notes workplace relations as being in a constant state of tension and movement. From this viewpoint, workplace relations are influenced by structural factors such as labour and product markets as well as technology which put pressures on workers and managers (ibid.: 200-1). In the case of Royal Mail, as with other areas of the public sector, these pressures have taken the form of liberalisation and the quest for greater workforce efficiency and productivity. However, according to Edwards (1988: 194-201) such external pressures are not deterministic and have to be interpreted at the workplace. The manner in which workers respond is influenced by factors such as payment systems, skills held by the workgroup and type of worker bargaining approach. Again, any such accommodation and arrangements arising from the above amount to a compromise in struggle over the labour

process which offers concrete benefits for both workers and management (ibid.: 193-4). This would appear to be particularly applicable to workplace relations within the Royal Mail. Here organisational attempts to eradicate worker influence within the workplace (as outlined in the previous chapter) have themselves, as a result of wide-scale worker resistance, been mediated resulting in a number of service-wide agreements (BT Agreement 2010, Pay and Modernisation Agreement 2007). These have provided scope for significant worker influence over the arrangement of production within a framework of agreed, managerially- sought, efficiency measures.

Edwards (1988) would seem to provide a credible framework within which to understand some of the factors that have contributed to the nature and durability of strong autonomous workforce regulation within the Royal Mail. This is particularly the case when considering his focus on the sometimes contradictory nature of informal group practices such as fiddles, and the benefit which they can provide to management (ibid.: 192). Thus, the origins of local informal bargaining arrangements within the highly centralised system of industrial relations within the Post Office can be traced back to a period of high labour turnover and recruitment difficulties (Clinton, 1984: 302). Managerial tolerance of this informality served as means of getting the job done- particularly with regard to the medium of localised overtime practices. This helped to sustain a form of secondary worker adjustment which assisted in stemming levels absenteeism and resignation (Edwards, 1988: 192). That these practices were intrinsic to the raft of so-called 'Spanish practices' contested by Royal Mail in their 2007 national dispute with the CWU (Lyddon, 2009) highlights their longevity and the fact that they had developed into part of a complex web of custom and practice in many workplaces (Brown, 1972).

It is perhaps tempting to regard worker activity around overtime as conforming to another category of workgroup bargaining behaviour which Edwards (1988: 196) identifies as militant individualism. This as the term suggests, refers to a context in which workers hold a degree of bargaining awareness but actively pursue their own individual interests. However, influence over overtime within the Royal Mail, is one of raft of control mechanisms through which postal workers and their union effectively equalise earning opportunities whilst preventing managerial favouritism and the victimisation of

workplace activists (Gall, 2003: 29). Though informal bargaining around overtime may have arisen from and been sustained by external labour market factors, these have been mediated at workplace level to become a source of unity and collectivism (ibid.: 29). Again workforce behaviour here would seem to akin to the category of worker action which Edwards (1988: 196) notes, involves the use of a more developed set of job controls which temper managerial prerogative.

If the depth of collective controls exercised by many groups of Royal Mail workers are at odds with those of many other public service workers, then they are so in spite of what has amounted to the full-blown liberalisation of the postal service in recent times. Thus the outcome of a series of 'efficiency' centred disputes throughout the mid-to-late 2000s has left many groups of Royal Mail workers with a considerable level of workplace influence (see BT Agreement 2010). Again, Edwards' (1988: 201) approach provides an understanding of the efficacy of worker action in this instance by identifying interrelated clusters of internal and external stimuli which are causally associated with patterns of workplace relations. From this viewpoint, postal work though not thought of as skilled, contains not inconsiderable job-specific localised knowledge relating to how work is organised and carried out.

The general cohesiveness of the CWU membership at shopfloor level means that there would be considerable logistical difficulties in creating and deploying a substitute workforce in the face of industrial action like that mentioned above (Gall, 2003: 140). The potency this affords to such action is complimented by the perishable, non-substitutable nature of the product and vulnerability of the mail network to industrial action (ibid.: 132-9). Furthermore, the legitimate and necessary mobility of postal workers between workplace and functions engenders solidarity and allows information, instructions and issues to be passed around (Lane, 1974: 190-1). These characteristics of postal work are on the whole external as is the occupationally homogenous structure of the CWU which assists in its interest formation and mobilisation of its membership (Gall, 2003: 138). That said, they are intrinsically related to, and serve to bolster, the industrial confidence of postal workers and the collective nature in which they look for solutions to their grievances in the workplace (ibid.: 134). It is this sense of awareness that grievances can

be remedied by collective action which Hyman (1975: 154) regards as an essential feature amongst workgroups who exercise effective workplace control.

It follows from the argument put forward by Edwards (1988) that the interrelationship between the technical capacity of postal workers to disrupt production and the manner in which they approach workplace action, extends to and influences the strategies adopted by management within the industry. These strategies are not always deliberate and can arise out of managerial pragmatism with subsequent benefits emerging in an unplanned way (ibid.: 193). Thus, the relative workplace autonomy enjoyed by postal workers may represent a sophisticated control mechanism by which management attempt to accommodate a strategically well placed group of workers (ibid.). This would appear to be so when considering the practice of job selection through the medium of seniority within the Royal Mail. Whilst, as Gall (2003: 29) notes, this might serve to enhance worker control and protect from managerial whim, it also provides benefits for management since it contributes to a reliance by individuals on seniority rights that undermines collective challenges to management (Edwards, 1988: 94). Again, the benefits that such arrangements might bring to management have often only emerged after their being a source of major contestation, highlighting the complex and contradictory interrelationship between conflict and consent within the workplace.

Workplace relations then, involve an on-going negotiation of order in which understandings and accommodations between workers and management are generated (Edwards, 1988: 202). They are influenced by, and in some respect influence, a cluster of characteristics including the nature of the product and product market, technology and managerial approach. In the case of postal workers, it would seem that these factors have cumulatively served to afford relatively high levels of workplace control and which has proved relatively resilient to economic change. This lends support to Edwards' (ibid.: 201) observation that whilst an environment of increasing market competition may act as a legitimatory argument for managerial driven change, the acceptance of such change is not inevitable. Arguments have to be made and a system of order reproduced (ibid.). That many collective working practices within the Royal Mail have not been swept away in a legitimatory tide of liberalisation, points to the continued existence of strong

collective customs and norms which whilst being social products are just as 'real' as a technology (ibid.: 202).

Postal workers and dockers: informality and adjustment

Although postal workers have as an occupational group managed to retain reasonable levels of influence over their terms and conditions, they have not done so without recourse to significant levels of strike action (Gall, 2003; Lyddon, 2009). The BT Agreement 2010 may have served to consolidate the position of the CWU in the process of negotiated change within the postal industry but its existence arose out of considerable conflict within an industry that in recent times has been regarded as the most strike prone in Britain (Gall, 2003). It is precisely the issue of strike proneness which Edwards (1988) concentrates on in providing an insight into the nature of workplace conflict amongst dock workers particularly during a period of technological and structural change. Again, it is argued here that an understanding of workplace conflict is best gleaned through consideration of the ways in which employers and employees mediate structural conditions to generate distinct combinations of cooperation and resistance (ibid.: 202). Whilst Edwards concentrates on industrial conflict amongst dock workers, the analysis provides a useful lens through which to understand the dynamic of shopfloor relations and the nature of job controls within the Royal Mail in the context of on-going modernisation. It is to this that attention now turns.

Central to Edwards' (1988) study of job controls on the docks is the ways in which dockers respond to the threat posed by structural change to their significant levels of autonomy and long-standing working practices. Historically, dockers had worked in autonomous gangs in which the allocation of work was decided by them with little managerial presence. This gave rise to a complex set of controls which emerged out of customs of the job and the development of a series of working practices. In this environment a highly organised system of pilfering amongst workers (ibid.: 206-7) was allowed to thrive. Work on the docks was highly irregular due to seasonal fluctuations involving a casual intermittent system of employment (ibid.: 206). At first glance it would appear a system fraught with such high levels of job insecurity, and an absence of managerial control would provide significant problems for both parties. However, casualization provided

workers with an alternative to routinized, disciplined forms of employment such as factory work. For employers on the other hand, it served to maximise productivity and weaken trade unionism on the docks (ibid; 206). These respective benefits help explain the longevity of this system and again illustrate that the social relations of work often involve the simultaneous subversion and pursuit of organisational goals (ibid.: 188).

Gall (2003: 138-9) identifies a range of features amongst postal workers which might be regarded as similar enough to those of dock workers as to make an interesting comparison. For example, like dock workers, postal workers lived work experience is sufficiently homogenous and arduous to help create a sense of commonality and community (Gall, 2003: 139). Additionally, the physical concentration of many postal workers in larger delivery offices means that whilst there is a clear hierarchy of power, relations between management and worker are often, like those in the docks, distant and typified by a 'them' and 'us' mentality (ibid.: 139). This chapter has already outlined the significant levels of job control traditionally held by many groups of postal workers. On this point, it is worth mentioning that, in a similar vein to the docks, many local work arrangements within the Royal Mail are determined at shopfloor level. Here those who negotiate on such matters are generally those that work alongside the colleagues who they negotiate on behalf of (ibid.: 140). As with the Docks, there are a number of features of the manner in which work within the Royal Mail is organised which appear perplexing from the outside. However, they too are underpinned by a particular set of logics that evolve out of the process by which external influences are mediated within the workplace.

With regard to the last point, dock work may well have been traditionally viewed as an unstable occupation in which fluctuating earnings generated discontent. However, its largely informal nature provided workers with enough space to define their own tasks and to determine within limits how hard they should work (Edwards, 1988: 214). Employment within the Post Office with its relatively low basic pay and unsocial hours has for much of the post war period onwards been considered unattractive enough as to cause recruitment problems (Clinton, 1984: 302; Batstone et al., 1984: 169). To counter this Post Office management have allowed, and at times encouraged, the development of local working practices which have effectively reduced workloads, enhanced overtime

and protected jobs (Batstone et al., 1984: 179). Examples of this are 'job and finish' (Gall, 2003: 208) (a major issue of contention in the 2007 dispute between RM and the CWU) and the informal means by which workers have rotated between duties. This has ensured that there has often been no permanent relation between worker, exact employment and even line manager (Martinez Lucio, 1993: 35). Again the relatively low levels of labour turnover within the Royal Mail (Gall, 2003: 139), suggests that these arrangements have provided significant enough 'hidden benefits' as to, like dock work, make the job more preferable than more routinized higher paid occupations. Indeed, when structural pressures have threatened the existence of these practices, both sets of workers have considered them so central to their way of working as to respond with significant levels of strike action (Gall, 2003; Edwards, 1988).

For Edwards (1988: 209) strike action was the natural response to structural reform within the dock industry which sought to eradicate casualization and the distinctive set of expectations which this way of working held for its workforce. The logic of this argument, in light of the above discussion, would seem to be applicable to the on-going modernisation of Royal Mail, in which rapid structural change threatens long-standing informal practices. In both instances the workers involved were not the authors of the system but managed to adapt aspects of it to their advantage. Once established such ways of working can carry what Brown (1972: 55) refers to as a customary legitimacy which structural change can serve to violate. This is an important point and provides an insight into the continuing willingness of postal workers to oppose restructuring even if such change falls within the ambit of collective agreements that link efficiency to pay increases (The Way Froward Agreement 2001; Pay and Major Change Agreement 2003; Pay and Modernisation Agreement 2007). This suggests that in addition to being symptomatic of job insecurity, high levels of strike activity within Royal Mail in recent times may also be viewed as an expression of collective resentment at the loss of space provided by secondary adjustment (Edwards, 1988: 212).

Whist it should be borne in mind that there are significant differences between the two groups, Edwards' (1988) study of dock workers helps shed light on to the behaviour of postal workers during a period of major structural change. In doing so it serves to question those who might regard postal workers as inherently militant and instead

suggests that their recourse to strike action is a secondary consequence of the system of working within Royal Mail (ibid.: 207). Such systems of working, as the above has argued, develop out of the contradictory politics of shopfloor relations. They are underpinned by a distinct set of logics and assumptions that are as real and as 'felt' as the technological, and substantive factors alongside which they exist (ibid.).

Edwards' approach therefore goes some way to providing a framework within which to examine how modernisation within the postal industry might affect the collective control of workers and how they subsequently react to this. What it perhaps does not cater for however, is a fuller explanation of the significant differences in workplace control and levels of mobilisation (Gall, 2003) displayed by workers within the reasonably homogenous setting of the postal service. This chapter seeks greater understanding by turning to an approach that lies outside that of a mainly structural analysis of workplace relations. Hill (1974: 218) captures the need for such a focus by positing, what factors persuade particular workgroups to take advantage of encouraging or facilitating conditions and, more significantly, to overcome impeding ones?

Shop steward organisation and the role of stewards

As this study has already highlighted, according to commentators such as Gall (2003: 163), general features exist within the Royal Mail that are conducive to its worker collectively mobilising to defend local working practices. However, these general features are themselves insufficient to explain the inconsistent manner in which actual mobilisations have occurred. For example, strike action has been much more common in some areas of Royal Mail than others (ibid; 149-53). An understanding this can only be gained through an analysis of the way in which these general features are mediated by local processes. Central to this process for Gall, is the nature of local trade unionism within Royal Mail and in particular the effect of the values and traditions of its local lay officials upon the way in which managerial driven change is met (ibid.: 151). From this viewpoint, lay officials in some workplaces have helped foster a tradition whereby terms and conditions have been defended through strike action. On the other hand, in workplaces characterised as having a more moderate culture, management have been more successful at pushing forward initiatives and achieving its aims (ibid.: 151, 204). This

suggests that added to the clusters of factors shaping worker action discussed earlier by Edwards (1988) must be the influence of the type of approach adopted by local trade unions and their shop stewards within the workplace. Accordingly, attention now turns to Batstone et al.'s 1977 study of *Shop Stewards in Action*. This will build on Edwards' earlier analysis and thus form part of the overall framework within which to analyse worker reaction to modernisation within Royal Mail.

Batstone et al. (1977) provide a comparative study of two domestic steward organisations, both of which are based within the same workplace. The first of these operate within a shopfloor manufacturing setting whilst the second are 'white collar' clerical and office based. Central to this is an analysis of the distribution of power within the workplace and how this relates to the relationships between shop steward organisations in question and the members which they represent. In the interests of clarity, the domestic organisation within the shopfloor establishment is referred to as 'the shopfloor side', whilst the clerical based is referred to as 'the staff side'. For Batstone et al., an understanding of the distribution and influence of power within a domestic organisation calls for a consideration of the following three points; the nature of the dominant ideology within the organisation, how the need for decisions is identified and how decisions are actually made (ibid.: 23). By concentrating upon these phenomena the study seeks to identify regularities and patterns of behaviour and, from this, how particular patterns of behaviour are created and maintained (ibid.: 3).

In a similar vein to Edwards (1988), Batstone et al. (1977) recognise that workplace relations are dynamic and that, in this sense, meaningful domestic organisation within the workplace has to be developed and established. This process can be influenced by a range of factors including employer approach, state policy and the employees themselves. Once established, the domestic organisation's incumbents and creators are likely to be able to achieve some degree of influence over the behaviour of their members (ibid.: 4). The extent of this influence is by no means fixed and is dependent upon a whole range of factors which include (often long-standing) sources of power held by particular incumbents, the priorities of the membership, managerial approach and economic factors. The influence of these factors highlights the potential for constant change within organisational behaviour and that central to the relationship between management and

shop steward is the negotiation of order. This can be termed as the processes of give and take, diplomacy and bargaining (Strauss et al., 1971: 103-4). The outcome of such negotiations reflects the power and distribution of influence within the domestic organisation (Batstone et al., 1977: 6).

The value of Batstone et al.'s analysis, therefore, lies in its combining of structural influences such as the organisation and layout of production with the micro sociological factors that are at play within the shopfloor. It recognises that the exercise of power is a product of the socially based success of some organisational members to persuade others to follow. Power here is the outcome of a decision making process and the initiating and directing of issues by key individuals or groups within the organisation are part of this process (ibid.: 8). It follows that in workplaces where unions occupy a high degree of institutional centrality, their representatives will be better able than those with little centrality to foster and maintain a set of predominant values and institutional procedures that operate to the benefit of those that they represent (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 43). This process is sometimes referred to as the mobilization of bias (Schattschneider, 1960: 71; Lukes, 1974: 21-5).

It is clear that for Batstone et al. (1977: 11) that ideology and institutions are important bases of power since they foster and serve to support particular views of the workplace and particular patterns of behaviour. From this viewpoint, the more important the union actually is, the more its members are likely to employ the collective means deemed necessary for successful worker action (Kelly, 1998; Batstone et al., 1977: 129). An example of such union centrality can be found in Moran's (1974: 96) account of local trade unionism within the Royal Mail. It will be recalled that strong local structures of branch officials and activists here exercise considerable union influence over large numbers of local members who have exhibited varying approaches towards workplace change. As this study will move on to illustrate, for Batstone et al. (1977: 128-129) these inconsistencies can in part be explained by particular differences in shop stewards' approaches and the interrelationships between these stewards, other elements of the domestic union network and key individuals in the workplace.

If shopfloor activity is directed by values and systems of belief (Beynon, 1973: 192), any adequate account of activism must consider the ideology of the activists in question and the organisations within which they are active. In terms of their study, Batstone et al., (1977) argue that the key issue of shop steward ideology had given rise to a number of significant differences in both steward approach and membership behaviour. Crucially, there were particularly notable differences between the two workgroups under investigation. In seeking to distinguish between different types of shop steward with regard to their ideological approach, two (main) types were identified. These distinctions are relatively crude (ibid.: 34), and categorize patterns of steward behaviour in terms of the following two cross-cutting dimensions. The first is the extent to which emphasis is placed upon either a representative role or a delegate role by the steward. The former of these involves the adoption of a leadership role by the shop steward who takes initiatives and is involved in the formation of policies as well as their execution. By contrast the delegate role involves the official carrying out the wishes of their membership rather than exercising discretion in the pursuit of their interests (Burke, 1906 cited in Batstone et al., 1977.). Secondly, is the extent to which the shop steward pursues union principles, which particularly involves the protection of the union as a collective based on strong principled leadership, in carrying out their role (Batstone et al., 1977:32, 34). Those shop stewards who displayed a propensity towards a strong representative role and a concern with the maintenance of union principles were termed 'leader' stewards. Those who carried out more of a delegate role with less commitment to union principles were termed as 'populist' stewards (ibid.: 35).

In continuing with the typology, Batstone et al. (1977: 41) go on to note that 'leader' stewards tend to be more involved with other stewards in comparison to their 'populist' counterparts. In particular, 'leader' stewards spent more time in contact with key groups of influential union-orientated workplace officials than did 'populists' (ibid.: 46). The significance of this upon shopfloor behaviour is identified by Beynon (1973: 102) who notes the role played by an established cohort of shop stewards in engendering solidarity and class consciousness within the workplace. Whilst Batstone et al. (1977: 36) found that populists formed the largest single type of steward in both workgroups, there was a far greater presence (and importantly coverage over membership) of 'leader' stewards in the

shopfloor organisation compared to the staff side. In terms of the two workgroups, the greater incidence of 'leader stewards' and the presence of a network of key activists within the shopfloor setting meant that the ideology, norms and values of leadership were reaffirmed. Moreover, the very norms and values of the shopfloor stewards which were reaffirmed are, as this study has already argued, a kind which facilitate a greater centralisation of power within the organisation (ibid.: 24, 53).

The arguments so far put forward by Batstone et al., are echoed by Hyman (1975: 154) who notes that a strong tradition of solidarity reinforces collective strength and the bargaining power of workgroups. However, shopfloor control is not only dependent upon bargaining power, it must be reinforced by bargaining awareness, a sense of grievance and the consciousness that grievance can be remedied by collective action (ibid.). Through their unique role as both a worker and a leader, shop stewards have the opportunity not only to understand the issues of their members but also to shape their attitudes and views (Buttigieg et al. 2008: 251). This shaping, or as Kelly (1998: 32) terms 'framing' of issues is a key means by which workgroup activists and leaders focus attribution onto the employer which encourages group identity and cohesion. What is essential here is that workers are encouraged to develop a sense of injustice and that they blame the employer or management for their problems (ibid.: 45). For Kelly this is crucial to the process by which workers mobilise towards taking collective action.

Having developed a sense of group commonality that such attributions can help bring about or strengthen, workers are more likely to act in terms of the collective interest of the group rather than in terms of the individual facet of their identity (ibid.: 30). Effective mobilisation also requires that workgroup leaders in addition to both promoting group cohesion and identity, urge workers to take collective action and defend such action in the face of managerially-deployed counter mobilization strategies. The whole process of collectivisation therefore, is heavily dependent upon a small number of leaders or activists (ibid.: 35, 44). It follows from the arguments put forward by both Hyman (1975) and Kelly (1998) that an appreciation of workgroup power within the workplace calls for a consideration of Batstone et al.'s (1977: 54) second and third dimensions of shop steward power: the extent to which stewards identify problems requiring decisions and to which

they control the procedures by which decisions are made, and the outcomes of actual decision making processes.

It is clear from Batstone et al.'s (1977: 57) study that stewards from the shopfloor side handled a lager range and greater number of issues than those on the staff side, with 'leader' stewards handling more issues than 'populist' stewards. Furthermore, shopfloor 'leader' stewards were the most likely group to actually 'shape' an issue (ibid.: 56). Not only did 'leader' stewards 'shape' and initiate more issues than their counterparts, they also amended and squashed over four fifths of the issues raised by others (ibid.: 58). These differences may, in part, be due to the greater concentration of leader stewards in piece work areas where there exist greater opportunities for bargaining (Cliff, 1970: 47). However, the authors again relate these differences to the strong presence of an influential steward network within the shopfloor side and the ideological support and reaffirmation of union principles that this provided (ibid.: 75).

This last point may go some way to explaining the upsurge in industrial confidence amongst postal workers over recent years. Thus, a reduction in CWU branches from the early 1990s has meant that local leadership is now concentrated in the hands of officers from larger branches. Such officials (and the branches that they preside over) have tended to be more combative in their industrial attitude than the officials of the smaller branches that they have subsumed. Many branch secretaries within the CWU, as a result of the greater demands placed upon them by this have now in order to gain more facility time, taken on a representative role. In sum, many branch secretaries within the CWU have a direct involvement in workplace industrial relations and stand at the apex of wider array of activists and branches that are now on the whole better organised (Gall, 2003: 146).

Recent restructuring within the CWU would seem then to have resulted in the historically 'active of the active' influential minority of the union (Moran, 1974) now locally occupying an even stronger position from which to espouse its traditional call for a militant style of trade unionism. If this is the case, branch leadership within at least some areas of the CWU would have appear to have further moved towards Batstone et al.'s model of a stratum of influential union officials who can reaffirm a strong union-orientated style of

trade unionism within the workplace. However, while Batstone et al. (1977) place much emphasis upon the role of shopfloor leaders, developments within the Royal Mail have created a context in which a stratum of officials with shopfloor experience now operate in a leadership capacity above the level of the workplace itself. Though leadership here may not be centred on one specific workplace, influence can in effect be transported into the workplace by branch officials who are employed in Royal Mail individual workplaces and, in comparison to the time of Batstone et al.'s study, have access to a wider range of effective methods of communication.

Strong shop steward communities like this not only promote the norms of shop steward leadership, they also provide certain resources to facilitate appropriate action (ibid; 64). These include the provision of up to date information of events; theories of management and membership behaviour; recipes of action; various forms of action and support, and control over errant stewards (Hyman, 1975: 168; Batstone et al., 1977: 64-5, 74). This contrasts with Batstone et al.'s staff side organisation in which a weak network of stewards provided little in the form of information or definition of workplace situations, were not committed to leadership and tended not to initiate or process issues themselves (Batstone, et al. 1977: 75). This lack of institutional centrality meant that stewards were more dependent and, as such, more focused upon the pursuit of often individual membership wishes and frequently had to turn to full time officials for support. In such an environment the staff side stewards held considerably less power in terms of their ability to define and resolve issues (ibid.).

The restructuring of branches within the CWU must be considered alongside both Royal Mail's on-going policy of decentralisation (for evidence of this see recent BT Agreement 2010 and Pay and Modernisation Agreement 2007) and the differential nature of mail volumes within workplaces. This has necessitated an increasing role for lay officers in negotiations and thus added further stimuli to local bargaining within Royal Mail workplaces (Gall, 2003: 146). The usefulness of Batstone et al.'s (1977) approach is again apparent here in that it seeks, in part to measure, steward power-and the subsequent behaviour of workers, by examining the extent to which stewards shape, define and resolve issues. In this sense the move towards a more localised model of bargaining (much of which is often ad-hoc in terms of overtime and contingency measures) has

potentially served to increase the bargaining scope (Cliff, 1970: 47), decision making role and thus power of key domestic stewards within the Royal Mail. These circumstances, in turn, serve to further centralise the importance of the domestic organisation and what was termed earlier as, 'the mobilization of bias', in favour of the union (Batstone et al., 1977: 10).

Evidence so far suggests that there are different levels of workplace strength and action that exists between the membership of the CWU and their respective stewards. This may be dependent upon whether or not there are a strong cohort of branch officials who are able to take advantage of the varying and dynamic presence of a number of structural factors as a means of strengthening control and influence in local offices. Further support is provided by Gall (2003: 146-7), who argues that branch leaderships are usually key in determining whether branches are active or inactive, vibrant or dormant. The positions of branches, in this regard, are generally determined by a handful of activists and the extent to which these seek to be consulted, promote union policies and challenge managerial prerogative.

In a similar vein to Batstone et al.'s staff side organisation, inactive CWU branches allow most terms and conditions to be set by local management. Active CWU branches, like Batstone et al.'s shopfloor organisation seek negotiation on every issue and pursue ambitious agendas which challenge the status quo (Gall, 2003: 147). This last point is central to an analysis of the development and maintenance of workplace control since it underpins the manner in which the sectional interests of either workers or management come to be established and then accepted by both of these parties within the workplace (Hill, 1974: 228).

Whilst the nature of branch leadership within the CWU is an important determinant of levels and types of action pursued by membership, Gall (2003: 146) makes the point that those effective models of leadership evidenced by the CWU rest upon a fulcrum of strong workplace unionism. As Terry and Edwards (1988: 224) note, there is a highly ambiguous relationship between workgroups and shop stewards, with the later having no power unless they have support of their members (Batstone et al., 1977: 99, 112). It follows that steward leadership depends upon the ability to win membership support. Whilst this is

achieved in part by levels of success in substantive bargaining, it should be borne in mind that workers within a capitalist society are subject to a series of influences that conflict with the solidarity based values espoused by leader stewards. Thus, various agencies within capitalist society play an important part in ensuring that workers bring to the workplace an ambivalence and dual consciousness (ibid.: 271) part of which is based upon compliance and an acceptance of inequality (Hyman and Brough, 1975: 202-3). This means that stewards require resources which help facilitate the stimulation of membership consciousness of grievance which Hyman (1975: 154) regards as a prerequisite for effective workgroup action. One important resource is the nature of the steward's relationship with their members. In particular, 'leader stewards' tend to have close relationships with what Batstone et al. (1977: 100) refer to as 'opinion leaders'. These are a category of member who are respected by their fellow workers and have influence over them. The presence of such individuals provides an important means by which stewards can access social networks of workers to offer definitions of work and society in a manner which promotes strong union-based principles and workgroup consciousness (ibid.: 110, 248).

Batstone et al.'s account of effective workplace action as being dependent upon a strong cohort of local stewards supported by a network of like-minded opinion formers may help explain what Gall (2003: 204) refers to as the unevenness in behaviour and consciousness between workgroups within Royal Mail. If effective localised strike action is used as an indicator of levels of organisation within the CWU, then its success would indeed appear to be down to the presence of a network of activists within recent years. From this viewpoint, given that strike action is a social process involving systems of power and influence (Batstone et al., 1978: 1) those offices displaying the capacity to execute largely successful strike action would be more likely to contain the above model of domestic organisation. Gall (2003: 139) adds to this equation the influence in recent times of the inward movement of many redundant workers from highly unionised strike prone industries. For example, many ex-dockers (Liverpool and London), car workers (Liverpool, Oxford, Paisley), printers (London, Oxford), shipyard workers (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle) and miners (Cardiff, Edinburgh, Newcastle) are reported by CWU activists to have become 'good' and 'solid' members within their ranks. Again, it follows that the

presence of such workers in certain workplaces may well be an important factor in strengthening a membership framework upon which a combative collective union ideology can be effectively imported and sustained.

If this is the case, then it adds weight to the argument that an explanation of worker behaviour lies outside an overly structural analysis of workplace industrial relations. Assuming, therefore, that the above categories of workers bring with them the traditions and expectations of their previous employment, it is important to consider not only steward attempts to influence these members but also *their* expectations and attempts to influence steward action. Both Beynon (1973) and later, Darlington (1994) draw upon this line of argument when providing analysis of shopfloor organisation and worker consciousness in a Merseyside car plant throughout the 1970s and 1980s. From this viewpoint, the relationship between stewards and their members is dynamic with effective shopfloor action being sustained by the interplay between the opinions of stewards and their members. In the case of the Merseyside car plant, the collective consciousness of workers was nurtured by both the aggressive approach taken by management and the input of the class conscious battle-hardened local representatives who, according to Darlington (1994), espoused a brand of trade unionism that was shaped by a set of regionally specific social, economic and cultural factors.

Gall (2003: 157) goes onto provide statistical evidence which identifies Merseyside as one of a number of areas including London, Birmingham Bristol and Edinburgh that have in recent years displayed disproportionately high levels of strike activity amongst local postal workers. Taken with Gall's earlier point, and in light of the argument made by Darlington, it is possible to posit the following observation; that external and particularly past industrial experience may play an important part in providing a reservoir of workers that are not only readily mobilised but furthermore, crucial in shaping peer group outlook and attitude within the workplace. This mirrors an earlier point made by Batstone et al. (1984: 115), who noted that the influx of workers from outside industries during the 1950s and 1960s significantly contributed to an increased willingness to challenge managerial authority and a general deterioration in industrial relations within the Post Office. Again, judged from this viewpoint, whilst social structures contain and condition what can be achieved through individual and collective human action, human action itself

constitutes, and in some circumstances transforms social structures (Darlington, 2002: 95).

It is useful at this point to bear in mind the earlier argument advanced by Edwards (1988: 211). This is that whilst the day to day generation of workplace order involves the creative and sustained input of workers themselves, this can be constrained by structural conditions. This echoes the point made by Batstone et al. (1977: 152) who highlight the importance of structural situations in facilitating workplace leadership and the type of worker behaviour that this can foster. The convergence of approaches on this point helps provide further important insight into another factor contributing to the varying nature of worker behaviour and action between offices within Royal Mail and the complex interrelationship between structure and agency. Gall (2003: 160) identifies that a far greater propensity of strike action (and presumably combative consciousness that this requires) exists amongst Royal Mail workplaces with over 50 workers when compared to smaller workplaces. Not only do smaller offices experience less pressure from mail volumes and therefore have less issues of contention, their relative isolation from fellow postal workers can imbue a spirit of de-facto cooperation. As such, smaller workplaces often lack a tradition of oppositional union practice that is crucial in the development of bargaining awareness and the exercising of power (Hyman, 1975: 154; Brown, 1973: 145). Such an environment would be both numerically less likely to contain members of the active minority of branch leaders and its domestic organisation would, like other unions, attract the sort of shop stewards that would support and uphold what would be in this case a tradition of moderation (Moran, 1974: 99).

It is clear that worker action within Royal Mail is, as Edwards (1988: 202) argues, affected by both structure and the on-going micro-political process of action through which order and understandings are negotiated within the shopfloor. The relatively high but uneven levels of strike activity within Royal Mail can be seen as an outcome of the structural pressures of modernisation and the way that these have interacted with the traditional, but varying, degrees and means through which workers have attempted to exert control over their labour process. However, although structural factors relating to workplace size might appear to affect localised levels of workgroup consciousness and action within the Royal Mail, this is not a wholly independent factor. As Darlington (1993:4) argues, the

nature of shop steward organisation is not a fixed static phenomenon and is dependent upon a range of contradictory factors which push in different directions at various times. Gall (2003: 160) in this sense identifies the potential for group cohesion expressed in terms of strike action amongst smaller offices brought about by commonality of shift patterns and easier economies of workgroup communication. That potential action in such workplace carries less industrial impact means that group solidarity expressed in terms of militant action is mediated by local processes. Such local processes highlight the inextricable relationship between structure and action since they further essentially include managerial attempts to structure relationships within the workplace. This is done through the creation of work roles and lines of authority (Rose, 1975: 297) amongst workers who are, however, 'active creators in the world in which they live' (Edwards, 1988: 211).

Jenkins et al. (2002: 88), contextualise managerial attempts to structure workplace relationships within the Royal Mail in a wider account of the development of green-field sites within the industry. From this viewpoint, Royal Mail, as part of a wider and on-going programme of modernization, has increasingly concentrated its core workload within a number of large automated mail centres at the expense of smaller regional processing centres (ibid.). This shift has been associated with the steady increase in the utilization of part-time staff and managerial attempts to erode established methods of workplace regulation. Such changes to organisational structure and work processes on the part of Royal Mail are redolent of managerial strategies within 'new' private sector workplaces and if realised, pose significant challenges to workgroup control.

The advent of green-field sites and flexible working practices like those above within the postal industry has coincided with adoption of a succession of radical new managerial initiatives (Beale and Mustchin., 2013: 2). These have ranged from HRM and TQM (Martinez Lucio et al., 1997) through to what have been identified as 'punitive' employee involvement schemes (Beale and Mustchin., 2013: 3). A central reason for their introduction would seem to rest on their following function: facilitating an environment in which workforce compliance and managerial control are maximised (Mckinlay and Taylor, 1996). From this perspective the nature of work organisation within the managerially-tailored environment of green-field mail centres when compared to some

more established depots serves to highlight two developments; firstly, that despite a broad commonality of conditions there exists within the Royal Mail itself a variable plethora of structural pressures which influence the behaviour of specific groups of workers. And secondly, within these contexts, managerial policy and strategy play an important role in affecting levels of workgroup strength.

Jenkins et al. (2002: 88) present a somewhat negative picture of 'new' Royal Mail workplaces and their potentially damaging implications for worker influence over their workload. They do however, go on to note that these environments can still be characterised as containing a level of local managerial autonomy that has contributed to a wide disparity of practices regarding levels of overtime, the number of part time workers and the extent and degree of workplace fixed shifts. It follows that any analysis of worker behaviour within Royal Mail must include a consideration of the relationship between management and stewards and, in light of the arguments advanced by Kelly (1998), how this affects the latter's ability to develop worker consciousness amongst their membership. On this point, Batstone et al. (1977) argue that, as they may both foster and support or alternatively challenge steward involvement in the organisation of work, management can be an important influence upon the centrality of the union and, therefore, the nature of domestic organisation.

Worker manger relations here again are shaped by the central and contradictory requirements of management within a capitalist society (Edwards, 1988: 188). These include the necessity to maximise the output of indeterminate labour (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 9-10), to make decisions in situations of uncertainty, and to cater for the structural pressures of the industry in question. The nature of geographically consolidated Mail Centre makes their workload unpredictable and vulnerable to disruption. Here key influential members of management might choose to cultivate strong bargaining relationships with more influential types of 'leader' steward who are in the position to lead their often strategically placed members into courses of action which result in 'goal achievement' for both parties. According to Batstone et al. (1977: 176), leader stewards 'goal achievement' may mean the increase in members' earnings whereas for management, it may mean the suppression of trivial employee problems and the maintenance of production by avoiding strikes.

Shopfloor power, worker and union relations

For Batstone et al. (1977: 155-7) then, steward leadership, and the membership solidarity that this engenders, is reaffirmed by managerial action and attitude. It follows that in less crisis-prone workplaces, where there exists a lack of potential for collective worker pressure and low levels of managerial influence in terms of the wider organisation, there is little scope for the strong bargaining relationships mentioned above. Here, managers weaken rather than strengthen any tendency towards steward leadership (ibid.: 177). This analysis provides a useful insight into the scope that the structure of work within Royal Mail provides for effective workplace bargaining. However, Darlington (2002: 95, 101) reminds us that workers and management do not respond automatically to environmental pressures and (in drawing on his earlier point in relation to the Merseyside car plant) though shop steward leadership can foster collective action, workers themselves are moulded by the world around them, but equally at the same time react back upon the world to change it. From this viewpoint, it is important not to lose sight of agency and the role that it plays in affecting workers' capacity to take militant forms of action. In the case of the Royal Mail, factors such as product market boom, authoritarian style management, and an increase in factory-style production methods help explain the relatively high but uneven levels of workplace action displayed by postal workers in recent times (ibid.: 98). However, this action has been dependent upon a crucial subjective factor; the extent to which there has been a layer of workplace activists and militants capable of providing local level leadership often independently from full time officials.

This focus on the interrelationship between workplace unionism and worker activism should not detract from the significant role that the wider union might actually play in shaping worker action. While rank and file members can put pressures, and set limits, on stewards' leadership, their consciousness, aspirations and ability to collectivise will be further affected by factors such as the stewards' relationship to the wider union and its full time officers (FTOs) (Darlington, 2002: 103). For Batstone et al. (1977) the level of this influence at workplace level could be gauged by the extent to which stewards within the two workplaces which they studied were dependent upon the larger union in terms of the various dimensions of power which were discussed earlier. They noted that paradoxically,

whilst leader stewards in the shopfloor organisation relied on the larger union to provide important ideological support for their espoused values and principles, they were in day-to-day terms of general negotiations relatively isolated and independent from this body. Conversely, populists and staff side stewards remained more dependent upon the active involvement of the wider union, in the form of FTOs, in both negotiations and support when faced with challenges and criticisms from membership (ibid., 180, 256). The authors go onto argue that these differing conceptions about the proper role of the larger union in the definition of members interests and upon horizons of responsibility which stewards and FTOs have, can serve as a source of conflict between these two groups (ibid.: 211).

The conflicting conception of interests that at times exist between wider trade unions and their domestic organisations, and its impact upon members becomes apparent when considering strike action by postal workers in recent years. Gall (2003: 64, 74) points to the part played by CWU FTOs in successfully supressing potential strike activity emanating out of local disputes within the Royal Mail in the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so, in a similar vein to Darlington, he provides examples of independent action that has taken place in contravention of repudiation by both FTOs and the national union (ibid.: 66, 73-5). In such circumstances, which have often arisen out of workplace specific issues such as suspensions and health and safety concerns, local workers and lay officials have, as Gall notes, not been bound by the same logic as the FTOs to keep the peace (ibid.). This highlights the important dichotomy between local unionism and national unionism and in particular the latter's role in contributing to the tensions of workplace agency. Moreover, this interplay between the structural pressures of trade union officialdom, managerial action and subjectively perceived workplace grievance lends support to Edwards' (1988: 201) argument that; an understanding of patterns of relations in a given workplace requires attention to a cluster of influences and to their interaction.

There is then no coalition of elements which can produce spontaneity of action by workers. As Allen (1981: 319-20) notes with regard to successful action by mine workers in the early 1970s, before realising and actualizing their power these workers had to be persuaded and made consciously aware of their situation by the endeavours of both local and full time officials. This took place within a context in which a right wing dominated NUM had for a period enforced collaboration with the industry's employer. For Allen this

shows that the belief in action by workers without leadership is a myth. He argues that it is equally mythical to suggest that leaders who occupy formal union positions inevitably obstruct the quality of spontaneity and prevent the emergence of progressive movements by local activists. The primary division within the trade union movement is therefore, from this viewpoint, ideological and cuts through both rank and file and trade union officialdom (ibid.).

The dialectic interdependency and interplay between full time and workplace unionism within the postal industry and its effect upon workers' consciousness is captured by Gall (2003: 248). Here, the centrality of workplace unionism to Royal Mail's industrial relations and postal workers growing tradition of unofficial action has provided activists with a base to launch intra union oppositional groupings and networks. These have been successful in helping to direct central policy over issues such as Royal Mail's unitary-centred Employee Agenda initiative, whilst heightening industrial confidence in situations of deleterious change. The emergence of such groupings has been helped by the frequent nature of FTO and local elections and consequently the strong lines of accountability between workplaces and union officers (Batstone et al., 1984: 250-74; Gall, 2003: 248). This helps to explain different workgroup responses to attempts by FTOs to supress action and furthermore, calls into question those who seek to understand worker behaviour within more top down explanations of trade unionism.

Both Darlington (2002) and Allen (1981) highlight the dialectic relationship between structure and agency and the dynamic nature of the joint processes between leaders and workers through which worker agency is negotiated then expressed. Their arguments suggest that although Batstone et al. (1977) provide a useful lens through which to analyse the nature of shopfloor organisation and the behaviour amongst postal workers, more careful consideration of the dynamics of collective action is required when focussing on the current and on-going modernisation of the Royal Mail. Thus, central to the viewpoint put forward by Batstone et al. is the argument that by moderating their goals and cultivating strong bargaining relationships with management, shop stewards can achieve more for their members than they possibly could through a more militant perspective (Darlington, 1994: 16).

Any such relations however take place within parameters which are heavily circumscribed by capitalist and social relations which can ultimately render, from the perspective of stewards and their members, collaborative forms of bargaining as impotent. In the case of Royal Mail, the competitive market pressures emanating from the on-going modernisation agenda have, as strike levels suggest, served to both reduce the scope for 'give and take' style bargaining and sharpened social and economic antagonisms between workforce and management (ibid.: 19). This may help explain why, both the threat of, and actual use of, strike action, rather than give and take pragmatism has often tended to be the method through which many workgroups have chosen to defend their terms and conditions in the Royal Mail (Beale, 2003). In this sense, the high level of steward cooperation identified by Batstone et al. could in fact serve to sap membership faith in their ability to resist attacks and dissipate the willingness to engage in the necessarily more militant strategies (Darlington, 1994: 146) like those adopted by many groups of postal workers.

Additionally, it might be argued that Batstone et al.'s (1977) preoccupation with steward bargaining power pays too little attention to the potential of rank and file workgroups such as postal workers to independently limit managerial prerogative (Darlington et al., 1993: 19). At workplace level postal workers have established a wide range of so called 'Spanish practices' to decrease workloads and reduce time at work (Gall, 2003: 207-8). Practices like these often develop informally and spontaneously out of the rank and file (Darlington, 1993: 19), and provide the only means by which workers can sustain effective levels of job control that are favourable to their own interests. In doing so they contrast with more formal workplace bargaining which, in a similar sense to the strong managerial-steward bargaining relationships mentioned by Batstone et al., can serve to impose a peace obligation and leave management with the prerogative of initiative (Hyman, 1975: 159).

Since steward legitimacy is dependent upon the active support of membership, stewards are under considerable pressure to respond to and support such rank and file initiatives like those above (Darlington, 1993: 21: Hyman, 1975: 161). The case of postal workers certainly supports the assertion Batstone et al. (1977: 110) that, leader stewards may look towards influential networks of opinion formers to reinforce domestically driven

lines of argument which promote strong union principles. However, they must adopt differing and sometimes conflicting patterns of behaviour depending on the issue, workgroup involved and shopfloor confidence. From this viewpoint, the power of workplace unionism is not the property of the steward, with the leadership relationship being a dynamic two-way interaction between members and shop stewards (Darlington, 1993: 19).

The above arguments raise questions with regard Batstone et al.'s study of the effect of shop steward behaviour on workplace organisation. In particular, it perhaps fails to pay enough attention to the independent and dynamic ways in which workers outside the official structures of workplace industrial relations can influence their labour process. They also highlight problems relating to stewards who are bureaucratically divorced from the shopfloor and encouraged to think in terms of the interests of the company (Darlington, 1994: 138). Fosh (1993) attempts to resolve what can be seen here as the tension between democracy and bureaucracy by identifying the positive role that key workplace leaders might play in both bringing about membership participation and an increasing union influence within the workplace.

According to Fosh, shopfloor members feeling towards the union are dynamic, context linked and dichotomous with views which shift between a commitment to solidarity and union-centred goals, to that of a more individualistic, instrumental outlook (ibid.: 579-80). Their levels of participation and solidaristic commitment to workplace unionism rise when issues of concern to the membership are being decided or widely discussed. This is particularly the case when union leadership is of a participatory style which communicates, consults and involves members in decision-making (ibid.: 581). Here then, a local participatory style of leadership that contrasts with the more didactic model identified by Batstone et al. (1977) is seen as key in the development of strong workplace unionism and moreover, union renewal (ibid.: 589).

Conclusion

Despite the foregoing criticisms, Batstone et al.'s (1977) study serves, in conjunction with the approach adopted by Edwards (1988) to provide a framework within which to understand worker responses to managerial-driven change within the Royal Mail. At first

sight this framework may appear somewhat dated for the study of the effects of modernisation on an area of the UK public services in the 21st Century. However, it should be born in mind that industrial relations within the Royal Mail stand in stark contrast to most other industries and are still based on strong workplace trade unionism and traditional negotiations of order. This, along with an absence of suitable more recent literature, required that the author looked to existing theories that were sympathetic to traditional models of workplace organisation.

Edwards brings invaluable insight to this study in appreciating that worker action is shaped by the unity of both subjective and objective factors. This takes place within the context of an employment relationship which is predicated on structural antagonism between capital and labour, both of whom are to some extent dependent upon the other's co-operation. This relationship is dynamic and is influenced by a cluster of structural factors such as product market conditions and the technological organisation of work. For Edwards (1988: 201), these pressures have to be interpreted by, and interact with, the central actors within a workplace context, namely workers and managers and the patterns of social relations that exist between these two parties. In the case of Royal Mail, influences at a structural level have taken the form of ongoing modernisation and marketization of the UK's postal services. While this has carried widespread threats to their job security, job discretion and remuneration (Gall, 2003: 277), it has evoked a variety of responses and outcomes from a group of workers with similar task, skill mix and nationally agreed terms and conditions, in the context of a single industry. It follows that any understanding of worker action must therefore include a micro-level analysis of the social processes, through which external pressures such as those emanating from modernisation are mediated at workplace level.

Batstone et al.'s (1977) study of shop stewards' organisation adopts a workplace based focus to examine how domestic relations and structures act to mediate external influences. In doing so it helps to explain for the variety of worker responses and levels of resistance to modernisation within the Royal Mail. From this viewpoint, the ability of workgroups to mediate external pressures and to favourably influence their work situation is related to the level of power which they are able to realise within the domestic organisation. Central to this is the existence of a strong domestic shop steward

network that is able to; successfully make decisions; identify, shape and direct issues in the manner required; and, finally, maintain a particular set of ideologies and institutions which serve to support and legitimate particular patterns of behaviour (ibid.: 252).

Whilst shop steward leadership can be seen as crucial, Batstone et al. also recognise the importance of management, particularly within the context of crisis-prone workplaces, in contributing to this. Through the strong bargaining relationships which they can develop with powerful leader stewards, management are able to resolve issues in ways that are favourable to workers and in doing so bolster the standing and indeed power of their representatives in relation to their members (ibid.: 255). This echoes Edwards' (1988: 194) argument that management play a key role as mediators of external conditions and that conflict and consent are interwoven within the same phenomena. It is out of the day-to-day processes, through which these contradictory pressures upon both labour and capital are negotiated, that patterns of workplace order are generated (ibid.: 188).

This thesis began by focussing on the role played by the state with regard to the marketization of public services and how this fits with in terms of its wider objective of securing an economic structure to meet business needs. This led on to workplace-based, investigation of how change such as that which is met by workers at the point of production which located the logic of market-driven reform within a wider debate about the capital-labour relationship. The relationship between management, state and workers was then examined within the more specific context of the Royal Mail and the wider Post Office itself. From here attention turned to worker agency and an evaluation of the factors that influence workers to behave in the way that they do at the locus of the shopfloor itself. Such depth of focus provides the foundation for a discussion of this thesis research, which makes up the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Researching Modernisation in the Royal Mail

The aim of this study has been to examine how Royal Mail workers within a variety of settings, respond to managerial-driven change in the context of rapid modernisation of the postal industry. Whilst the modernisation agenda has brought about a significant change in relationships between employers, their managerial agents and workers within the wider public sector (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 5), this has been neither even or clear cut. Thomas and Davies (2005: 689) and Worrall et al. (2009: 120), for example, note the importance of worker agency, and workplace setting in mediating the raft of managerial initiatives that have come to be associated with public service modernisation. If managerial-driven change is context dependent, then it follows that any meaningful understanding of change within the postal industry must take account of the specific characteristics of what are a wide range of different types of workplace within the Royal Mail. Accordingly, the ambit of this study extends to four Royal Mail workplaces each of which differs in terms of size, nature of work organisation, age and geographical setting. This calls for a comparative study through the medium of a series of case studies which Kitay and Callus (1998:102) identify as a research approach which has provided insight into areas such as workplace trade unionism and the process of industrial action (Batstone et al., 1977, 1978) and the changing nature of work in the mass production and continuous process industries (Goldthorpe et al., 1968; Beynon, 1973; Nichols and Beynon, 1977). Attention is concentrated, in particular, on the experiences of manual postal workers within these various workplaces at the level of the shopfloor, since there are a range of studies which point to this location as a key area where Royal Mail management have in recent times attempted to restructure its relationship with both its employees and their union representatives (Beale, 2003; Beale and Mustchin, 2013; Beirne, 2013).

Research is conducted in the qualitative tradition of traditional industrial relations research (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000: 141) and is deductive. This means that the research questions are driven by existing academic literature and a theoretical framework that is developed from existing theoretical approaches to the study of workplace industrial relations. That said, sound empirical research begins with strong grounding in related literature, identifies a research gap and proposes research questions that address

that gap (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 25). As such, there was a particular concern that the research design provided scope for an approach which built on earlier studies of worker agency and more macro-level studies of impact of modernisation on public sector workers.

Research Design

From the outset, this study has sought to gain insight into how and why workers respond to and react back to changes to their working environment within the context of on-going managerial- driven change. Central to this has been an investigation into how patterns of conflict and accommodation (Edwards, 1988) are created in a work place setting and the factors which influence the efficacy and form of worker action. This has been pursued through the medium of a labour process analysis the core strengths of which involve the theoretical concern with the contradictory relationship between capital and labour, and an empirical interest in the experience of work at the point of production (Edwards, 2010: 42). The research, therefore, was initially concerned with conducting a series of individual workplace case studies adopting an ethnographic method of study which has historically played a critical role in the study of work (Friedman and McDaniel, 1998:114).

Central to ethnography is a concern with understanding what happens in particular settings, how the people involved see their own and others actions, and the contexts in which the actions take place (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 1-2). Such an approach would serve to provide a rich insight into the perceptions and social interactions of the postal workers under analysis and the opportunity to discover emerging issues (Friedman and McDaniel 1998: 114-7) emanating out of a production process that is undergoing considerable change. However, first-hand experience of the practical difficulties associated with ethnographic study, notably that it is extremely time consuming and requires a high degree of access to the subject of study (ibid.: 121) soon rendered it beyond the scope of this study. That said, the researcher was guided by, and did draw upon his own work experiences and knowledge within the Royal Mail in order to elaborate upon and enhance this study's findings. Such an approach, as is discussed below, is referred to as auto-ethnography.

Before moving on to discuss the benefits that auto-ethnography and the case study approach might bring to the field of industrial relations research, it is necessary to say a little more about the factors which shaped this study's research design. Since fieldwork sought to investigate a number of different workplace settings it was important to identify a range of Royal Mail sites that were potentially accessible and diverse. The researcher here drew on his previous knowledge of working processes, area-specific industrial relations and a network of union contacts gleaned from time spent as a branch official and workplace organiser for the CWU. While such sound understanding is vital in helping select the appropriate sights for research, it perhaps raises questions relating to researcher bias. This is addressed below in the chapter's evaluation of the research methods and fieldwork.

A final consideration in the design process was that of any potential ethical problems that may have arisen. As Burgess (1984: 185) notes, research fieldwork is associated with a series of common ethical and political problems relating to inter alia data collection, data analysis and data dissemination. This fieldwork took place against the backdrop of an impending national dispute between the Royal Mail and the CWU. Similar such contexts some in recent years have seen Royal Mail target a number of activists and union officials (see Lyddon, 2009). As such particular care was taken throughout the fieldwork to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All those interviewed and all workplaces covered retained their anonymity, equally each of the four workplaces that were investigated was referred to through this study purely by a given number (for example, Delivery Office 1, Mail Centre 1). That said, the researcher did seek the fundamental ethical principle of informed consent on the part of each interviewee which itself may reduce levels of anonymity and increase the risk of identification (Burgess, 1984). This was reinforced through the secure administration and retention of interview transcripts which were kept in a locked cabinet in an office which was in turn locked and accessible only through a key pad. Before being deployed, the fieldwork approach received consent from its sponsoring body's ethics committee (see Appendix 3).

The researcher and auto-ethnography as a research method:

As a method, auto-ethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. It is therefore, an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, 2004: Holman Jones, 2005). According to Ellis et al. (2011) scholars have turned to auto-ethnography as a means of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience. This is research that seeks to sensitise readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen the capacity to empathise. When adopting this approach, researchers are attempting to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience. This is accomplished by the researcher first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artefacts, and then describing these patterns by way of storytelling (e.g., character and plot development), and showing and telling. As such, the auto-ethnographer not only tries to make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also, by producing accessible texts, they may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995).

This highly personalised mode of qualitative research was a key means of providing greater insight into the nature of shopfloor life in the Royal Mail. It allowed the researcher to employ personal working experience of the industry itself to highlight the long-standing cultural and historical factors which shaped the actions and beliefs of workers in four Royal Mail workplaces. This was important in rendering this study's contribution as both important and unique in comparison to others which have previously examined industrial relations in the Royal Mail (see for example, Martinez Lucio et al., 1997; Gall, 2003; Beale, 2003; Beale and Mustchin, 2013). While these all largely examine the impact of market-driven change upon postal workers, none have really done by way of such an intimate account of the informal and not just formal ways in which workers view and respond to this. This echoes the sentiments of Wall (2006) who notes that the freedom of a researcher to speak as a player in a research project and to mingle his or her

experience with the experience of those studied is precisely what is needed to move inquiry and knowledge further along.

At a practical level, the author's biography was of great benefit to the fieldwork process itself. The researcher had worked for the Royal Mail for twenty-two years during which he had spent long periods first as a trade union activist followed by many years as a lay representative and later union official. As such the researcher had a comprehensive understanding of workplace layouts, senior officials and key activists in all the sites under research. Added to this was an awareness of the local workplace histories and the long-standing traditions and micro-politics of each workplace. As such, he was better informed than most on both the nature and extent of illicit and informal practices that had historically been carried out beneath the waterline and the methods through which theses were maintained. It should be borne in mind here that the latter part of the researcher's employment was one of poor worker-manager relations and considerable workplace and area-wide unrest. This was to culminate in an indefinite strike over restructuring and the researcher's compulsory transfer to another Royal Mail site some forty miles away. The author was ever mindful of both the accusations of bias that such a situation might invite and the lack of systematicity and methodological rigor that is sometimes associated with auto-ethnography (Wall, 2006: 155). It was vital therefore that this subjective method of analysis formed part of a wider case study approach to which the focus now turns.

The case study and industrial relations research:

According to Kitay and Callus, the on-going popularity of the case study in the field of industrial relations research reflects its suitability as a method which provides explanations and understandings of complex social phenomena (1998: 101). Since industrial relations deals with values and perceptions as well as objective facts, it requires access to a range of information sources which help to make sense of the subjective elements of social and economic life. While case studies do not inherently contain several research methods, they often require that researchers make use of more than one, and often many different research methods (ibid.: 101-3). The appropriateness of the case study to this particular study becomes clearer when the following is considered; this

study's focus with how different workgroups within an industry covered by a nationally prescribed terms and conditions might react in various ways to the pressures of modernisation means that there is a particular interest in how specific context might influence worker action. However, Yin (2003: 3) reminds us that the inclusion of context as a major part of a study raises challenges especially since the richness of context means that the study must rely on multiple sources of evidence. The case study is a research strategy therefore, which often uses techniques which include semi-and unstructured interviews, archival work, questionnaire surveys and observation (Kitay and Callus, 1998: 103). It can be an effective means to cover both a particular phenomenon and the context in which the phenomenon is occurring (Yin, 1998: 31). The nature of the case study and its position and value within the wider field of industrial relations research will now be considered.

Hyman (1994: 170) argues that the bulk of writing and teaching in industrial relations has traditionally been empirical in character. Empiricism here may be defined as the assertion that what is presented as fact rests (or should rest) exclusively on empirical evidence, and that what is presented as theory is (or should be) derived from and reducible to propositions of an empirical nature. It is this tradition of empiricism based upon multi-disciplinary research, heavily reliant on fieldwork case studies, observations and interviews that have historically provided insight into obscure areas of industrial interest such as workplace bargaining processes (Brown and Wright, 1994: 154). Writing as long ago as 1917, Webb and Webb, in their account of *Methods of Social Study*, prescribe an approach towards workplace relations which would appear to lend itself to the employment of case study research and its means of understanding complex social phenomena (Kitay and Callus, 1998: 101). As Webb and Webb (1932: 136) note, empirical studies, such as those like Schloss' investigation of workplace payment systems, necessitate the close observation of the unit of analysis by the interviewer, and sensitivity and awareness of the facts gleaned from interviewee within a process that benefits from the first-hand experience of the researcher as opposed to the 'mere pondering of second hand ideas' (ibid.: 223). Brown and Wright note that this powerful empirical tradition, whilst tending to ebb and flow in more recent years, has involved researchers using techniques that have tried to explore the balance of transactional employment

relationships and their meaning to the actors involved. They have done so by dealing closely with them, by 'talking to the data' and by attempting to relate bargaining relationships to the broader structure of societal power (1994: 154).

Despite its undoubted merits, there has, within the field of industrial relations been a shift away from empirically based, qualitative research in recent times (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000: 145; Brown and Wright, 1994). The trend towards what are regarded as more quantitative methods of research such as surveys are more macro-level in focus and have more latterly involved the application of advanced statistical methods for analysing workplace issues (Cully and Marginson, 1995: 1). According to Brown and Wright (1994: 154) statistical techniques, such as the workplace survey, have in some areas significantly advanced our understanding of the employment relationship. Indeed, such techniques have a tradition stretching back from the Donovan Commission to contemporary WIRS and WERS surveys and share the common aspiration to provide a detailed factual account of workplace industrial relations which is nationally representative (Cully and Marginson, 1995: 1). However, Whitfield and Strauss argue that there is a danger that an over-emphasis on analytical rigour by a more quantitative approach may carry the risk of shifting focus away from the importance of cultural and environmental influences upon industrial relations and the causal mechanisms that may link these (2000: 148).

It has been argued that the on-going trend towards a more quantitative approach within industrial relations research in recent years is based on greater discipline orientation. This has been influenced, in part, by a desire amongst industrial relations researchers to increase the field's academic standing (ibid.: 147). Accompanying this shift in approach has been a shift in focus brought about by the radically changing labour market context of the 1980s and the consequent reduction in trade union influence in the workplace (Brown and Wright, 1994: 160-1). The diminishing numbers of researchers engaged in workplace bargaining have, if anything, tended to focus on management behaviour as the prime influence in workplace bargaining (Guest and Conway, 1999: 367; Brown and Wright, 1994: 160). However, this study's central area of interest is shopfloor relations between Royal Mail management and workgroups some of which, as a number of recent studies have indicated (see Beale and Mustchin, 2013; Beirne, 2013; Beale; 2003; Gall; 2003), have continued to exercise considerable workplace influence over the regulation

of work. Indeed, a brief glance at some of the contested issues which have given rise to local and national postal disputes in recent times (see Lyddon, 2009) suggests the existence of control mechanisms such as 'job and finish' and task demarcation that are reminiscent of period in industrial relations which for Brown and Wright signified the high tide of empirical workplace research (1994: 158). Its success during this period in providing insight into strike-proneness, shop steward activity and restrictive practices renders an empirical approach based on a series of qualitative case studies as the most suitable means of gaining insight into the micro-level process of change and worker resistance within the context of Royal Mail workplaces.

The decision to focus upon the workplace as the main unit of analysis gains further support from Cully and Marginson who view the establishment as the best locus from which to analyse the variety of industrial relations practices that go on within organisations (1995: 8). In the case of Royal Mail, Gall's 2003 study of militancy amongst postal workers highlights that, although affected generally by a commonality of issues, workgroups within Royal Mail have tended to react differently in terms of effecting strike action and that this has been dependent upon a variety of context-specific factors such as management's approach and its interaction with the union, the nature of task, workplace size and tradition. These differences have arguably been accentuated more recently by an increase in devolved bargaining (see the Pay and Modernisation Agreement 2007 and BT Agreement 2010) and a raft of managerial-driven Employee Involvement initiatives such as the World Class Mails programme (WCM) which seek localised involvement of staff and their representatives in the pursuit of greater efficiency savings (see Beirne, 2013). The capacity of some localised workgroups to resist and, moreover, reshape these initiatives (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 17) and the continued yet uneven incidence of local action again highlight the need for a qualitative, comparative and in-depth mode of enquiry.

Research Settings

This study's original research question necessitated the analysis and comparison of a number of Royal Mail workplaces which varied in terms size, nature of production, geographical location and age. This, along with availability of access, formed the basis for the selection of four workplaces which were to comprise a series of case studies. Every

effort was made to ensure that the workplaces under investigation provided a broadly representative sample of those which make up Royal Mail's letter network. In terms of its delivery and collection of mails operation Royal Mail employs some 150,000 staff throughout the UK in a large number of workplaces that are located in a range of town, urban and rural settings. The main aspects of postal work that are carried out by workers within the area of Royal Mail under analysis are mail delivery, mail processing (or sorting) and mail distribution. As an occupational group, postal workers have traditionally been densely unionised and highly active (Jenkins et al., 2002: 81) although there are considerable intra-workplace variation with regard to the latter (see Gall, 2003). The industry's main union, the CWU (Communication Workers Union), has proved remarkably resilient to the damaging effects of liberalisation experienced by postal workers within many other EU countries (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 2-3). The workplaces that were investigated were all located in the CWU Midlands region. The details of those interviewed can be found in Appendix 1 of this thesis.

The Mail Centre Context

In recent years Royal Mail has increasingly concentrated its sorting and distribution operation into large Mail Centres. These are typically located on green-field sites close to the motorway and in spacious buildings designed for accommodating the latest mail processing technology (Jenkins et al., 2002: 87). The shift in mode of production by Royal Mail has been associated with an upsurge in new managerial HRM-based initiatives central to which has been the increasing use of temporal and part time employment. Consequently, postal workers employed within these new workplaces have expressed feelings of job insecurity, creeping casualisation and a loss of occupational identity (ibid.: 98). New greenfield purpose built workplaces have replaced and contrast starkly with more traditional mail processing centres which have been typified as being situated in urban settings and containing more manual based work processes involving large groups of people with extensive knowledge of the postal code system. Here, work allocation has tended to be rigidly determined by length of service with the local union exercising strict limits as to the numbers and use of temporary and part time work (ibid.: 89-93). The transferral of many workgroups from traditional to green-field sites is representative of Royal Mail's strategy of geographically consolidating mail operations at the expense (and

closure) of smaller regional processing centres (ibid.: 88). This renders such workplaces as fertile terrain in which to examine the effects of modernisation upon worker action. Moreover, given the tradition of strong workplace organisation within the Royal Mail such a context allows insight into what for the wider field of industrial relations constitutes a rather unique area study; how pre-organised groups of workers respond to new working environments that have a long association with anti-collectivist initiatives including flexible and team working, continuous training and direct communication (Hallier and Leopold, 1996: 47). It follows that an important element of this study's fieldwork involved in-depth qualitative investigation into two such green field sites which are outlined below. This was carried out through the medium of two individual case studies.

Mail Centre 1

This Mail Centre was approximately ten years old and situated on a modern industrial estate in the Midlands. This was roughly one mile from the city centre which had been the site of the previous processing centre which it had replaced and for the purposes of this research it will be referred to as Mail Centre 1. Around 600 workers were employed here of which around 75% were full time employees with the remaining 25% being part time. Both of these categories of workgroups also contained a number of temporary workers. Union membership stood at around 95% and many workers had lengthy service meaning that they had transferred to Mail Centre 1 from the old processing centre in the city centre. Whilst the workplace had, under Royal Mail's modernisation agenda, been subject to a number of (voluntary) job losses, more recently new work that had been consolidated from another regional processing centre had been brought in and was accompanied by displaced workers from this site. In terms of its core operations, the delivery, distribution and processing of mail all took place on site with each having its own functionally assigned group of workers. Whilst mail delivery had its own 'stand-alone' work area, the processing operation took place in a large open plan workspace furnished with the latest mail processing technology. The work area itself could be described as light and spacious resembling that of a modern warehouse type workplace. Although separated from their colleagues in the delivery operation, employees in the processing and distribution functions often came into contact with one another during the course of the working day. Whilst historically industrial relations here had been relatively cordial,

increasing levels of shopfloor conflict had led to workers staging a workplace 'sit-in' only a few days before fieldwork began. Research here focussed upon those workers that were employed in the distribution and processing functions.

Mail Centre 2

This workplace was also situated in the Midlands and was around 1 mile from a busy city centre being recently built and operational for around 3 years. It was the product of the amalgamation of 3 traditional processing workplaces which had respectively been situated throughout a 30-mile radius. Each of these previous workplaces had in the past been regarded as militant and had all at various times displayed a capacity for both unofficial and strike action both on a local and national level. The workplace itself housed around 700 staff and like Mail Centre 1 was responsible for the core functions of mail processing, collection and delivery. As with Mail Centre 1 the bulk of work took place within a modern warehouse type setting in which indoor processing staff would interact with one another and their distribution colleagues throughout the course of the day. Here again the Delivery Office operation was a stand-alone unit with its own managers, designated workers and their union reps. The amalgamation of workplaces had meant that many of the three different groups of workers who had followed the work into the new workplace were now under a different Branch whose senior officials were based a significant distance from this new workplace. Mail centre 2 was situated in a relatively affluent area which had created number of resourcing difficulties in an industry that has historically experienced recruitment problems. While a number of local stewards were fully released from their everyday duties to carry out their union role, unlike Mail Centre 1, they could not be termed as Branch officials.

The Delivery Office Context

The migration of considerable numbers of Royal Mail's existing staff from well-organised traditional processing centres to green-field sites then points to the shopfloor in the latter of these workplaces as a potential locale for contestation and therefore an important area of research interest. These developments are, however, not exclusive to Royal Mail's processing and distribution operations being part of a wider modernisation agenda that has extended to the reform of work processes and practices within its delivery offices.

Here reform has focused upon greater efficiency gains through increased workloads (Gall, 2003: 154) and managerial challenges to local arrangements such as 'job and finish'- itself being one aspect of 92 alleged 'Spanish Practices' identified and increasingly contested by Royal Mail. This has resulted in relatively high levels of localised action which has in recent times culminated in 2 national disputes (Lyddon, 2009: 325). However, national disputes notwithstanding, strike propensity amongst Royal Mail delivery offices has tended to vary, with some workplaces never having taken industrial action of their own accord, some having done so infrequently and others frequently (Gall, 2003: 149, 157). Whilst Gall notes, the actuality of strikes within the Royal Mail depends upon the different positions and actions of local management, the local union and their interaction (ibid.: 149) the localised nature of much of the recent action within the Royal Mail points to significant intra-area differences. Workplaces within a given branch under the jurisdiction of the same cadre of managers often react differently to a uniform set of initiatives within the context of the wider modernisation agenda. This again suggests that while there is an undoubted tradition of mobilisation amongst postal workers much action within the industry is context specific. Robust research into to such a situation requires a method of investigation that is sensitive to the values and perceptions of the actors involved. In practice this took the form of a case study approach which, as Kitay and Callus note, can be deployed to provide a wide range of informational sources that assist with an understanding of the subjective elements of social and economic life (1998: 101). Again, as with the research into mail centres, attention focussed upon 2 Royal Mail delivery depots. Whilst the first of these had a history of militancy and activism the second can be characterised as densely unionised but largely inactive.

Delivery Office 1

This was situated on an industrial estate in the Midlands some 3 miles from a city centre. The building was around 12 years old and had replaced an older delivery office that was half a mile away. All existing staff at the time had moved into what was a purpose built office with work processes, which centred around the delivery of mails, on transfer remaining the same. Approximately 85 workers were employed here of which around 65 were full time and 20 part-time. A small number of these, as with all staff employed in recent times by Royal Mail, had begun work on a temporary basis and were subsequently

awaiting the opportunity of substantive employment. Union density stood at around 80% amounting to a significant decrease from some 4 years earlier when it stood at 100%. The office had a history of strong trade unionism with workers exercising significant levels of shopfloor control over the organisation of workloads, overtime levels and local working practices. From the mid-2000s onwards workers at Delivery Office 1 had taken, even by the postal services' standards, high amounts of both official and unofficial strike action. Industrial relations had throughout this period been fraught and subject to series of high profile investigations by both Royal Mail and the CWU. A number of long-serving union officials and activists had within the last few years left the organisation through either voluntary redundancy or in some cases disciplinary-based dismissals.

Delivery Office 2

Although situated in a rural setting that was some 12 miles away from the nearest city, Delivery Office 2 came under the same regional managerial structure as Delivery Office 1 and was part of the same branch of the CWU. The workplace was around 70 years old and had historically attracted workers almost exclusively from within the surrounding town or its environs. As recently as the early 1980s workers here, like those in other rural delivery offices at the time, had their own independent branch that was later dismantled as part of the CWU national restructuring exercise (Gall, 2003: 143-4). Approximately 60 employees worked in Delivery Office 2 of which around 45 were full time with the other 15 being part time. Again, at the time that fieldwork was carried out a number of these were employed on a temporary basis and seeking substantive employment. Whilst the office had taken part in national and area-wide industrial action, at a local level it had historically been moderate and comparatively inactive. Nevertheless, union density was high standing at around 90% with a well-established local union presence**.**

Access

As Burgess notes, gaining access is an essential phase in the research process; it is a prerequisite and precondition for research to be conducted (1984: 45) and in its broadest sense involves gaining permission to do a piece of research in a particular social setting (ibid, 38). In recent years, significant industrial unrest and on-going managerial challenges to strong well organised workplace trade unionism has attracted considerable academic

interest (see for example Gall, 2003; Beale, 2003; Martinez-Lucio et al., 2000; Jenkins et al., 2002) regarding industrial relations within the Royal Mail. This has helped shed light on important phenomena such as the nature and dynamics of industrial action and resistance among postal workers (Gall, 2003; Beale, 2003) management strategy in the context of marketization (Martinez-Lucio et al., 2000), and gender segregation within the postal industry (Jenkins et al., 2002). In the case of Martinez et al. (2000) and Jenkins et al. (2002), access to the area under investigation provided considerable scope for face-to-face interviews across a range of workplaces. More latterly however, studies by Beirne (2013) and Beale and Mustchin (2013), undertaken at a time of increasing sensitivity towards rationalisation and commercial confidentiality along with growing tensions in workplace industrial relations within the Royal Mail, have suggested certain difficulties in securing access to detailed on-site investigation.

The majority of this study's fieldwork took place against the backdrop of a national dispute over pay and the potential shape of post-privatisation work relations between Royal Mail and its workforce. Consequently, tensions were high and manifested in initial managerial caution regarding access to local workplaces. This meant that in terms of the delivery offices that were analysed, the choice of workplace (Delivery Offices 1 and 2 were situated in an area in which there were in excess of 10 delivery units) was in some ways shaped by the researcher's prior relationship with local management and their willingness to allow access. This was requested through informal meetings with the management in question after the respective workplace representatives had carried out some initial 'sounding out'. Similarly, initial requests for access to the 2 Mail Centres were carried out through the medium of local officials who again paved the way for what were largely informal meetings in which the research objectives and area of study were spelled out. Local representatives and officials might here be referred to as carrying out a gatekeeper role in that they had a certain degree of power to grant access to people or situations (Burgess, 1984: 48), what proved particularly important was their role in providing access to local workers.

Once permission was granted to undertake fieldwork in delivery offices 1 and 2 respectively, there was little difficulty in gaining access to both ordinary workers (some of which were activists) and trade union representatives. Research further benefited from

management's general ease with, and permission for, some interviewing and observation to take place directly on the shopfloor during working time. Additional access was granted in both of these workplaces to their respective canteen, restroom, smoking and loading bay areas. While the focus of the interviews was that of shopfloor workers, freedom to observe and access to a variety of workplace areas provided some limited insight into how management themselves interacted with workers and the methods through which they sought to communicate both local and wider organisational objectives. In sum, delivery offices 1 and 2 can be characterised as providing a research-friendly environment that was conducive to the collection of a range of rich data through the medium of a qualitative research approach that sought to investigate problems in their natural setting (Whipp, 1998: 56).

In the case of Mail Centre 1, whilst the nature of access provided opportunities to observe the working processes and shopfloor layout, interviews, whilst carried out on site, took place away from the main work area. Again, access to both union reps and workers was reasonably easy to obtain, restrictions around access to the shopfloor itself however, narrowed the opportunity to observe direct managerial interaction with shopfloor staff. Interviews with trade union officials tended to take place in the local union room which was situated on the first floor of the site and overlooked the shopfloor. Shopfloor workers were interviewed in a workplace learning centre that was ostensibly regulated by both management and the CWU in the spirit of 'partnership'. In reality however, this was the exclusive preserve of workers and the union and a place where management rarely if ever visited. Again, as with Delivery Offices 1 and 2, Mail Centre 1 enabled the collection of a range of rich and qualitative data. However, initial conversations with local representatives and interviewees revealed that, due to the recent industrial action tensions between management and workers were high and that on that basis requests for greater research access to the shopfloor itself should not be progressed. Finally, when it came to Mail Centre 2, interviews with union representatives and shopfloor staff were largely conducted within the local union's office which was on-site. This was supplemented by a number of separate periods of shopfloor observation on the part of the researcher.

Research Methods

Although Whipp's identification of qualitative methods as being appropriately suited for studies of culture, power and change (1998: 59) bodes well for its use in this study's investigation into the meanings and action of workers in relation to workplace change, he notes that it is associated with three main problems. These relate firstly to their concern with the particular, at the expense of the general, meaning that findings are limited in terms of providing a reliable base from which to generalise. Secondly, much theory within qualitative research emerges from the evidence collected and is sometimes the result of 'creative leaps' (Eisenhardt, 1989: 553). These leaps are not always fully reported, or they arise from a process of constant iteration between theory, data, and relevant literatures that are not written up in publication. Such research is more difficult for other authors to replicate (Whipp, 1998: 57). Thirdly, given that many qualitative techniques rely on in-depth investigation of research issues, the subsequent immersion of the researcher can result in questions around transparency. How data was collected, catalogued and analysed is often explained only briefly in final reports leaving other academics to speculate on how the results were achieved (ibid.: 58). In order, therefore, to strengthen both the internal validity (as in how far the researcher's presence might influence the generation of data) and external validity (which refers to the whether the data that are obtained in studying one situation can be generalised to other situations) of this study's findings, triangulation of research methods was attempted (Burgess, 1984: 144).

Interviewing

In its broadest sense, an interview is a purposeful discussion between two people, and can help gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to research questions and objectives (Saunders et al., 2009: 318). Interviews themselves may be highly formalised and structured using standard questions for each research participant, unstructured which are informal with no pre-determined list of questions or semi structured in which the researcher has a list of themes and questions to be covered but which may vary from interview to interview (ibid.: 320). Burgess argues that few researchers undertaking sociologically-based investigation have followed a structured approach preferring to use an unstructured or semi-structured style which gives informants the opportunities to

develop their answers outside the structured format (1984: 101-2). In terms of its relevance to the field of industrial relations research, Burgess points to the subject's early pioneers the Webbs, who recognised the value of informal style conversation in providing rich detailed data that could be used alongside other materials (ibid.). This viewpoint is echoed by Whipp who goes on to add that when used in a qualitative capacity the interview not only provides scope for detailed and vivid accounts of events and processes, its flexibility also enables the researcher to open up new dimensions of a problem or to discover clues that connect its different elements (1998: 54). The nature of such an approach rendered it a central research method of this study and its concern with the social processes through which postal workers come to perceive and react to managerial-driven change.

As qualitative methods of investigation, semi and unstructured interviews (in addition to questions of reliability and validity such as those discussed above) can also be open to charges of bias on the part of the interviewer. As Saunders et al. note, this is when the comments tone or non-verbal behaviour of the interviewer creates bias in the way that interviewees respond. This may extend to the way the interviewer interprets the responses of interviewees (2009: 326). In the case of this study, the researcher had spent many years working for the Royal Mail before leaving in 2009 and had been active in both local branch and workplace trade unionism. This had involved general activism before holding office in a number of branch positions. The latter part of this period can be characterised as one of poor worker-manager relations and considerable workplace and area-wide unrest. This was to culminate in an indefinite strike over restructuring and the researcher's compulsory transfer to another Royal Mail site some forty miles away.

In light of the above, there was an acute sensitivity throughout this study that researcher-bias may well be inevitably present within the process of social research (Allen, 1971: 3). As such the construction and design of the interview schedule sought to minimise subjectivity. Thus, interviews were compiled by using a series of factual questions relating to technological and structural change within Royal Mail workplaces. Here every attempt was made to maintain consistency and reduce ambiguity by asking interviewees to provide concrete examples relating to their answers. This formed the basis for what were effectively guided conversations which allowed for the interviewees views to flow

naturally around the main topics that were covered. Throughout this semi-structured style of interviewing considerable care was taken to ensure the avoidance of 'leading' questions.

The choice of a semi-structured interview model was also influenced by the nature of production both in Delivery Offices and Mail Centres along with the wider pressures of modernisation within the Royal Mail at the time. Delivery Office work involves (before actual delivery) the sorting and preparing of mail by postal workers for their respective deliveries. Despite management's ease with the researcher's presence, from the workers' perspective, time spent away from these processes, as in this case being interviewed, delays the time that they finish work. Alternatively, although the nature of work within Mail Centres is less hurried (the practice of 'job and finish' is more difficult to actualise here), shopfloor layout renders workers much more visible to managerial scrutiny in terms of time spent not working. Additionally, workers here are often 'tied' to machine-based, or production line type tasks (see Gall, 2003: 158). In both contexts managerial concern with disruption to production has been heightened in recent times by efficiency-based cuts to staff numbers. In such circumstances, which were compounded by time-bound access of no more than five days of research per office, the lengthier method of the unstructured interview was, despite its many benefits, deemed regrettably unfeasible.

In practice, interviews present the researcher with a number of practical problems and call for a range of social skills. As Sutcliffe (1999: 146) notes, more qualitative types of interview often generate large amounts of data the quality of which will often be dependent upon the extent to which the behaviour is faithfully recorded. Operationally, the interviewer's dual role of questioner and reporter can make accurate recording difficult meaning that some researchers seek to record observations through the use of a second person (note-taker) or the medium of a tape recorder. However, the quality of any interview is dependent upon the interviewer both gaining the respondent's confidence and ensuring that they are supportive of the interview from the outset (Whipp, 1998: 54; Sutcliffe, 1998: 146). Whilst the first of these measures was not appropriate to an individual doctoral thesis, the second demands a high level of initial trust and may lead respondents to feel uncomfortable (Friedman and McDaniel, 1998:

124; Sutcliffe, 1999: 146). As such, it was decided that the interviews in all workplaces would be manually taken in note form. Furthermore, any potential for initial suspicion by respondents to the interview and observation processes was minimised by the local union's endorsement of the fieldwork and the researcher's trade union background.

The length of workplace interviews varied and ranged from around 25 to 35 minutes for those that were carried out on the shopfloor, through to 40 to 50 minutes for those which took place in canteens and restrooms. Selection of the interview setting here was based on the availability and location of the interviewees themselves. A total of 15 interviews were carried out in Delivery Office 2 and in Mail Centre 1 and 2 whilst 16 people were interviewed in Delivery Office 1. Outside of the workplace, interviews with five local Branch Officials averaged at around one hour, during which respondents were encouraged to broaden their answers with regard to how they have viewed change within the wider context of their respective branches and regions (all details of those officials interviewed can be found in appendix one). Given that these latter interviews were conducted on union premises with respondents who enjoyed fully paid facility time, the greater demands in terms of time did not present difficulties. Whilst it may be argued that the shopfloor interviews were themselves, due to operational constraints, a little short, they formed part of a broader research strategy which also included the method of non-participant observation. As Sutcliffe notes this has been a relatively common means of research within the field of industrial relations (1999: 142).

Observation

Whilst the nature of access in Mail Centres 1 and 2 limited scope for direct observation, fewer restrictions in both Delivery Offices 1 and 2 created a favourable climate in which to observe worker behaviour at workplace level. This was invaluable to a study that seeks to understand the social processes through workers mediate and shape change within the context of the shopfloor. As Edwards (2010: 42) notes, systematic observation can reveal important information about the nature of work tasks and other key issues such as the ways in which managerial controls are deployed. Batstone et al. (1977: 13), in their study of worker action within a factory setting, regarded such an approach as the most appropriate as a research method which sought a high degree of flexibility and the

maximum collection of rich social data. Whilst they go on to note that this can often be a lengthy process which includes periods spent learning about the situation which one is observing (ibid,), it is worth pointing out that the researcher's previous working biography compensated for the fieldwork's time constraints. In this sense, prior on the job knowledge of production processes and what were standard workplace layouts meant that information could be comprehended and assimilated quite quickly.

Further opportunities to observe worker behaviour came in the form of access to rest room, canteen, smoking and (in delivery offices 1 and 2) loading bay areas. This was informal in nature and-given that these areas were largely exclusive to workers, provided access to worker opinions and behaviours that might not always find expression on the shopfloor and the closer proximity of management. For Collinson (1992: 136-7, 149), areas like these constitute back regions that are free from the coercive constraints of management in which workers resist managerial objectives through the appropriation of time and space. Access here therefore added significantly to the quality of research and brought into light an important area of shopfloor 'under life' (Goffman, 1961) which the interview process itself would have missed.

Outside of the immediate parameters of the workplace, the researcher also attended and observed a number of 'gate meetings' which, as their name suggests, took place outside individual workplaces and a number of Area union meetings. Research into the gate meetings extended to eight out of the twelve separate workplaces which came under the jurisdiction of the parent branch of Delivery Offices 1 and 2 (see table 6.1 below).

Table 6.1: Attendance at Gate Meetings

Delivery Office	Total Number of staff in workplace	Total of workgroup in attendance	% of workgroup in attendance
D.O. 1	85	60	70%
D.O. 2	60	33	55%
D.O. 3	173	97	56%
D.O. 4	65	32	49%
D.O. 5	35	28	80%
D.O. 6	63	42	66%
D.O. 7	151	87	57%

Each meeting lasted for approximately forty minutes. They were addressed by the Branch Secretary and Full time Official who sought to secure a 'yes' vote for forthcoming national industrial action.

The meetings themselves provided the opportunity to evaluate worker reactions to proposed change that may not have been picked up in the more constrained setting of their workplaces. Since they were called in relation to the prospect of taking forthcoming industrial reaction, the meetings were a particularly valuable means of accurately gauging the effects of an employer counter-mobilization strategy that had become apparent during the fieldwork. In terms of the Area union meetings, the researcher attended 5 of these over an 18-month period. This too enhanced the quality of research since it was a forum in which, union representatives and senior officials could articulate their opinions in an environment that was free from managerial scrutiny. Throughout the observation process the researcher wrote consistently-even when no information needed to be recorded. It was hoped that this continuity of writing might minimize the obtrusive nature of note taking (Friedman and McDaniel, 1998: 124), and at the same time counter problems of artificiality of the subject's behaviour (Sutcliffe, 1999: 143). Despite these measures the researcher remained sensitive to problems of reliability and validity that are associated with an over-reliance on observation as a research method (ibid.). In addition to the use of semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation, therefore, research was carried out via the analysis of documentary evidence.

Royal Mail and CWU Documentation

As an organisation Royal Mail produces regular journals which outline to employees the company policies, projects and aims. One particular off-shoot of the organisation's main monthly employee magazine is a monthly pamphlet which updates staff on an on-going, and in many cases controversially regarded initiative called the World Class Mails programme (see Beirne, 2013). Access to these sources, which are national in scope, provided the researcher with an insight into the wider industrial relations developments within the Royal Mail and off-set, to a degree, the study's worker-centred focus. Attention also focused upon national documentation generated by the Communication Workers Union in the form of a monthly journal. These were supplemented by a limited

amount of local level documentation in the form of briefings and internal bulletins generated by both the CWU and Royal Mail. In addition to these sources, fieldwork also drew on a number of national level agreements between the CWU and Royal Mail. These included the BT Agreement 2010, Business Transformation and World Class Mails Agreement 2012 and Agenda for Growth Stability and Long Term Success 2014. The researcher was mindful that every document that one encounters during fieldwork is a socially constructed piece in itself bearing certain values and assumptions (Patmore, 1998: 219-221). The analysis of documentation here from both parties helped to ensure a level of balance to the research process.

Reliability and Validity

This study's research strategy took the form of a multi method approach which involves combining a range of techniques for collecting and analysing data to address a research framework (Rossman and Wilson, 1994: 315). It was hoped that this, along with the decision to focus upon 4 individual workplaces would maximise the validity and reliability of what was small scale study carried out by one researcher who had previously worked and been an active trade unionist within the area under study. Buchanan (1999: 153-7) notes that such an approach is referred to as methodological triangulation which helps to corroborate findings and enables researchers to draw on data which might yield different insights into the subject matter whilst improving the quality of data collected. A focus on and comparative analysis of a number of workplaces sought to gauge the level to which the study's findings might be 'representative' and 'generalizable' (Gardner, 1999: 58) with regard to the modernisation process of the wider postal industry.

It is important at this stage to bear in mind that in addition to being small in terms of its scale, the study's focus was narrower in workplace focus than would have been desired. In particular, fieldwork only yielded limited first-hand insight into the actual actions and thoughts of management within the workplaces studied. Greater access to management in this respect would for example have enhanced understanding of a central theme of this thesis- the dynamic way in which workplace regulation is played out between workers and managers (Goodrich, 1920), whilst bringing greater validity and reliability to its conclusions. In a similar vein, the nature of access and the gate keeping role of the initial

contacts in both Mail Centres meant that only a handful of non-unionised workers were interviewed. In both delivery offices, historical problems arising out of non-member complaints about union harassment resulted in a similar situation. Whilst non-union members may form only a small minority of workers within Royal Mail, greater representation in the fieldwork process would have been beneficial. This could have added clearer insight into how such workers might perceive workplace change whilst again adding to the research's validity and representativeness of the wider group of workers under study.

The worker-centred focus of this study and its theoretical framework clearly has implications for its reliability. Had the study adopted a more managerial unitary-based perspective through which to view the area of study, then some of the data may have been interpreted somewhat differently. For example, there was a commonly held belief amongst workers in Delivery Office 1 that Royal Mail had sacked the office's nucleus of representatives in order to pave the way for the introduction of more flexible working practices and greater efficiency. A more unitary approach might have viewed this as evidence of workers struggling to adapt to rapid change and in doing so misinterpreting what amounted to the removal by management of recalcitrant workers who had bullied their work colleagues. However, data gathered from both Mail Centres 1 and 2 highlighted similar Royal Mail tactics resulting in the removal of key workers ostensibly for a range of reasons ranging from breaches of attendance, which itself is privy to an extent of managerial discretion, through to alleged (and completely unsubstantiated) bad language. Conversely, there were other accounts of non-active and in some cases non-unionised workers engaging in similar substantiated actions that were largely overlooked by management. The consistency of findings here suggests that whilst the study's theoretical framework undoubtedly influenced the manner in which fieldwork was interpreted, it did not compromise its reliability.

Further support for the reliability and validity of this study can be garnered from a range of recent academic research into modernisation of the wider public sector. For example, the increasing lack of control over their respective labour processes, work intensification and heightened feelings of job insecurity reported by workers in all of the case studies which inform the following chapter, mirror those of other employees subject to public

sector modernisation identified by authors including Worrall et al., (2009), Ruane (2007) and Grimshaw and Hebson (2005). Similarly, interviewee accounts of the growing prevalence of a more unitary style of supervision within all four workplaces resembles trends in other areas of the public sector in which, amongst other things, managerial concern with the right to manage, the implementation of explicit measurements of performance, and workforce flexibility has according to Massey and Pyper, become a permanent feature of the very process of modernisation (2005: 37). The impact of this has been met at times by the workers under study with immediate stoppages and walk-outs that is untypical of those within the wider public sector. However, research by both Beale and Mustchin (2013) and Gall (2003) point to such action as being common and thus a representative and reliable indication of worker behaviour within the Royal Mail.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused upon the value of case study research as a method of investigation within the field of industrial relations and its applicability to this study's investigation of four individual Royal Mail depots. Yin notes that the case study is a suitable means of gaining insight into a particular phenomenon and the context within which the phenomenon was occurring (2003: 31). This deems such an approach, therefore, as appropriate to a study that's central concern is to understand how workers respond and react back to managerial-driven workplace change. While meaningful examination of the workplaces in question calls for considerable time amongst the workers at shopfloor level, the general industrial relations environment and, initially, the researcher's previous role within the industry meant that access was more restricted than would have been desirable. This is recognised as a potential weakness as is the possibility of bias arising out of the researcher's previous role within the industry. Every attempt was made to remedy this by triangulation involving the use of more than one method of enquiry in arriving at conclusion.

This study is by no means as comprehensive and as in-depth as earlier analyses that focus upon the complex and dynamic nature of worker organisation and resistance specifically within a local workplace setting (see, for example, Lupton, 1963; Batstone et al., 1978; and Beynon, 1973). Nor could it hope to compare in terms of attention to historical,

occupational and socio-political detail with that of commentators such as Gall (2003) and Batstone et al. (1984) who focus in particular on industrial relations within the Royal Mail. It does however, provide a contemporary insight into the manner in which a group of well-organised public service workers might react to and make sense of change that serves to threaten traditional working methods and long-standing mechanisms of job control. That this has been carried out during a period in which the industry in question has been subject to unprecedented levels of commercialisation and eventual privatisation renders its findings as a useful extension of earlier studies which could only predict the impact of full marketization upon relations within the Royal Mail. In a wider sense, the study makes a small contribution to academic concern with the impact of modernisation upon work relations within the public services and, in particular how, workers seek to mediate its effects upon their labour process within the context of the shopfloor. It is to these issues that we now turn.

Chapter Seven: Modernisation and workplace industrial relations - findings from four case studies

This chapter discusses the findings from four separate workplace investigations into how workers react to managerial-driven change within the context of the on-going marketization of the Royal Mail. Attention here focuses on the impact of management approach, new forms of technology, increasing non-standard forms of employment and the growth in Employee Involvement initiatives (Beale and Mustchin, 2013) on the frontier of control in each of the workplaces in question. This involves an evaluation of action at the locale of the shopfloor itself and the ways in which such pressures might be mediated by both collective and individual worker agency.

The researcher has at times here drawn upon his own work experience and prior knowledge of the research sites to illuminate both the nature and degree of change that has taken place in each workplace in recent years. This entailed time as a lay representative, branch official and branch organiser. Such a background provided prior in-depth knowledge of shopfloor life within the Royal Mail and a clear understanding of the state of workplace relations in each workplace as they stood some three years before this study. In line with Wall (2011), it is hoped that the freedom of the researcher to mingle his own experience here will help move inquiry and knowledge of contemporary shopfloor relations within a fully liberalised Royal Mail further along.

The dynamic and complex relationship between structure and agency is central to Edwards' (1988) analysis of patterns of conflict and accommodation which has been employed throughout as an analytical lens through which to understand the findings of this study. While this helps shed light on the different types of worker bargaining behaviour that variety of structural influences can help stimulate, it perhaps fails to adequately account for the case of Royal Mail where a set of relatively uniform industry-wide pressures have, as has been noted earlier, evoked a range of localised workgroup responses. Accordingly, attention has also focused on Batstone et al.'s (1977) workplace study of shop stewards in action. This has enhanced understanding of the subject matter through its investigation into the nature of workplace organisation and how this affects

worker behaviour. Together these form this study's analytical framework and have been discussed at length in chapter five.

Empirical evidence has indicated that although there remain important differences as to how workers meet managerial-driven change within each workplace, there are also certain similarities. This means that any meaningful understanding of what influences these phenomena must therefore take place within an analytical context that serves to facilitate a comparison of these workplaces and in particular their varying organisational and social characteristics. Accordingly, the findings gleaned from each workplace are grouped into two main thematic categories. These both fundamentally relate to this study's central question and for the purposes of analysis, fit within the overarching analytical framework of this study. The two categories in question are: the extent to which each workplace can be categorised as collective-militant, and the extent and nature of non-union based forms of individual and collective job controls in each workplace. These are outlined below and precede the main body of this study's findings. The findings themselves contain quotes from the respondents from each of the workplaces, the details of each respondent can be found in the study's appendices.

Structure of the findings

Extent to which each workplace can be categorised as collective-militant

This section examines the extent of union centred collective-militancy in each office and to what degree this has been affected by Royal Mail's on-going modernisation programme. This calls for a focus on two particular areas of worker behaviour. To begin with, attention will concentrate on the level of success that the local CWU have had in maintaining both formal and informal job controls within each of these workplaces in recent times. This will involve an evaluation of job discretion amongst local workers, and the extent to which they and their representatives have managed to collectively retain the significant levels of influence over both work allocation and wider working practices that have long been associated with postal workers (Gall, 2003: 29). Such a context provides a suitable setting in which to make analytical use of Edwards' (1988) study of patterns of conflict and accommodation. Of particular value here is the author's

investigation into the manner in which structural pressures similar to those emanating from modernisation, are themselves actively mediated by worker agency (ibid.: 211).

This leads on to the section's second area of investigation into worker behaviour. This is whether commitment to the CWU and further workplace union-centred organisation remains strong in the face of a set of managerial-driven initiatives which serve at least in part to win the hearts and minds of workers within the Royal Mail (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 17; Beirne, 2013:123). Thomas and Davies (2005: 685) point to a raft of studies which associate such strategies with the further objective of facilitating a managerial discourse which seeks to colonize workers' subjectivity thereby diluting worker opposition (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Townley, 1993; Willmott, 1993). However, it should be borne in mind that the acceptance of such initiatives is not inevitable. It has been argued elsewhere that shop stewards themselves can play a key role in influencing worker behaviour through their application of rules, the reaffirmation of dominant values and their capacity to invoke group sanctions (Batstone et al., 1977: 4).

It follows that an appreciation of the interrelationship between workers and the domestic trade union within each workplace under investigation will go some way towards providing an understanding of just how effective each workgroup has been in maintaining the collective levels of job discretion that have been associated with strong union-centred workgroup organisation. Here greater understanding is gleaned by way of Batstone et al.'s (1977) study of *Shop Stewards in Action* with its focus on the nature of shop steward leadership and how this relates to worker behaviour within the context of the shopfloor. Although first published in 1977 its comparative analysis of the impact of two contrasting models of shop steward organisation upon worker outlook, action and organisation renders it relevant to the study of contemporary industrial relations within the Royal Mail. As this study has pointed out, this has been an area where similar sets of structural conditions have evoked a variety of responses from workgroups (Gall, 2003) that fall outside Edward's (1988) more widely scoped and multi-occupational analysis of worker behaviour.

The extent and nature of non-union based forms of individual and collective job controls

This section examines the extent to which workers in each workplace have responded to market-driven change through both collective and individual non-union centred job controls. This phenomenon is again best understood within the context of Edwards' (1988) analysis of patterns of conflict and accommodation within the workplace. Of particular relevance here is a focus upon different modes of adjustment by workers and workgroups and the causes for this (ibid.: 194-197). Edwards goes onto identify a range of informal adaptations by individuals and workgroups who commonly lack the capacity, propensity or opportunity to collectively regulate things like the division of task, allocation of overtime and application of discipline. This approach provides a useful lens through which to examine the nature of non-unionised forms of behaviour within the workplaces under investigation. Such a focus additionally dovetails with the study's other thematic category in that it provides insight into how successful local unionism and the necessary membership loyalty and support upon which it relies have been in retaining influence over workplace change.

Section One: The extent to which each workplace can be categorised as collective militant

This section examines the extent to which each of the workplaces under investigation can be categorised as collective militant. This will involve an in-depth analysis of evidence gathered from each workplace which will then be drawn together to form an overall summary of the findings. To begin with attention will focus upon Delivery Office 1 and centre upon the study's choice of two key indicators of collective militancy that were discussed above, these are; firstly, the levels of success that the domestic union have had in maintaining both formal and informal job controls in recent times; and secondly, levels of worker and membership commitment to and identification with the CWU. This process will then be repeated with regard to Delivery Office 2 before moving on to Mail Centres 1 and 2 respectively. Attention in Mail Centres 1 and 2 is focused upon those workers who were involved in the processing and sortation of mail within the context of large new build factory type settings, along with a number of drivers who collected and transported

mail in and out of the workplace. Research into Delivery Office 1 and 2 was concerned with those workers who deliver mail both on foot and via delivery vans.

Delivery Office 1:

Extent of union-centred formal and informal job controls

Within its delivery office network Royal Mail were at the time at which the fieldwork was undertaken, at various stages of implementing a new set of national working practices that sought more efficient ways of working and subsequently a potential reduction in staff. This is indicative of developments within the wider public services where on-going reform has been introduced within general neo-liberal aspirations which focus on solving the public sector labour problem. This might be defined in terms of low productivity, restrictive working practices and by managers feeling unable to manage (Worrall et al., 2009: 118). The initiative itself was termed 'Delivery Methods' and had formed part of an overarching agreement on pay and modernisation between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union. The agreement provided for full union involvement and negotiation in its introduction at workplace level (BT Agreement 2010). Its implementation involved the use of a software package which sought to reroute and rationalise deliveries through satellite-based information of the local area based on agreed jointly agreed walking and driving speeds. This had become increasingly prevalent within the organisation in favour of the traditional 'rule of thumb' methods of planning.

Within Delivery Office 1, this had been fully introduced with the full involvement of the local CWU. Local representatives had haggled over and disputed much of the data that the software package and management had generated. In doing so they had achieved favourable time allocation for all outdoor tasks from driving vehicles, collection of mail business and sub Post Offices' and walking delivery rounds. This had been something of a drawn out process that had eventually been settled after being been progressed through the organisation's disputes procedure. The local representatives, like the vast majority of staff were, on the whole, reasonably pleased with its outcome. As one local rep in the office commented:

> *We have just completed a revision of all the duties under Delivery Methods and I think that 95% of our people are happy with the way that the jobs have panned out. Ok we had to go through the stages of disagreement which could have ultimately led to strike action to get there as the members were not prepared to accept any rubbish….. we think that we got a good deal* (Workplace Representative /OPG 13, Delivery Office1).

That the union locally were largely happy with the outcome of this should not detract from the potential threat that the initiative itself posed to established ways of working. Operationally, at least in theory, this equated to a reduction in delivery support jobs, a concomitant increase in the content of workload in remaining duties, and greater workforce flexibility (BT Agreement 2010:3). In practice, however, its implementation had resulted in no actual reduction in jobs, and a small reduction in scheduled overtime. Many workers did not really appear to be working much harder than they were prior to this change. Some said that they had noticed a bit of an increase but that this had been more down to an earlier national agreement some years earlier which had involved a national restructuring of delivery jobs from twice per day down to once.

The following responses capture what appeared to be the consensus amongst interviewees:

> *I haven't really noticed that much change in work since the last [BT 2010] agreement OK, you can't make as much time as you used to do these days and we are working a bit harder, I used to only work 5 hours a day. I can still make some time but not as much as before* (OPG 3 Delivery Office1); and

> *….BT 2010 hasn't really changed that much for us here….the big thing is that you can't get home as early as you used to be able to, it is a bit heavier than it used to be but that's down to things that the union nationally have been tied to over recent years…. you can still make some time it's still pretty easy* (OPG 2 Delivery Office 1).

If, for Royal Mail the agreement had seemingly failed within Delivery Office 1 to usher in the level of 'optimised efficiency' that they sought (BT Agreement 2010: 23), then their further aims of achieving greater workforce flexibility also appeared to have fallen short

of the mark. Attempts to address what was a perceived lack of worker flexibility and thereby redefine locally accepted standards of the effort bargain in this workplace in particular had been a long-standing goal amongst regional (and at times national) management within the Royal Mail. During his time spent as a local union official the researcher had developed first-hand experience of the long tradition within this workplace of tight union control over workloads, staffing levels and overtime. The local shop stewards enjoyed full time release and any movement of staff or change to workloads were subject to their agreement. Many attempts by Royal Mail to introduce change in this workplace had been thwarted by industrial action, or the threat of it. Such was their level of influence the local union had a list of Royal Mail managers that they would not allow to manage in this workplace. Should management seek to bring in anyone new (even if this was on a relief basis) then it was understood that they would first seek the 'green light' from the union.

In recent times management had, for a number of years, conceded to the union's requests that all workers here were paid two hours per week overtime two undergo on-site IT and Spanish courses. In practice, workers were able to undertake these, and claim the overtime, within their existing duty times. It was accepted by staff and management that any work performed outside of set workloads would automatically be paid at overtime rate. Overtime was itself often carried out on a 'ghost' basis (see England, 1981: 19). This is an arrangement whereby the claimant would carry out and be paid around six hours' overtime for an extra delivery round within the time span of their existing duty. During his time as a branch official the researcher was also aware that there was a 'sick rota' being operated within Delivery Office 1 whereby workers systematically took turns in taking sick leave for the purpose of creating overtime for the wider workgroup when mail volumes were low.

A few years prior to this study, all workers within this workplace had been involved in a long and bitter all-out strike which had lasted for six weeks and ended with the dismissal of a number of experienced stewards and activists. This was widely perceived as a nationally-coordinated attempt by the Royal Mail to claw back for what they saw as some of the deeply embedded and unacceptable workplace practices held by the local union and its members (Lyddon, 2009). Evidence indicated that, the local CWU, in line with Gall,

(2003) at the time of fieldwork had, nevertheless, continued to enjoy significant influence over the way in which work was organised, the allocation of overtime and annual leave and regulation of workloads and health and safety matters. They were also responsive to any membership concerns with regard to the breaching of such issues by management whilst further, due to the two most senior representatives being on full release, remaining clearly visible, and accessible to members within the workplace itself. Moreover, many workers themselves were in the words of one interviewee:

> *...more often than not perfectly capable of defending themselves and each other on the floor so that the union can concentrate on bigger issues……. if management try and tell us to do extra work we'll just say 'no' and they know that if they try to suspend one of us we'll all be out* (OPG 7, Delivery Office 1).

Job demarcation remained widespread here then, despite the opportunities for garnering greater worker flexibility that the principles of the BT Agreement 2010 presented to management. Further indications of this depth of shopfloor strength were clearly evident throughout the duration of research during which management remained confined to their office for considerable periods of time. When they did make brief appearances many workers remained indifferent to their presence whether 'off task' (in the sense of talking, smoking fooling around or resting) or 'not off task'. A number of interviewees had put this managerial reticence down to both their constant haranguing by workers in the past and, as the above suggests, an unwillingness amongst the latter to do anything that was deemed to be outside of their daily workload. In a similar sense the canteen and rest room areas within Delivery Office 1 were also virtually exclusive to the workforce. This appropriation of shopfloor space can be seen as a means by which workers within this workplace had successfully restricted managerial control over the arrangement of work which along with the function of discipline have historically been contested areas between management and workers. Goodrich argues that these twin issues form the basis of what might be termed as the shifting mass of workplace rules and regulations which he refers to as 'the frontier of control' (1920: 61-62).

The type of workplace regulation exhibited by those workers within Delivery Office 1 in this instance bears resemblance to the category of organisational workgroup behaviour which Edwards identifies as extending beyond only the solidarity of the workgroup. Here worker customs, influence over manning levels and mobility of workers, along with the union's legitimacy in vetoing proposed changes, are accepted as part of the structure of the situation (1988: 196-197). Importantly, the affiliation of union efficacy to organic workgroup action highlights the continued presence within this workplace of a layer of union activists and militants upon who Darlington (2002: 98) argues effective workplace action depends. That said it should be borne in mind that, there remains limitations to such an approach. In particular, because job controls deployed by workers within this type of organisational model are dependent on action at the point of production they are vulnerable to managerial counter attacks (Edwards, 1988: 197). In the case of Royal Mail, this had in many of the organisation's geographical regions, including that of Delivery Office 1, increasingly taken the form of a sustained managerial challenge at workplace level to many of the long-standing practices such as 'job and knock' (Lyddon, 2009) and worker restriction on workload. Within a number of neighbouring offices rudimentary and what appeared to be individual resistance to this had in some cases led, as the following Branch Official noted, to the suspension or dismissal of a number of workers:

> *they (management) seem to be pursuing a zero-tolerance policy in the weaker workplaces, the objective seems to be if we suspend enough people then eventually everybody will be frightened of cutting off at their finish time and brining what's not been delivered back* (Branch Official 1).

Whilst it was not immune to such initiatives, the domestic organisation within Delivery Office 1 was able to collectively mediate their impact upon existing practices. Much of management's counter-offensive at shopfloor level had taken place in workplaces that had traditionally within the parameters of Delivery Office 1's region and been seen as moderate with little history of independent workplace action. If a powerful and emboldened management faced here with quiescent labour forces were successfully able to shift the frontier of control (Brown, 1972: 56), this arguably did not take place in isolation. Integral to the new ways of working contained within the Business Transformation Agreement was the development, and deployment, of new types of

technology and machinery aligned to standardized work plans (BT Agreement 2010: 13). This had resulted in the introduction of more sophisticated methods of automated mail sortation which pre-sorted mail for delivery office prior to it being dispatched for delivery offices (see Beirne, 2013). As such workers now spent more time outdoors on delivery than in the workplace sorting mail for local deliveries. As the following interviewee points out:

> *We still see each other in the morning when we are getting our walks ready and still have a good crack, but we don't spend as much time together as we used to now some of the mail comes pre-sorted* (OPG 3, Delivery Office 1).

Although they had managed to veto many local efficiency-based schemes, the union in Delivery Office 1 were saddled to the nationally agreed introduction of these initiatives. Moreover, they were accompanied by news forms of workforce surveillance mechanisms which held implications for existing levels of effort bargain in Delivery Office 1. New software here, in particular, had broadened managerial scope to trace workers involved in the outdoor, and thus traditionally difficult to monitor, function of delivering mail. All walking staff now carried on their delivery rounds small hand held devices which were downloaded in the depot on the following morning. This provided information such as the speed at which an individual was walking, how many times they stood still, the exact location of where they were and the exact time that they finished delivery. In doing so it could also ascertain if workers were involved in what was the reciprocal practice of as covering one another jobs. This entailed workers going home early while their colleagues from neighbouring delivery rounds split and delivered outstanding mails between them.

Similarly, tracking devices installed in driver vehicles provided information such a vehicle speed, location, duration of stops and even the level of pressure that individuals applied to the vehicle's breaks. In theory this could have detected the common use of vehicles by drivers, both in this workplace and the wider branch for shopping, carrying out 'school runs' and transporting household refuse-usually in works time. As Brown (1972: 58) notes, such technologies might be seen as species of managerial information and control systems which can be crucial in the hindrance of custom and practice like the type carried out by the workers within Delivery Office1. Again, the potential threat that this posed to

their working practices was recognised by almost all those interviewed. The following sums up how many felt about how the job had changed in recent times:

> *One of the biggest changes is the technology that they use now. They can, if they want to, tell where you are and what time you finish just by looking on the computer* (OPG 3, Delivery Office 1); and

> *In the old days you didn't have to really worry about anything. Once you were out on delivery you could do what you wanted to. OK, there was the Post Office Patrol Officer who would watch what went on. But he was one bloke covering the whole of the area and he only came out once in a blue moon* (OPG 5, Delivery Office 1).

It follows that data captured from these systems might be used to provide management, within an increasingly efficiency-driven climate, with substantial arguments relating to future reduction in staff headcount. In practice, however, management in Delivery Office 1 had neither stopped informal time making nor sought to reduce staff numbers. Many of the workers here clearly still enjoyed reasonable levels of task autonomy and the opportunity to finish early, cover for the mates and misappropriate Royal Mail vehicles. Although this may, in many ways, have been due to the collective strength of an organised group of workers within this workplace, it must be considered within the overarching and potentially neutralising context of a modernisation agreement which saddled postal workers with a level of compliance in the on-going reduction in the overall numbers of employees (BT Agreement 2010: 3). Again, insight into the durability of custom and practice within such an environment is provided by Edwards' (1988) study of patterns of conflict and accommodation. Of particular importance here is the contradictory nature of the capital-labour relation and the patterns of workplace order that this generates (ibid.: 188).

According to Edwards (1988: 188-92), despite the basic antagonism between capital and labour regarding how a worker's capacity to work is translated into actual effort there are elements of cooperation; workers rely on the firm for their livelihoods while employers through their managerial agents, need to seek their continued willingness to work. In practice, this involves a negotiation of order involving both struggle and accommodation between the two parties through a host of informal and sometimes managerially-

sanctioned working practices at the point of production. In the case of Delivery Office 1 much of the continued existence of practices such as job and knock seemingly rested upon such a set of understandings and an accommodation between workers and management. On management's part, there was no doubt a level of awareness that they were coordinators of a complex production operation in which the primary product is perishable, non-substitutable and, due to the nature of the mails network, susceptible to industrial action (Gall, 2003: 132-9). This made them potentially vulnerable to the possibility of sanctions from a workgroup which had a long and proven history of mobilization and effective workplace regulation. For the workers within Delivery Office 1, whilst they remained resistant to change, many had bitter first-hand experience of the consequences of a nationally-coordinated attack against what was perceived by Royal Mail as domestic union intransigence some years earlier.

In many respects therefore it was in the interests of workers in Delivery Office 1 not to disrupt production to the point that might provoke action such as that deployed by Royal Mail in the past. On the other hand, local management risked potential damage to the delivery operation should they seek to challenge or undermine local practices amongst workers. However, while such customary ways of working here might as Edwards notes, have evolved out of historical relations between the two parties, these very relations are dynamic with customs themselves having to be both developed and sustained (1988: 202, 211). An insight into how this actually played out at shopfloor level in this workplace was provided by the following interviewees. This highlights the ways in which socially constructed expectations can shape the extent to which managerial objectives can be met (Edwards, 2010: 39):

> *Management had been speaking to some people about finishing early and saying that they were making too much time and that they could come back and absorb extra work that was on overtime. Everybody for the next few days just slowed down and brought stuff back, management soon backed off* (OPG 7, Delivery Office 1); and
>
> *Management daren't push it too much about work as they know everyone will just slow down, work till their time and just bring it all back. This is one of the reasons*

why they don't actually act upon any information that they might get from personal data trackers (Workplace Representative /OPG 14), Delivery Office 1).

Such viewpoints notwithstanding, both the union and a majority of the workforce were in favour of working to ensure that mail was fully delivered since it served to reduce the prospect of unwanted attention from a cohort of senior management who had jurisdiction over the region. Whilst these were based a considerable distance away they had been perceived by reps and activists in both Delivery Office 1 and the wider region as 'aggressive' and 'unreasonable' and also as 'hatchet-men'. As Beirne (2013: 122-4) notes in his recent study of shifting boundaries and patterns of resistance within the Royal Mail, the authoritarian manner in which this grouping have attempted to drive through modernisation has led to feelings of insecurity and a concern with dilution of service amongst both workers and some lower level management. This suggests a disjunction between a stratum of higher management and those involved in the actual process of production at shopfloor itself- a disjunction which Brown argues is crucial in enabling the existence of customary practices (1972: 58) such as 'job and knock'.

Such a disparity in opinion and approach between regional and local management was evident in the form of informally high levels of 'ghost' overtime allocated to incentivise workers in completing the delivery of late mails. Whilst this may have arisen out of a collective unwillingness of workers to flexibly absorb this mail, it arguably reflected what Beirne (2013: 127) identifies as an alliance between some groups of worker and lower-level management who were critical of the manner in which modernisation was being driven by those at executive level. Here then, in many ways because of the constraints placed on them by collective worker action, particularly in the form of output restriction, management, as Edwards notes, themselves played a key role in mediating external conditions (1988: 194).

Levels of worker commitment to and identification with the CWU

Viewed from Edwards' (1988: 202) perspective, the arrangements surrounding the delivery of mails within Delivery Office1 is indicative of the nature of workplace relations within capitalist society in which workers and managers are mostly not engaged in active struggles but try to accommodate to the world as they find it. Although this may provide

fertile ground in some cases for the development of informally agreed ways of working, it must be borne in mind that that the decision making process within the Royal Mail as with most other areas of the public services (Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2005: 114) remains highly centralised. As such localised workplace relations within the postal service during a time of on-going change exist within the wider context of senior managerial objectives that, in addition to a concern with increased efficiency, seek to usher in modernisation through cultural change amongst postal workers (Beirne, 2013: 120). This study has earlier made reference to the raft of Employee Involvement schemes that this focus on culture change has given rise to within the Royal Mail and the threat that these might pose to union organisation and workgroup solidarity.

Such initiatives were to some extent present within this workplace in the form of team-briefing sessions and workplace newsletters. However, evidence suggests that the local union had actively played its part in ensuring that these had little success in increasing worker loyalty and commitment to the employer nor relinquishing 'outmoded' working practices (ibid.: 120). The workplace stewards here had successfully reconstituted team-briefing session, which were increasingly being used in some offices as a method through which to strengthen managerial control vis-à-vis the CWU (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 14) into a forum which promoted the role and views of the latter within the workplace. As one representative stated:

> *We don't allow management to brief anything that hasn't been agreed with us first. We also have an input in the sessions and make sure that we get across all the things that the union has to say both locally and nationally* (Workplace Representative Rep/OPG 15, Delivery Office 1).

An indication as to the effectiveness of this in helping sustain the high levels of support that the union enjoyed within this workplace is gleaned from the following responses. These were typical of those interviewed in response to a question concerning where individuals felt that their loyalties within the workplace lay:

> *My loyalties lie with the union first and my workmates as well but definitely not with management* (OPG 4, Delivery Office 1); and

Where would I say that my loyalties lie within the workplace? Well first of all my mates and the union, I mean they're the same thing aren't they? (OPG 8, Delivery Office 1).

Further evidence of the continued depth of support for the union was apparent in the belief by nearly all those interviewed in the efficacy of strike action as a means of defending and improving terms and conditions and the attendance of an after work meeting by approximately 70% of the workers where support for forthcoming industrial action was overwhelming. The level of organisation that this signified was echoed by the following branch official:

One workplace that we can count on supporting a national strike is Delivery Office 1. They're always up for its (Branch Official 4).

It was during this period of impending strike action that Royal Mail deployed its strategy of writing to all individuals warning them as to the danger that this would visit on the industry whilst spelling out the benefits and indeed necessity of privatisation of the postal service. In a similar vein to the wider programme of employee involvement schemes deployed by Royal Mail this initiative can be viewed as a method through which employers might seek to counter-mobilise and delegitimise worker action (Kelly, 1998: 35). Again, in the case of Delivery Office 1 this appeared to be less than effective with a majority of respondents giving credence to the arguments put forward by the union. There was a consensus that if anything, many workers were now even willing to strike and were angry at Royal Mail for 'insulting their intelligence' with 'lies and propaganda'.

Clearly then the domestic steward organisation within Delivery Office 1 was able to maintain both high levels of membership commitment whilst exercising considerable influence over many workers' viewpoints towards Royal Mail and its modernisation programme. According to Batstone et al. (1977: 128-129), this situation is dependent to some degree upon the level of union centrality and the presence of opinion-leaders and leader stewards in the workplace. In particular, these groups play a major role in influencing the perspectives that members adopt and the likelihood of them applying collective means of achieving goals. Insight into the extent of union centrality within this workplace can be garnered from worker responses to the question of whom they would

first and foremost approach if a problem arose at work with all but one stating the union. The likelihood of this preference among workers was increased by the relatively high ratio of experienced representatives within the office all of who espoused strong union principles and collective values. Importantly, most had considerable scope to interact with what were key activists in work areas such as the canteen and rest room that were all but exclusive to workers. Such opportunities of sociability, in line with Batstone et al.'s study provided local representatives with access to a network of union-minded workplace opinion leaders which bolster the leadership role (1977: 110-1) and at the same time reaffirm the very values and norms which facilitate a greater centralisation of power (ibid.: 24, 53).

Despite the strength of local workplace unionism within Delivery Office 1 membership levels had decreased from 100 per cent down to 85 per cent over the last few years. Findings also identified that, in contrast to the researcher's considerable experience of this workplace, the emergence of a fracture in opinion towards the effectiveness and legitimacy of the workplace union. This involved a small, but nevertheless noteworthy minority of workers who remained detached from the wider collective and who had according to many interviewees formed a sub-group within the office. This minority was comprised of three broad categories of worker which have been termed here as 'new starters', 'union-member individuals' and 'non-unionised individuals'. All 'new starters' were employed via agency or temporary contracts and were awaiting the opportunity for substantive employment. This was an area that the local CWU had been somewhat less successful in retaining its influence over. As recently as three years prior to this study all but two workers within this workplace were full time, indeed the two part-time workers in question were so by choice and were themselves employed substantively. Two attempts by management in 2004 and 2005 to introduce temporary staff had been thwarted with the threat of immediate strike action. As the following representatives pointed out, Royal Mail's dominant narrative of ever greater efficiency in the face of ever greater competition and the experience of the local protracted strike had hamstrung their best efforts:

> *The temps? They were an argument we just couldn't win in this climate. I mean everywhere has got them, Royal Mail just don't set on full time now. They've*

waited here until people have left and replaced them with these (Workplace Representative /OPG 13, Delivery Office1); and

After the strike people are wary about kicking off too much about temporary workers, the last thing any of us want is to be accused of bullying their own workmates (Workplace Representative /OPG 14), Delivery Office 1).

The growing presence of this category of worker in Delivery Office 1, as with many other areas of the Royal Mail, was indicative of the increased casualisation of the wider public sector workforce (Worrall et al. 2009: 122). Many had not joined the local union and had never been in a union; most had also previously worked in non-unionised workplaces. Not only are such peripheral workers difficult to unionise, their contractual vulnerability-as was the case in this workplace- renders them susceptible to managerial attempts to secure intra-workplace cooperation (Heery and Abbot; 2000: 155; Drago, 1996: 540). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many 'new starters' worked over without being paid, began work before their official start time and worked through their breaks. This meant that they were highly unlikely to enter the canteen or rest room areas during official and unofficial breaks. Furthermore, most new starters did not as a rule, attend union meetings.

In line with the 'new starters' many within the union-member individual category whilst being union members did not attend union meetings. Indeed, a common feature amongst this group was a critical attitude toward the local union in terms of policy, direction and in particular, their role in a drawn out and bitter dispute within the office a few years earlier. For many 'union-member individuals', the local union's main core of activists were the residue of the previously too militant regime which had in their opinion stopped members earning money, struck over the slightest thing and had exercised too much control. This apparent lack of commitment towards and identification with the local union was also evident in the manner in which those within this group tended to approach management with regard to workplace problems rather than the local union. Similarly, those within the non-union individual category also looked to management rather than the union to sort out local problems and to arrive at individual agreements. As their label suggests, this group were non-union members, a few of which had been at the centre of the office's dispute some years earlier and had, according to many of the wider collective,

played a key role in assisting Royal Mail in what was the sacking of the main body of the union. As was also the case with union-member individuals, non-union individuals did not attend union meetings and rarely visited the canteen and rest room areas during official and unofficial breaks. As the following indicates, crucially for many of those who formed the main collective within the workplace, both of these groups tended to play some part in helping socialise the 'new starters' in a manner which threatened the union-based solidarity of Delivery Office 1:

> *…you can see them that are against the union get to the new starters when they start and you can hear what they're saying like 'look after yourselves' and 'don't listen to the union they'll get you the sack… those sorts of things* (OPG 5, Delivery Office 1); and

> *…well it's like this, before they sacked the union lads, all those anti-union ones now who are filling the heads of the new starters with anti-union messages wouldn't have dared open their mouths (*OPG 7, Delivery Office 1).

Finally, as this chapter will later discuss, both non-union and union-member individuals were more likely to carry out informal practices that were both individual and in contravention of union policy.

Delivery Office 2

Extent of union-centred formal and informal job controls

In contrast to Delivery Office 1, the workers in Delivery Office 2 had long been viewed by their branch officials and members in other local workplaces as much more moderate and less union centred. The workplace union itself, whilst both reasonably visible and formally active in terms of opposing managerial change, had less influence over the day to day organisation of work. As a not infrequent visitor to this workplace the researcher had a good grasp of the local working practices. Here, up until the time of the BT Agreement 2010, workers had tended to cover unstaffed deliveries for half of the monetary amount that they were prepared to do in Delivery Office 1. Management had traditionally controlled the distribution of overtime and also retained tight control over allocation of leave. That said there had been widely accepted demarcation lines around set duties for

each worker with work outside of these covered through overtime. The following interviewee is representative of the wider workplace opinion that the workload itself in this workplace had been such as to afford workers time for unofficial breaks and early finishes of up to two hours before official finish times:

> *Things here have been pretty easy if I'm truthful, when I first started I couldn't believe it. I'd finished by about 11.00 am and said to the driver who took me out on delivery what do I do now as I've still got 2 hours left to go? He just said to go home as that's how things work here* (OPG 9, Delivery Office 2).

Unlike most other workplaces within the area, the new 'Delivery Methods' way of working had not been implemented within Delivery Office 2 at the time of fieldwork and by all accounts would be nowhere near ready within the near future. Here its introduction remained in a state of limbo which involved the toing and froing of proposals and arguments between the local CWU and Royal Mail's management team. This appeared to be due to a number of different factors that were specific to the recent history of this workplace and its geographical setting. To begin with, despite union pressure, management had refused to recruit against a number of vacancies in the last two years or so which had led to an increasing workload for the workforce in this workplace. Under the agreed terms of the new way of working the eventual move to the new system would necessitate, on implementation, an actual increase in headcount rather than the much sought after reduction that was fundamental to the aims of Royal Mail (see Beirne, 2013). In this instance management were believed by the union to be 'dragging their feet'. This was reflected in the following statement from one of the workplace representatives who was interviewed:

> *We and management both know that if they do bring the changes in they will have to put more time in. This is why they are backing off and making excuses about bringing in change. We will probably be the last office in the country to go through change as it will cost them that much money* (Workplace Representative /OPG 14, Delivery Office 2).

Moreover, the nature of delivery work in many rural offices like Delivery Office 2 requires specialised knowledge of specific delivery points and routes that the automated planning

system within the 'Delivery Methods' implementation process did not possess. As the following interviewee points out, such a system could not possibly replicate the years of experience that many workers had here and their recourse to the various uncharted dirt tracks and 'cut throughs' that had made their life easier:

> *The can sit there all they like and plan but when it comes to it we know loads of short cuts that they can't possibly pick up on which knock about half an hour a day of the duties. If we did it to the book they'd have loads of undelivered mail coming back each day* (OPG 9, Delivery Office 2).

The possession of what are tacit skills by workers here highlights, what Sturdy et al. (1992: 4) note, as the limitations of direct management control which, in this instance, provided the local union with a strong line of counter- arguments for additional 'man-hours'. Finally, the incumbent office manager was viewed by all interviewees as a moderate who, unlike his recent predecessor, was unwilling to pursue an aggressive-style implementation of the agreement that might resurrect earlier poor industrial relations.

If the union within Delivery Office 2 had managed up until this point to thwart the implementation of a new way of working that served to threaten the employment levels of its membership, it had perhaps been less effective in other areas. This was particularly the case in terms of Royal Mail's wider objective of ushering in increased flexibility and efficiency amongst its staff. Management here had taken greater advantage than their colleagues in Delivery Office 1 of the opportunities for greater workforce flexibility that were laid out within the 2010 BT Agreement. Many workers, for example, now absorbed extra mail from unstaffed delivery rounds into their own workload on an almost daily basis. As the following pointed out, while neither workers nor their union had really challenged this collectively, it had to some extent pegged back their finishing times and eaten into some unofficial breaks that were taken while out on delivery itself:

> *I don't make any time anymore, the job has gotten harder than it used to be* (OPG 5, Delivery Office 2); and

> *Some of us don't make any time anymore in fact some of us even have to 'cut off' and bring stuff back every day* (OPG 2, Delivery Office 2).

This is indicative of a number of critical accounts from commentators such as Leys (2001), Mooney and Law (2007) and Pollock (2004) of the effects of neo-liberal based public service modernisation on workers' terms and conditions that have been identified by Bach and Kessler (2012:27). Overall, these accounts have generally been pessimistic emphasising the loss of autonomy and work intensification brought about by commercialisation and systems of performance management (ibid.: 27).

Despite the reported increase in workload by many workers within Delivery Office 2, a number of those interviewed said that they still made time at the end of the job and still worked on a 'job and knock' basis. Unlike the case of Delivery Office 1, it would be difficult to argue that this rested upon on a wider set of union-centred collective control measures that included the threat of collective and negative workgroup sanctions. For example, interviewees stated that:

> *I make at least an hour a day and I am always home for 12.30 every day. OK. This might mean us absorbing other work but most people just do it so they can get done and get home. The bosses know this but turn a blind eye and let us make time if we mop up and get everything done* (OPG 7, Delivery Office 2);
>
> *Not everyone makes time but that's just how it is, some jobs are heavier than others. Its every man for himself in here* (OPG 9, Delivery Office 2); and
>
> *Lots of people still make loads of time here most days, everyone knows that including management but they're not bothered as long as all the work is done'….'Some people don't make much time but that's just the luck of the draw* (OPG 4, Delivery Office 2).

If anything, many workers, by absorbing late and unstaffed mail at the daily behest of management, were hampering the CWU's long term bargaining objectives of defending headcount and upgrading part time jobs into full time positions. That this was taking place on a tacitly agreed and individualised basis with management in which there were 'winners' and 'losers', meant that it arguably further undermined the sense of common interest and perceived injustice amongst workgroups that Kelly views as a prerequisite for collective action (1998: 44).

In a similar vein to their managerial counterparts in Delivery Office 1 then, management in Delivery Office 2 were prepared to overlook informal finishing times. Again, there appeared to be little recourse by management to any of the new technology that might have identified early finishes, and the misappropriation of 'down time' by workers. However, in this instance it was conditional on all mail, including that which was over and above worker's designated workload was delivered, despite in breach of the CWU's interpretation of nationally agreed ways of working. This 'hand's off' approach by management was in evidence throughout fieldwork, during which workers were largely left to organise their own work and the allocation of work that was over and above their own. This provided workers with some autonomy to socialise and engage in horseplay with colleagues the latter of which was at times encouraged by and indeed partially engaged in by management itself. Edward's (1988) typology of different categories of workgroup behaviour again provides a useful lens for analysis here. Rather than the more organisational model displayed by those within Delivery office 1, workers in Delivery Office 2 undertook behaviour which was characteristic of a non-militant type of approach. Here, workers tend to be controlled less directly and are given autonomy but do not use their freedom to pursue objectives which might conflict with management. Discipline tends to not be overt and there is an emphasis on cooperation. In that it is structured into any employment relationship, conflict is still present, but under such circumstances tends to be individualised rather than collective (ibid.: 195).

Edwards (1988: 201) offers insight into the stark contrast between Delivery Office 1 and the more individually-inclined workers in Delivery office 2 whose union, though formally active, had less influence over day to day issues. From this viewpoint, any understanding of patterns of relations in a given workplace requires attention to a cluster of internal and external influences and their interaction. In the case of Delivery Office 2 the following factors appeared to be particularly significant. Whilst it had identical market pressures to those of all offices within its region, it had like many isolated rural offices within the Royal Mail a history of moderation, quiescence and inactivity with regard to its union leadership (Gall, 2003: 144). As such the existing ideology of comparative indifference towards the union by some workers and the absence of a network of activists to help facilitate union centrality within this workplace reflected, in part, what Batstone et al. (1977: 11) refer to

as past actions of members of the domestic organisation. Furthermore, Delivery Office 2's peripheral location in the mails network, as the following Branch Official noted made any threat by its workers of strike action as a source of bargaining leverage largely ineffectual:

> *It's not like in the bigger offices, OK, they don't want people to go on strike but management are not as nervous in Delivery Office 2 as they are about immediate walk-outs in bigger offices where they cause major disruption*. (Branch Official 3).

Such circumstances rendered the union in this workplace less likely to be able to propagate a set of values and beliefs which would engender membership loyalty and allow it to achieve power and influence within the workplace (ibid.).

Whilst both Edwards (1988: 202) and Batstone et al. (1977: 11) recognise the important influence of workplace histories upon patterns of workgroup behaviour, it should be borne in mind that workplace relations are dynamic and dialectic (Edwards, 1988: 202). As Berger and Luckman (1967, cited in Batstone et al., 1977: 11) argue, although they are shaped by and reflect past endeavours, workplace ideologies and institutions such as trade unions can be changed by present endeavours. The salience of this last point was brought sharply into focus by two events within Delivery Office 2 that both took place during the time at which fieldwork was being undertaken as well as one which had taken place a number of months earlier. The first of these involved an attempt by Royal Mail to re-deploy a previous manager who had been the subject of a series of complaints of bullying and harassment by a number of staff within this workplace. This was met with overt threats of immediate industrial action by workers should it be progressed by Royal Mail. As the following workers pointed out quite forcefully:

> *If they bring* (the manager in question) *back in we'll all be out. We've told them this and I don't think they'll push it* (OPG 6, Delivery Office 2); and
>
> *Everyone's up for walking out if they bring him back, we won't wait around for a ballot either* (OPG 3, Delivery Office 2).

Some days later, significantly on a Saturday morning, historically associated with early finishes, there followed a point-blank refusal by many workers to carry out what had become the almost standard practice of absorbing late and unstaffed mail. Not only did

Royal Mail acquiesce on both issues, crucially the local union representatives played a key role in articulating and justifying the arguments and viewpoints of the workforce.

Due to his connections with the local branch, the researcher was aware of, and able to gain insight into, a third incident that involved the potential disciplining of a driver. Like their colleagues in Delivery Office 1, drivers in Delivery Office 2 had, for some time been allowed to take their vehicles home and return in them the next day. This was on a voluntary basis and enabled Royal Mail to effectively extend the delivery spans of drivers- should mail be heavy, for no extra cost. The drivers themselves had the benefit of going home straight from their last delivery point saving on petrol, and sometimes travelling back time. This was based on the strict understanding that the vehicles could not be driven for private use. The errant delivery driver had been caught shopping in his Royal Mail vehicle at the local supermarket by a manager from a neighbouring Delivery Office at around 7.30 in the evening. The offence if substantiated would, after initial investigation by local management, be passed to an area manager with the likely outcome of dismissal.

Having become aware of this situation the local union representatives informally disseminated the information on to the shopfloor. Subsequently each driver in Delivery Office 2 the following day prematurely finished and drove their vehicles and any undelivered mails back to the workplace some 20 minutes before the end of duty time. All stated that they were, from now on, choosing to leave their vehicles at work. Given the high ratio of driving duties in this workplace, it meant that management here were faced with a loss of 20 minutes work per day from 25 drivers and a congested delivery yard which itself posed problems around health and safety. The following branch official captures the impact that that this had on management's decision not to pursue the issue:

> *We had a phone call from* (the investigating manager in Delivery Office 1) *asking us what to do and he said that he had wished that he'd never brought it up, he said that he could lose up to 40 hours per week and that the workplace yard with all the vans coming back and parking up at the same time was unsafe* (Branch Official, 1).

The immediacy of this action was, as Gall (2003: 184) notes, reflective of the tactics through which postal workers have dealt with what here was a perishable issue. In this

instance, this was that had the investigating manager gone through the normal agreed disciplinary procedures, the case would have been passed higher and the individual almost certainly would have been dismissed. In light of events, local management the next day said that they were prepared to overlook this incident and reissued 'clearer, specific guidelines' around non-use of vehicles for domestic purposes.

It would of course be premature to regard these events as signifying the dawning of a shift within this workplace towards a more collective union-centred model of organisation. This is particularly so when considering that they took place within a wider climate of individualism. However, the significant part that they played in informally securing outcomes that were favourable to the workgroup does suggest the presence of at least some level of workplace influence and effectiveness on the part of the local union. For Batstone et al. (1977: 252), the success of the union in the decision-making process in such circumstances along with its ability to identify and the shape issues at stake constitute two aspects of what they identify as three interrelated dimensions of basic forms of power that unions might hold within the workplace.

The danger of an over optimistic prognosis of the seemingly new found ability on behalf of the union to effectively regulate this workplace is apparent when considering the relative absence within Delivery Office 2 of Batstone et al's third dimension power. This is the maintenance of a particular ideology and associated set of institutions which serve to support and legitimate particular patterns of behaviour (ibid.). From this viewpoint, the ability of local stewards to garner and furthermore maintain support for the above type of action is dependent upon their carrying out a leadership role based on the pursuit of union principles as part of wider network of stewards who serve to reaffirm these values (ibid.: 53). In that they played little part in the day to day regulation of workloads, that they were relatively isolated from the wider body of officials within their Branch, and that they lacked the infra-structure of a network of like-minded workplace opinion formers it would seem plausible to posit the following; that the two issues in question were viewed and subsequently addressed in terms of being particular stand-alone issues rather than through ideological reaffirmation and promotion of a collectively based union-centred model of workplace regulation on the part of the local stewards (ibid.).

Level of worker commitment to and identification with the CWU

As was the case in Delivery Office 1 workers in Delivery Office 2 were themselves subject to newsletters and team briefing sessions. Thomas and Davies argue that such processes are fundamentally associated with wider public service restructuring which has involved the redefining of its workforce (2005: 684). However, whereas the potential threat that these types of Employee Involvement initiatives posed to union loyalty was recognised and met in the former of these workplaces with organised resistance on the part of the union, this was not the case with regard to Delivery Office 2. Here team briefs were held regularly during which the local manager would read out Royal Mail's latest business objectives, the standards that were required of the workforce and in particular, given the wider climate, the dangers of taking part in forthcoming national industrial action. The process was overwhelmingly one-way with no real scope for input from workers or their representatives. After each session every worker present was expected to (and to a person did) sign a document to say that they had attended and were aware of what had been communicated throughout the brief. Evidence clearly indicates that in some workplaces these have been resurrected to subsequently substantiate dismissal proceedings (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 12). This growing trend of a more punitive approach towards team briefing sessions adopted here by management has been recognised by Beale and Mustchin as a mechanism through which Royal Mail have attempted to whittle down their workforce in a period of on-going redundancies (2013: 12). Unchecked by any organised resistance, it arguably further served in this workplace as a means through which management could control staff behaviour and crucially counter-mobilise the potential threat of a move towards a more collectively-centred pattern of behaviour on behalf of the local union leadership (Kelly, 1998: 35) and their members.

Just how effective Employee Involvement schemes were in terms of realising their objectives of strengthening management at the expense of the union within workplace 2 is difficult to gauge. For example, as the following responses suggest, compared to Delivery Office 1 there appeared to be considerably less commitment towards and identification with the CWU amongst the workgroup as a whole:

…you don't see much of the union here they don't really do much (OPG 8, Delivery Office 2); and

The union, yes I'm a member but that's about it, we don't really get that involved here (OPG 4, Delivery Office 2).

Yet, on the other hand, many of the same interviewees appeared to have little loyalty towards or identification with Royal Mail and the sweeping changes which it sought to implement. As the following indicates:

Where do my loyalties lie? Not with Royal Mail that's for sure, things just get worse, this modernisation thing is all about making things worse for us and taking things off us. (OPG 2 Delivery Office 2); and

There's been a real change of culture amongst management in recent times and its for the worst. OK (the office manager) is alright but he is told what to do from the ones above who are a nasty bunch of thugs (OPG 6, Delivery Office 2).

What did seem clear was that Royal Mail's attempt to convey via team briefings the case for impending privatisation and sweeping cuts as opposed to the CWU's argument for national action to defend the effects of this was making some headway amongst workers here. Although a well-attended gate meeting was held by the Branch to mobilise support for national strike action, a number of senior Branch Officials had been made aware informally that quite a few workers in Delivery Office 2 were intent on crossing picket lines should strike action take place. This antipathy on the part of some workers towards the union's call for collective action in this workplace was confirmed during this study's period of fieldwork.

Despite any antipathy that may have existed towards union-centred action amongst some of its workforce, membership levels within Delivery Office 2 remained at what had over the last few years been the constant figure of around 90 per cent. This, was similar to levels in both Delivery Office 1 and the wider Branch itself, compares favourably to the situation within the wider public services where on-going decline has seen overall membership density fall in recent times to around 57 per cent from 84 per cent in 1980 (Bach and Kessler, 2012: 145-6). Most non-unionised workers, except for one employee in

this workplace could be categorised as recently employed temporary staff. The union had tried to limit the introduction of these with some success but had, like their colleagues in Delivery Office 1 been forced to concede some ground. Again, most of these had previously been employed in non-unionised service sector and retail areas of the economy. Since they were awaiting the opportunity for a substantive job offer, these workers tended to unquestionably work over and above the normal workloads of substantive workers. As the following interviewees pointed out, such a situation additionally helped to undermine traditional areas of demarcation that had for management been, even in the relatively quiescent environment of Delivery Office 2, off-limits:

> *The thing is, I've seen management ask people to do extra and when they've said no then management have turned around and said, well [the temporary worker] managed to do it easily last week so you should have no problem* (OPG 2, Delivery Office 2); and

> *It makes it difficult for us when management get a new starter to do something that's over and above. If we try to argue they'll say that the temp who has less experience can do it so there should be no problem.* (Workplace Representative/OPG 14, Delivery Office 2).

In contrast to Delivery Office 1, the fieldwork research found no presence of an organised and articulated opposition to the CWU within this workplace that might have dissuaded these workers from joining the union whilst moreover serving to factionalise the wider workgroup as a whole.

There is a danger that too narrow an interpretation of the evidence gleaned from Delivery office 2 might lead to an overly critical and somewhat simplistic picture of a domestic union that was constrained through long-standing organisational patterns of behaviour in bringing about commitment to union centred goals amongst its membership. Any evaluation of worker commitment to the union here must again be contextualised within a wider analysis of a cluster of influences related to this workplace and crucially, as Edwards (1988: 201) argues, the way that these influences interact. What is particularly important in this instance is the role played by management in encouraging a particular

type of working practice, the manner in which workers embraced this and its effect upon the union's attempts to build effective workplace organisation. As has been noted, workers within workplace 2 were overwhelmingly subscribed to a union which many seemed largely indifferent towards. Furthermore, whilst many workers were prepared to err on the side of managerial arguments which sought to negate the union's national call for strike action to defend worsening terms and conditions, they had demonstrated willingness, on two occasions during fieldwork, to oppose initiatives which threatened their immediate work situation. This animosity towards the employer was at times made quite clear amongst many of those interviewed.

The co-existence of both radical and unitary outlooks amongst workers here is indicative of what Batstone et al. (1977: 248) refer to as the essentially complex and ambivalent nature of worker attitudes. This again calls for a consideration of the ideological dimension of union power through which stewards, by emphasising one element against another, can influence member consciousness. However, it will be recalled that workers never really interacted outside of their immediate labour process, even opting to take meal breaks, if at all, at their work stations. Since this took place under the often benign but nevertheless watchful gaze of management it provided little opportunity for local representatives to bring about the more union-centred aspect of worker consciousness amongst their members within this workplace that would bolster organisation. As this chapter will move on to discuss, the lack of independent social interaction exhibited by the workers within this workplace was intrinsic to an informal and more individualised set of working practices that, in a similar vein to where they existed in Delivery Office 1, contravened union policy.

Mail Centre 1

Extent of union-centred formal and informal job controls

As with their counterparts in Royal Mail's network of delivery offices, workers employed in the organisation's Mail Centres were themselves subject to the terms of the BT Agreement 2010. It will be recalled that this committed local work units and, in particular, their representatives to engage in a Royal Mail change programme (Beirne, 2013: 123) that for the employer sought to establish 'one lean modern business with the right

amount of people'. In the case of Mail Centre 1 this was the latest in a succession of similar initiatives in which the union had been fully involved, as one interviewees noted:

> *The good thing about here is that the union are always fully involved in any changes. We joke that* (a local representative) *who is virtually on full release to deal with management's proposals, hasn't done any proper work for about three years as they've constantly been negotiating with management over changes* (OPG 3, Mail Centre 1).

Indeed, during fieldwork it became apparent that the local union had maintained its traditionally high degree of institutional centrality (Batstone et al. 1977: 10) within the workplace. The researcher had previous knowledge of this workplace that had been gained during his time as an official. It was, even by Royal Mail's standards, well organised and had consistently produced the highest returns in the country with regard to both local and national elections. While worker-manager relations had historically been cordial, traditionally there had been strict demarcations around jobs and the movement of workers. Workers stuck to their jobs and all change with any movement being agreed by the union. Workers here in the past had sometimes finished up to thirty minutes early per night. The union had however, largely due to occasional recruitment problems, been more accepting than other areas with regard to part time working. However, this had been predicated on agreed levels of substantive rather than temporary contracts. Many workers and nearly all union representatives and officials had transferred here from a previous now defunct Royal Mail processing centre.

At the time of research, there were at all times at least four members of the local organisation who were fully released from their operational duties to carry out negotiations and representations over a wide range of issues such as health and safety, duty and overtime allocation and general day-to-day industrial relations matters. In terms of the BT 2010 negotiations themselves, the union had managed to secure an outcome in which only a handful of jobs were lost through the medium of voluntary redundancy. The extent of their organisational presence within the Mail Centre is reflected in the following statements:

> *We try to make sure that we negotiate over as many issues as possible. Any potential changes to jobs, any new ways of working, overtime levels, manning levels, most things really. It helps that we have a lot of experienced reps and members on the ground who will flag up issues that we can jump* on (branch official, Mail centre 1).

This depth of involvement in the regulation and organisation of work by the local CWU is indicative of the entrenched nature of workplace unionism within the Royal Mail (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 16). An example of the way that this was transposed into everyday shopfloor life was to be found in the way that unforeseen overtime for absence or increased mail traffic was allocated. Here, it had been a long-standing practice that all overtime that was unforeseen was advertised on a whiteboard in the collections office. It was filled on a first come first served basis, on the understanding that once an individual had put their name against a certain allocation, then they would be debarred from taking on more until other people had had such opportunity. Such was their sphere of influence any disputes between prospective volunteers were sorted out through the local union rather than management. This type of control mechanism is a common feature within many Royal Mail workplaces including what was the parent of ice of the author. When applied to holiday and job allocation, these enhance postal worker collectivity while guarding against management favouritism (Gall, 2003: 29).

In Mail Centre 1 union consciousness was reinforced by the permanent on-site presence of the Branch Office and its officials, most of who were employed in this workplace. As Gall (2003: 147) notes, the Royal Mail branch leaderships, because they contain the most active that have access to information (from management) and ideas (from their own experience), are key in both determining whether branches themselves are active or inactive whilst additionally serving to validate action and frame issues. Although he goes on to argue that this indicates the relatively low levels of involvement and consciousness of workers within the organisation (ibid.), the following should be considered; the presence of what were an active cohort of Branch Officials in Mail Centre 1 who were prepared to seek negotiations on every issue, provided the union with considerable scope to access social networks of workers. Such a situation would allow, what in this instance, were a union-minded group of local officials to offer definitions of work and society which

would promote strong union-based principles and workgroup consciousness (Batstone et al., 1977: 110, 248).

For Batstone et al. (1977: 10) such centrality on the part of the union might enable it to strengthen workplace controls through the development of a predominant and favourable set of values, beliefs and institutional procedures. It should however, be borne in mind that workplace relations are dynamic and, as Edwards (1988: 194) notes, subject to tension and movement. In particular, a change in economic, political or commercial circumstances can provide impetus for managerial challenges to what have sometimes been long-standing and jointly-accepted patterns of behaviour and areas of worker influence. Thompson and Bannon (1985) provide the example of a rapid disappearance of job controls within an electronics factory during a period of rationalisation and competition thus identifying the shopfloor itself as a key locale for the contestation of work regulation between management and organised workgroups. Significant on-going economic and commercial change within the Royal Mail had, in the case of Mail Centre 1, more recently given rise to a period of such shopfloor challenges which in many ways mirrored the employer offensive which had occurred in the Region in which this study's Delivery Offices were situated. Although this had at the time of fieldwork to some extent abated, it was for many respondents within this workplace symptomatic of a shift, albeit coordinated from above, to a more hard-line approach by management. As the following interviewees note:

> *There'd been a real change in management's approach recently, they had started to try and challenge everything we do its obviously coming from above* (Workplace representative /OPG 12, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *They'd been trying to clamp down on all sorts of things, watching you more closely and challenging things that they never used to challenge* (OPG 7, Mail Centre 1).

What perhaps served to heighten the sensitivities of these workers was the nature of the job itself which differed considerably to that of their delivery office colleagues especially in terms of its technical organisation. Edwards (1988: 199) notes that technology and in particular the manner in which management might socially align workers to systems of production as a possible determinant of workgroup bargaining behaviour. From this

viewpoint, although workers might often be capable of exerting influence on the conduct of work, they enter a terrain whose contours have already been shaped by managerial decisions such as plant layout (ibid.: 194)

In comparison to their counterparts in the organisation's delivery office network, both indoor processing staff and distribution staff that together made up the workforce in Mail Centre 1 spent, as do workers in all other Mail Centres, significant amounts of their time in close proximity to management. Indeed, while the latter intermittently drove and collected external mail that they helped to process on the shopfloor, processing staff-at least in theory, spent their entire working day on the shopfloor. Jenkins et al. (2002: 88-98) have identified new Royal Mail settings like Mail Centre 1 as constituting laboratories in which Royal Mail have pursued the development and deployment of a plethora of HRM-style managerial practices which focus on increased workforce flexibility and the eradication of traditional forms of task allocation and regulation. Located in 'greenfield sites' these workplaces resemble people-less offices in which workers who are physically separated by large pieces of equipment, have expressed feelings of increased job insecurity, a loss of occupational identity and decreasing levels of sociability (ibid.: 98). Those respondents who had relocated to Mail Centre 1 from the old mail processing centre which it had replaced put forward viewpoints that supported these observations and highlighted the increased scope for managerial control that this move had brought with it:

> *This place is a lot different than the old workplace, we all worked close to each other and everybody could have as great laugh. Management didn't know who was doing what job and where anyone was supposed to be. That is one of the biggest changes in the job* (OPG 4, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *The trouble is now they can see what you're doing all the time, everything's on one level. The old workplace was great for just finding somewhere to talk with your mates and keep out of the way. We'd talk about union stuff and have unofficial meetings and things* (workplace rep/OPG 11, Mail Centre 1).

More recently management in this workplace had taken down a dividing wall which many workers had regarded as an attempt to increase surveillance over a work area that was

up until that point difficult to monitor. This took place within the wider context of the on-going deployment by Royal Mail of increasingly sophisticated means of surveillance in its Mail Centres. These included swipe-card access, satellite vehicle tracking and number plate recognition systems. Swipe cards provided management with the precise times that each worker entered and left the building and held obvious negative implications for the informal practice of arriving late and leaving early on the part of some workers. Satellite vehicle tracking, as was the case in Delivery Office 1 and 2 provided management with comprehensive information of driver whereabouts and finish times. The vehicle recognition system in this workplace again, provided management with details of when staff's personal vehicles arrived and left the mail centre premises. Such initiatives of course potentially held implications for the ways in which workers had tried to adjust formal measures of the effort bargain in this workplace. These had in Mail centre 1, involved some individuals, leaving significantly early and arriving for work late and, particularly for those not 'tied to' mail sorting machines, covering for one another's absence from the workplace.

The drivers in Mail Centre 1 were also subject to potential closer technological scrutiny by way of a new model of barcode scanning device which drivers carried on collection and were obliged to activate at every mail collection point that they visited. These again provided management with a clear picture of the times at which drivers collected mail down to the last second. The data that this process generated was scrutinized daily by regional management and can be viewed as the latest in a long line of TQM mechanisms (Jenkins et al., 2000) that have intensified as Royal Mails exposure to competition has grown. While such arrangements had been in place for some time, workers had, with previous models, been able to forward their digital timing devices and effectively scan early before subsequently resetting them. In doing so, drivers were able to make time at the end of, and during their shift without drawing attention from management. What is more, they could cover each other's rounds by doubling up on their colleague's collection routes, and further covering unstaffed collection routes in their existing duty times whilst claiming overtime.

The latest systems were now set and locked by management themselves which, along with a more advanced timing and scanning mechanism, rendered them seemingly

incorruptible and highly reliable. Not only did this scupper the above practice, it served to thwart an important source of what Flanders (1965) refers to as cut price industrial action through which drivers periodically kept management in check. In the author's parent office, this was widely referred to as the scanner strike. It involved all drivers, deliberately not scanning three of the barcodes from their collection points. The drivers would to a person, put this down to their faulty scanner which, though management knew otherwise, was, up until now, plausible. This would significantly skew the performance figures of the office and bring unwanted attention from a regional management that were hyper sensitive to dips in such performance indicators. In such circumstances, local management would usually withdraw from the initiative that this had given rise to.

As Rosen and Baroudi (1992: 215) note, because technology has tended to be developed for management, it has frequently enabled the social relations and structuring of work in a way which increases managerial control over the labour process. As the following suggests, many respondents in this workplace, in addition to feeling more physically scrutinized, tended to associate the Mail Centre environment as one in which personal discretion was increasingly ceded to ever more sophisticated and omnipresent methods of production and workforce monitoring:

> *The biggest change is the technology, they can tell what time you come on shift and when you leave, where you go when you're at work and what time'* (OPG 5, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *As a driver, the biggest problem is the changes in technology, they know what time you arrive at a certain place and what time you leave, how long you spend in the traffic and even how fast you're going and how many times you stop'* (OPG 7, Mail Centre 1).

Nevertheless, in spite of this, union-centred job-controls remained very much in evidence within Mail Centre 1. In particular, workers employed in both processing and distribution functions were still able to operate long-standing practices such as 'job and finish' and collective unofficial rest periods. They had also managed to retain reasonable levels of demarcation in terms of tasks performed. Whilst these had been challenged by

management during what had recently been a period of considerable conflict, they had been met with strong and organised worker opposition. This initially took the form of outright refusals to deviate from everyday tasks followed by union intervention from what were a highly visible and accessible cadre of local reps. The following responses capture the thoughts of many respondents:

> *Management kept trying to shift us round but we said no, when they tried again we just kept calling the union in, you can always get hold of a rep* (OPG 5, Mail Centre 1);
>
> *If management asked us to do something that was over and above what we usually do we'd just say 'no' and stop work until the union intervened'* (OPG 4, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *When they started trying to tell us what to do we really got stuck into them* (OPG 2, Mail Centre 1).

Management's proposals to tighten their control over late start times on the part of some workers by recourse to data generated gathered from swipe cards was also (despite a rear-guard action on the part of the union itself) given short shrift. The following interviewee alludes to a tactic that had also been used in Delivery Office 1:

> *They tried to clamp down on start times and said that they were going to start disciplining people who came late or left early over ten minutes a month. We let them know through the union, that if they did that we'd have a line up every day* (OPG 10, Mail Centre 1).

The researcher was familiar with, and had once witnessed, a 'line up' in Delivery Office 1 in response to management attempts to clamp down on start times. This entailed all the workplace's 100 workers meeting en masse outside of the workplace five minutes before duty. From here the workers entered the building and queued up in single file by the designated signing on desk and sheet. At the stroke of 6.00 am, the official start time in that office, the first worker in the que painstakingly checked their wristwatch and signed on. They then passed their pen on to the next person who did the same. This process continued down to the last person in the line. By this time over 25 minutes had elapsed

and many people had of course started late. An exasperated management quickly withdrew from their position.

In Mail Centre 1 then managerial attempts to make inroads into task autonomy and what had been some flexibility around start times was constrained by a combination of organic membership action and formal union intervention. This highlights what Darlington identifies as the crucial role played by rank and file workers in establishing counter-control measures within the workplace through the mechanism of spontaneous and informal action (1994: 19-20). In the case of many workers within Mail Centre 1, long-established patterns and meanings of behaviour carried over from the previous site from where many had transferred arguably acted as a well-spring from which to draw upon aggressive shopfloor tactics (Hyman, 1975: 154)

In terms of Edwards' typology of work groups and modes of bargaining behaviour, workers in Mail Centre 1 certainly conformed to that group which were deemed able to exert considerable collective influence over things such as manning levels, the division of tasks, allocation of overtime and influence over the application of discipline (1988: 196). However, the application of discipline itself along with the related issue of absenteeism had, in line with the generally tougher stance that management for a period adopted within this workplace, begun to take on a more punitive and managerial-determined complexion within this workplace. This took the form of a zero-tolerance approach towards minor misdemeanours and absenteeism that had previously been considered by both parties to be the norm, and the de-facto removal of union influence over conduct procedures. For Goodrich (1920: 61-62) the issue of discipline, and management's right to apply it, is intrinsic to the wider struggle in which they and workers strive for control within the workplace the frontier of which must be viewed as being shifting and dynamic. Management's attempts within Mail Centre 1 to challenge and make inroads into previously acceptable standards of worker conduct threatened both what was for workers the customary legitimacy (Brown, 1972: 55) of long-standing and established patterns of behaviour and an important mechanism through which their representatives could keep management in check.

In response to this initiative, the workforce within Mail Centre 1 had shortly before the start of fieldwork taken unofficial action in the form of a workplace sit-in which had lasted for a number of hours. Gall (2010: 112) notes that this has been a tactic through which postal workers have over the last few years sought to resist both the victimisation of workers and unilateral action on the behalf of management. Its effectiveness in terms of a tactic through which workers were able to collectively repel the recent wave of aggressive managerialism was recognised by many respondents:

> *It was great, management have really backed off they weren't expecting it, it was straight out of the blue as far as they were concerned* (Workplace Representative /OPG 14, Mail Centre 1);
>
> *They've stopped trying to bully people now; they had it coming to them* (OPG 12, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *There's a real difference in the way that they are with you since the sit-in. All the reps have noticed it. It had got to the point where they were issuing warnings over anything and not listening to anything we said. That's changed now and they are reluctant to issue anything in case there's more trouble* (Workplace Representative/OPG 12, Mail Centre 1).

The action itself like most unofficial strikes within the Royal Mail was organised and premeditated (Gall, 2003: 168) in that it was tacitly endorsed by the local union and promoted and called for by local shopfloor activists. Since it again resulted in management retreating from their occupation of a key area of established worker influence, it was indicative of the dialectic and continuous way in which understandings and accommodations are generated within the context of the shopfloor (Edwards, 1988: 202). Moreover, it highlighted that the institutional centrality of the local union was such that it enabled both reps and activists to mobilize bias (Batstone et al., 1978: 32) in favour of both an unofficial stoppage and what earlier had amounted to other collective sanctions.

Although the union had played a significant part in thwarting what was a wave of managerial unilateralism that had been co-ordinated from an executive level, there was

clear evidence that some workers within Mail Centre 1 at times took action that was both collective and what Darlington (1994: 19) terms as organised and independent. An example of this was to be found amongst a group of drivers who spent certain periods of their day sorting bags of mail in to different regional postcodes for dispatch. Here the deeply sensitive issue of over-zealous managerial surveillance had not only evoked such action but furthermore provided impetus for the development of a mechanism through which workers could influence the effort-bargain through what Edwards (2010: 39) defines as tacit disobedience. Thus, the following respondents note:

> *They used to watch us all the time and try to make us work harder but we just all stopped work, they kept telling us to start again but we'd argue with them until they stopped. Then we'd work again. They realised after a while that they were wasting more man hours by watching us than just leaving us alone to get on with it* (OPG 5, Mail Centre 1);

> *Management can see where you are in this workplace but they don't really bother us when we're sorting because we'll just slow right down or stop. This way we manage to get unofficial breaks as we can cover for each other* (OPG 7, Mail Centre 1).

Workers then were able to stem managerial control and moreover establish a customary system of output restriction which enabled them to periodically gain unofficial leisure time throughout the working day. For Edwards (1988: 191) group fiddles such as this can often be more developed than those which involve individual workers and, as the workgroup in question had demonstrated, can sustain rules and customs that institutionalise a system of secondary adjustment. Whilst it may have originated out of independent worker action, this practice unlike workplaces with little collective organisation, was sustained in part by the prospect of collective support for anyone penalised (ibid.). Since as has been indicated above, this could ultimately involve the intervention of local workplace reps whom Flanders refers to as the principal guardians of custom and practice (cited in Brown, 1972: 59), the action itself can be regarded as not just collective but also union-centred.

Finally, while this workgroup's customary right to regulate this aspect of their labour process had arisen out of an essentially conflictual situation between themselves and management, forms of secondary adjustment like this contain elements of cooperation with production as well as restriction (Edwards, 1988: 190). Workers here were keen to complete the sortation of mail bags as quickly as possible to gain free time between this and their scheduled outdoor driving tasks which followed. This often involved working at a pace which was above that which was considered the norm during which there were often breaches to local health and safety standards. As Edwards (1988: 192-3) notes, management have often tolerated and at times encouraged fiddles since they have provided benefits including getting the job done more quickly. In a similar vein to Delivery Offices 1 and 2 this appeared to be the case in Mail Centre 1. Here the rapid processing of mail and subsequent period of 'downtime' provided breathing space in which management could prepare for any unforeseen spikes in mail traffic whilst enabling them to meet strictly monitored targets and timescales. That the managerial benefits of these particular arrangements emerged only after a period of significant contestation within this workplace again serves to highlight the complex and contradictory interrelationship between conflict and consent within the workplace.

Level of worker commitment to and identification with the CWU

Worker agency within Mail Centre 1 then had proved relatively effective in mediating the structural pressures of product market liberalisation and the subsequent increase in managerial challenges to working practices. Much of this managerial action, which appeared to be driven by a stratum of senior executives acting on regionally coordinated directives, may be seen as bureaucratic and visibly based on mechanisms that sought to enable control of the labour process. However, like their colleagues in the Delivery Offices, workers here were additionally subject to more unobtrusive forms of control such as team briefings and newsletters. While the former of these took place on a weekly basis, the latter were displayed on notice boards and distributed both in the workplace and to workers' home addresses. Rosen and Baroudi (1992: 217) term these as ideational control initiatives in that they are concerned with the control of workers' beliefs, value, attitudes and their underlying rationality as a means of bringing about behaviour which will result in suitable levels of output. Put another way, these might be seen as

mechanisms which, in addition to the generic features of capitalism such as the system of wage labour, the subordination of the worker to the labour process and the mystifying effects of the market, serve to realise for management what is distinctive about the capitalist labour process: the simultaneous obscuring and securing of surplus labour (Burawoy, 1979: 193)

Again, as with Delivery Office 1, there appeared to be little evidence to suggest that these initiatives had brought about an increase in either greater output or commitment to Royal Mail as an organisation amongst these workers. The following respondents when asked whether they thought that workers needed to be more flexible in terms of their working practices in order that the organisation could progress capture the views of the majority of interviewees:

> *We have changed enough, it's a con they just feed us all this rubbish so that they can get us ready to be sold off. Nobody believes that there's any benefit in it for us* (OPG 5, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *Everybody knows that what they come out with is just lies and rubbish. It's the people at the top who ought to change. They are just here to run it down and strengthen the case for us to be sold off* (OPG 4, Mail Centre 1).

Management's inability in this instance to appeal to what this study has earlier identified as the more unitary element of worker consciousness (Batstone et al., 1977: 24) was due in no small part to the role of the local union. In particular, workplace reps were able to use team briefing sessions as platforms from which to communicate union objectives while at the same time criticising management policy. In addition to this, the branch itself sought to negate the effectiveness of employer communications through well attended on-site meetings and additionally with their own regularly published briefings which were distributed in the workplace by local stewards. The latter contained information on CWU national policy, counter-arguments with regard to the benefits of privatisation of the industry, and up-dates on events at workplace level. Again, the union were able to utilise these processes to promote a definition of interests amongst workers which differed from that put forward by management. The sources of what, here, are social beliefs calls for a consideration of ideology which, according to Snow and Benford (1998), serves to frame

an event, issue or situation. The use of injustice or illegitimacy frames similar to those deployed by the local union in Mail Centre 1 are critical for collective organisation and action since they begin the process of detaching subordinate group members from loyalty to ruling groups (Kelly, 1998: 29).

The cohort of shop stewards within Mail Centre 1 when viewed from the perspective put forward by Batstone et al. (1977) carried out what would be termed as a leadership role with regard to their union position. This meant that they were able to successfully shape issues which arose in the workplace whilst exercising, and moreover, imbuing amongst the wider workforce a commitment to union principles and the achievement of collective goals (ibid, 24 56). If the former of these points is apparent with regard to the manner in which they had influenced the outcomes of a period of shopfloor conflict, then the latter is evident in the following responses:

> *Where do my loyalties lie within this workplace? Well first and foremost with the union* (OPG 3, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *My loyalties in this place lie with the union and my mates, definitely not with Royal Mail and their managers* (OPG 5, Mail Centre 1).

While the efficacy of this action was intrinsically related to the on-site presence of the branch and the wider body of experienced stewards that this brought with it, it was again further affected by a cluster of other influences and their interaction in the workplace (Edwards, 1988: 201). Though the Mail Centre environment may have ushered in greater scope for workforce surveillance, on the other hand in the case of Mail Centre 1, it had served to reinforce a strong union-centred approach by the workplace representatives. In particular, the indoor nature of the job and proximity of time spent under the same roof meant that levels of peer group interaction and patterns of contact amongst the workers were such as to foster a collective orientation. This itself is associated with the greater propensity towards a leadership type role on behalf of the local stewards (Batstone et al., 1977: 149, 152).

Although certain structural situations might help to facilitate leadership amongst stewards they do not automatically bring this about. Whether or not leadership actually

occurs is dependent upon processes of negotiation (Batstone et al. 1977: 152) and the manner in which structural forces themselves are mediated within the workplace itself. In Mail Centre 1 scope for local representatives to promote a culture of union-centred collectivism had itself been significantly enhanced by three key factors. Firstly, management's quest for ever-greater levels of productivity and headcount reduction meant that workers, at the behest of their union, were now more cautious in rushing to make time at the end of their shift. Secondly, the recent introduction of technologically advanced machinery that now sorted individual delivery rounds, meant that many workers, due to longer sorting sequences, made less time at the end of their shift and now spent more time than in the past together the Mail Centre itself. Thirdly, some workgroups were willingly prepared to independently defend and moreover build on long-standing informal arrangements. This not only gave opportunities for sociability and leisure time, it provided greater scope for union contact. Worker agency itself, therefore, played a key part in both tempering managerial aggression and strengthening union organisation amongst this workgroup. As Darlington (2002:95) notes, social structure and social action are intimately related with each continuously affecting the other in a dynamic fashion. Such arguments serve to caution against misconceptions of collective, union-based action and indeed strong level of identification with the union on behalf of workers as being the exclusive outcome of a top-down didactic process.

Union membership levels within Mail Centre 1 were high and stood at around 85-90 percent. As Jenkins et al. (2002: 94-5) note, the shift to Mail Centre type environments has been associated with a significant increase in the use of part time employment and the development of a more casualised workplace. This was the case in Mail Centre 1 where the union had lost some of its influence over the employer's introduction of non-standard contract holders. Again, it was evident that the union, while maintaining some control over the limits of such employment models, found the climate of ever greater liberalisation a difficult one in which to argue:

> *We have had to accept an increase in temporary working, we don't want to but what can we do? They won't employ substantively against vacancies and if we don't agree we could fail (as in not meet dispatch times) and we'll be under*

scrutiny to be the next office closed down (Workplace Representative /OPG 14, Mail Centre 1).

Consequently, there was now an increasing minority of workers in this workplace who were temporary and awaiting substantive job offers. While some of these were non-unionised, most had joined. Like their counterparts in Delivery Offices 1 and 2 many had previously worked in areas of the labour market such as retail in which trade unionism might be termed at best as being weak.

Shop stewards in Mail Centre 1 were, since they presided over a much larger workforce, faced with disproportionately greater challenges than their colleagues in both of this study's delivery offices. They had to attempt to recruit a disproportionately large category of employees who were less likely to join the union (Heery and Abbott, 2000: 155). In doing so they had to maintain a context in which to counteract what Burawoy (1979: 140-4) refers to as the imported consciousness of a group of workers who had not been traditionally associated with or familiar with the notion of trade unionism.

In terms of the last point, a final observation is worthy of note here since it reinforces Edwards' argument that an explanation of patterns of relations within a given workplace requires attention to a cluster of influences and to their interaction (1988:201). As was the case with their substantive colleagues, temporary workers within Mail Centre 1 largely looked first and foremost to the shopfloor representatives to resolve issues. Furthermore, as the following responses suggest they were less likely than temporary workers within both Delivery Offices 1 and 2 to be managerially coerced into working over and outside of what was considered to be their normal daily workload:

Management have tried in the past to mess the temps about and shift them round and things. We have been made aware of this and have stepped in to stop it. (Branch Official, Mail Centre 1); and

We just do the same as the others. If management try to bully us or try and keep shifting us around and things we just refuse or get the union involved. (OPG 3, Mail Centre 1).

The institutional centrality of the union in this workplace undoubtedly helped local representatives to maintain influence over, and loyalty amongst, a type of workforce who due to the precarious nature of their employment have been deemed as being susceptible to 'management by fear' (Drago, 1996) and organisational whim (Kalleburg, 2001: 481-2: Heery and Abbott, 2000: 155). This was further bolstered by what Edwards (1988: 199) refers to as the technical organisation of work which in this instance, despite on-going changes in production methods, still involved the interaction of large groups of workers in one large work area. In such an environment, temporary workers would feel less isolated than their Delivery Office counterparts and the union would be better available to deal with any managerial misdemeanours towards them. Finally, in that their entire working day involves socializing with the wider more experienced workgroup within the Mail Centre temporary workers in this workplace would have an earlier and much more comprehensive induction into what here were the specific union-based traditions of the workplace in comparison to those temporary staff within both Delivery Offices 1 and 2.

Mail Centre 2

Extent of union-centred formal and informal job controls

All aspects of The BT Agreement 2010 had also been fully implemented in Mail Centre 2. As was the case in Mail Centre 1 its potential impact on the terms and conditions of the workforce had seemingly been mediated by a cluster of influences and their interaction (Edwards, 1988: 201). In sum it had resulted in a handful of voluntary redundancies which went to those who were approaching retirement age. Again, one important factor was the embedded on-site presence of the well-organised local union and its representatives, a number of who were fully released from their everyday jobs to carry out their representative roles. Unlike Mail Centre 1, the representatives here were not officials of the Branch itself which was situated off-site and a considerable distance away.

Mail Centre 2's parent Branch covered a wide geographical area encompassing a number of other mail centres and stand-alone delivery offices. The three old mail centres that merged and moved into form Mail Centre 2 had all had a reputation for militancy. Each had taken significant amounts of unofficial and official strike action over what Gall (2003:

188) determines as substantive reasons such as victimisation of union reps, the ill-treatment of colleagues and, increased pressures for flexible working. The issue of flexible working had been something that the Branch and its constituent Mail Centres that now made up Mail Centre 2 had in the past been particularly effective at staving off. Up until the merger, as the following interviewees note, job demarcation had been significant, allocation of overtime was controlled by the union and there had been successful unofficial action that had countered the introduction of temporary and part time staff:

> *When we worked in the old office the union had complete control. When they tried to introduce casuals (part time and temporary staff) we just walked out, we were all full time permanent with everything that they couldn't staff against covered on overtime* (OPG 8, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *Nobody would ever be moved from what they were doing. The union would intervene and what was outside of your job would be covered on overtime or not get done* (OPG 2, Mail centre 2).

The reps in Mail Centre 2 were, as the above suggests, not integrated into the wider network of their higher ranking Branch Officers and full time officials- to the same extent as their colleagues in Mail Centre 1. As Batstone et al. (1977: 64, 252) note, such networks not only serve to promote the leadership role of local stewards, they also provide certain resources which bolster and steward power. These include up to date information of events, interpretations of events and recipes of action.

Nevertheless, as the following responses point out, reps were involved in, and had influence over, a wide range of work-related issues up to and including those which potentially involved worker dismissal:

> *I'd say that we are heavily involved in negotiating over most things that go on in the workplace, management never really try to change things without running it past us*. (Workplace Representative /OPG 13, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *We're involved in most things really. I mean, we have recently had on-going negotiations over the BT agreement, we deal with Health and Safety issues,*

everyday issues and discipline and attendance. (Workplace Representative/OPG 14, Mail Centre 2).

Additionally, the local union prided itself on the considerable influence that it had over staffing levels. That said they had given ground on the issue of temporary working since this workplace opened. Although they had been unable able to stem an influx of agency staff and temporary workers, the local union had managed to establish a local agreement which regulated the numbers of these. On this point, representatives had appeared to be considerably more successful in winning substantive contracts for agency staff in this workplace than those in all other workplaces. However, since they could be utilised more flexibly than substantive staff, such workers had, as the following interviewee suggests, reduced the union's ability influence over overtime levels and annual leave:

> *Where we used to have a say over exactly how many hours went on overtime, management sometimes now will say that they can resource some of the hours with a less than full time temp. It's cheaper for a start as they don't have to pay overtime rate* (Workplace Representative/OPG 15, Mail Centre 2); and

> *We still control annual leave but not to the extent that we used to do. Before we could go into the resourcing, which is covered by one of us anyway, and just get them to cover people at short notice with overtime. It's different now, the resourcing bloke can only sanction it if there are the right amount of agency staff or temps to cover it for the flat rate* (Workplace Representative/OPG 14, Mail Centre 2).

That said, the method of advertising unforeseen overtime on a board with the union adjudicating over any disputes, free from management interference was still a recognised means of resourcing in this workplace.

In terms of its relationship with management the union within Mail Centre 2 at the time of fieldwork can be said to have adopted a partnership style approach towards bargaining. Proponents of this model, as Heery (2002: 20) notes, regard unions as intermediary organisations that should cultivate the resources of employers in order to bolster institutional security and obtain fresh opportunities to recruit and retain

members. The focus here on social partnership, with its connotations for mutual gains and cooperation (Tailby and Winchester, 2000: 374), was reflected in much of the discourse of the local union's senior officials:

> *We try to be responsible and operate on a give and take basis. This is the best way to achieve things in the current climate*. (Workplace representative/OPG 15, Mail Centre 2).

Further evidence of this approach was to be found in the complete absence of industrial action within this workplace since it had been opened a few years earlier. Whilst this mirrored the espoused shift in approach of the national CWU in recent times (see BT Agreement 2010), it differed at a local level from the more conflictual nature of relations within both Mail Centre 1 and Delivery Office 1 in the main, and at times Delivery Office 2 -all of which it will be recalled came under the same nationally agreed terms and conditions relating to one single employer. Moreover, it differed considerably from the approach of the wider Branch within which Mail Centre 2 was located that had a long history of workplace militancy. As Batstone et al. (1977: 11) note, as institutions, domestic union organisations can be important sources of power that foster particular views of the workplace and behaviour. Changes in these patterns of influence may occur through either a turnover in key personnel or as the result of a host of other political, legal or social factors (ibid.: 5). In this workplace the nucleus of local reps had spent considerable time in a previous Branch workplace that merged with a number of others to form Mail Centre 2 and that itself had been associated with militant action. As such they will more than likely have played a role in instigating or endorsing the action mentioned above (Gall, 2003: 168). It follows that any understanding of the more conciliatory means by which the union here sought to mediate the pressures of modernisation must take place within an analysis of wider external factors.

In contrast to the other workplaces under investigation and even the former individual offices from which it was formed, Mail Centre 2 was situated in an area in which unemployment at the time of fieldwork stood at around 3.6 %. This was significantly lower than the national UK average of 7.8 % and meant that management here had difficulty in attracting and retaining labour in an industry that has long been associated

with low wages and unsocial hours. As Ironside and Seifert note, when faced with staff shortages management are under pressure to pay more and improve conditions to attract staff and retain them (2000: 93). In the case of Mail Centre 2 this was reinforced by the potentially strong bargaining position of a strategically placed workgroup who were responsible for processing, and therefore potentially disrupting the flow of, 20% of the country's mail. As a consequence, the approach of both local and senior management, according to the following union reps, appeared to be somewhat less strident than their colleagues within the other workplaces under investigation:

> *The blokes here don't have any problems really, nobody bothers them. Management are really ok. If anything arises we can usually sort it out* (Workplace Representative/OPG 14, Mail Centre 2);
>
> *We've had people take loads of sick leave and who are then on a stage 3 (potential dismissal meeting). I've never lost one yet-everybody keeps their job* (Workplace Representative OPG 15, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *Management are really ok with everyone here, there's never any trouble really. Why should the union and the members risk losing money by striking over things when things are like this?* '(Workplace Representative 13, Mail Centre 2).

That a local group of reps that had in the past looked to more militant methods of achieving their aims now felt able to mediate the structural and potentially damaging effects of modernisation through the medium of a more moderate model of bargaining was again then related to a cluster of factors and their interaction (Edwards, 1988: 201). In particular, local economic conditions and the manner in which Royal Mail had chosen to organise work had served to constrain the employer's wider strategy of unitarism and work intensification. This highlights that the policies and positions which unions adopt to some extent reflect the strategies of employers (Ironside and Seifert, 2000: 93), and that structural pressures are mediated by the subjective features of actors and their actions at workplace level. However, Edwards reminds us that the relationships between these actors are dynamic, involving a continuous negotiation of order (1988: 194). In times of change such as the present climate of competition and rationalisation within the Royal Mail, this may result in the erosion and indeed disappearance of job controls (Thompson

and Bannon, 1985) like those which have been historically associated with many groups of postal workers (Beale, 2003; Gall, 2003; Batstone et al., 1984). From this viewpoint an accurate understanding of the true nature of relations within Mail Centre 2, must-as with the other workplaces under investigation, include a micro-level focus on the shopfloor itself and the perceptions and actions of workers.

Although the union were on the whole satisfied with their attempts at limiting change, this at times conflicted with perceptions of some workers on shopfloor. Evidence here suggested that management had made significant inroads into some of the traditional areas of shopfloor regulation that the union, in previous times, had whole-heartedly defended. While the majority of interviewees in contrast to Beirne's (2013: 123) recent study of modernisation within the industry reported that they had perceived no negative change to their occupational security and workload in recent times, many stated that they had felt some reduction to their level of workplace autonomy. This had been particularly evident with regard to the gradual erosion of unofficial breaks and the clamping down on cigarette breaks by management. Additionally, while workers still operated some discretion over the movement of labour, this, as the following interviewees suggest, had in recent times been diluted:

> *If management ask us to do another job while we've still got work in front of us we usually say no. Usually that's enough to make them back off but sometimes they'll push it and say things like the world has changed and we need to be more efficient, if this happens most people will eventually say things like 'ok just this once but don't ask again* (OPG 2, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *We still say no and won't let them shift us around but sometimes if they are really struggling they'll push it and then ultimately most people will carry out what's been asked. This doesn't mean that management have got carte blanche and we'll still tell them where to go if what they're asking is unreasonable* (OPG 8, Mail Centre 2).

Indoor non-driving staff on the whole also reported that they now made comparatively less time at the end of their shift than they had done in the past. Moreover, where early finishes had previously involved the whole of the workgroup, they now increasingly took

the form of 'sneaking off early' by individual workers. Again, management sought to deter this and worker opposition to flexibility through appealing to workers to think of its impact on quality of service and the subsequent threat of the movement of work to another mail centre. This was a view which was endorsed by the local union and its network of representatives at shopfloor level.

As with the other workplaces under investigation, management in Mail Centre 2 seemed to have been reticent to deploy available surveillance to gain tighter control over the local workforce. Management in this workplace too had access to swipe card data, CCTV footage of workers and barcode scanning systems that revealed workers time spent on particular task. Again, this would appear to contrast with other areas of the public services in which some commentators have noted the negative consequences for employees resulting from increased surveillance and managerial control (Glover and Noon, 2005). What did perhaps differ here in comparison to Delivery Office 1 and Mail Centre 1 in particular was that the potential impact of increased managerial scrutiny was, as the following interviewees point out, exclusively mediated by the formal body of the local union rather than either actual organic worker action or the threat of this:

> *Yes, we know that they've got all the latest technology and could watch us all day with it if they wanted to. The union have made sure that this doesn't happen so we they don't really monitor where we are all the time.* (OPG 8, Mail centre 2).

In practice this took the form of a tacit understanding that management would refrain from over-scrutinising workers on the understanding that the union would not oppose a reasonable amount of flexibility with regard to the movement of staff. While not conceding that that they may have surrendered some control to management, the local representatives did justify what were shopfloor concessions on the part of both workers and their union which had, in part, been influenced by the potential consequences of surveillance. As the following representative pointed out:

> *We don't want to push it too much with management, give and take. If they wanted to clamp down they could, there's probably enough information from cameras and swipe cards to hang everybody if they used it* (Workplace Representative 13, Mail Centre 2).

In some instances, the inroads made by management on the shopfloor here might be regarded as being indicative of a shift in their favour of the frontier of control away from that of a more quiescent workforce and their union (Brown, 1972: 56). This is at first glance perplexing since a number of factors combined to provide workers with considerable bargaining power and the capacity therefore to defend long-standing forms of custom and practice However, worker action itself, aside from subtle, yet omnipresent threat of closer surveillance, was tempered by the structural influence of liberalisation and, in particular, what Edwards (1988: 201) refers to as the legitimatory resources that this provided management with. From this viewpoint management were able to appeal to workers often on an individual basis to behave responsibly in a climate of competition and shrinking market share. Such an approach resembles the more sophisticated means by which management, for Edwards (ibid.: 196), seek to prevent the emergence of open struggles around the effort bargain. This was given further legitimacy by the local union's adoption of a cooperative, give and take type of trade unionism. Whilst union strategy was up to a point shaped by its relationship with, and experience of, a management whose preferred agenda was hamstrung by a tight local labour market, its reticence in terms of attempting to exploit this, as will be discussed below, was also related to recent changes in the nature of its membership and the effects of these on workplace organisation.

Level of worker commitment to and identification with the CWU

Like their colleagues in the other workplaces under investigation, workers within Mail Centre 2 were themselves subject to weekly team briefing sessions. As might be expected here, these did not take on the more punitive appearance of the type that was identified in Beale and Mustchin's recent study of the Royal Mail (2013: 12). Nevertheless, the flow of managerial information emanating from the process did focus strongly on the workplace's vulnerability to both internal and external competitors (Jenkins et al., 2007: 638). For its part the local union, who had licence from management to engage in the meetings took the opportunity, despite its leanings towards a cooperative relationship with the employer, to raise issues on behalf of the workforce. In contrast to their general acceptance of worker flexibility and its implicit acceptance of management's right to manage, the union, as the following correspondents point out, adopted a somewhat

oppositional approach raising questions that were often at odds with the everyday interest of management:

> *A member had been stopped and warned by management for the way that they were pushing a York (metal mail trolley). We waited until the next team briefing and raised it with management in front of everybody that management, more than anyone, were guilty of this too and that they should also be disciplined. This resulted in the warning being revoked.* (Workplace Representative /OPG 14, Mail Centre 2); and

> *In the team briefing sessions we would constantly ask for temporary workers to be made permanent. We'd argue that we were a responsible union who cooperated but also needed to prove to temporary workers that the employer was fair and interested in their futures. This often put management in a position and we'd get people made-up onto substantive contracts as a result. If they weren't already in the union they'd join afterwards.* (Workplace Representative/OPG 12, Mail Centre 2).

The representatives extended this approach towards other forms of employee involvement such as newsletters and the ubiquitous presence of plasma screen televisions which have in recent times increasingly replaced the printed word in pushing the employer's business message to employees (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 14). This involved the dissemination of union counter-briefings through both the notice board and hand-to-hand circulation. Again, the union gained managerial permission to undertake this by framing such initiative within the discourse of partnership and 'balance of opinion'.

Within Mail Centre 2 then, the local union's model of a partnership did not, in contrast to the opinions of commentators such as Blyton and Turnbull (1998: 106), rest upon a de-emphasis of the role of workplace organisation in advancing the interest of workers. Rather, it extended opportunities for representative participation (Heery, 2002: 23) and crucially served to mitigate the structural effects of a managerial discourse. As Beirne (2013: 123) the discourse in question was predicated on the employer's wider objective of bringing about cultural change and worker acceptance of modernisation and lean ways

of working. The effectiveness of union action in this instance was apparent in the overwhelmingly critical views of those interviewed in terms of Royal Mail's modernisation programme. Whilst many saw this as an attempt to 'cut jobs at any cost' in preparation for privatisation, nearly all respondents believed that the union acted in their interests and stated that they would always approach the union rather than management when faced with a problem. Furthermore, in line with the following respondents, most interviewees were mistrustful towards Royal Mail's wider Employee Involvement initiatives and said that their loyalties lay first and foremost with the union:

> *The Work Time Learning sessions here are just an attempt to try and justify the fact that Royal Mail are ruining our jobs and the service. When we are in there nobody takes any notice of what management are saying because we all know that its just lies and propaganda* (OPG 5, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *Management are always trying to get us on board at the Work Time Learning Sessions. Nobody really falls for this. I mean, we listen to the union here rather than those Royal Mail stooges* (OPG 4, Mail Centre 2).

On the other hand, there were, according to the reps, a sizeable number of members who were detached and indifferent towards the union and its objectives.

Despite the presence then of a range of managerial aids which were underpinned by the wider objective of increasing managerial control at the expense of the CWU (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 17), a majority of workers within Mail centre 2 appeared to be committed to their union and its role within the workplace. The existence in such circumstances of what might be termed as a trade union ideology amongst these workers is related in part to the institutionally centralised position of the local union within this workplace. This crucially enabled reps to foster and promote a particular set of views and patterns of behaviour that operated in favour of the union (Batstone et al., 1977: 10-11). While this suggests that like their counterparts in both Delivery Office 1 and Mail Centre 1 the reps in this workplace carried out what for Batstone at al. was a leadership approach with regard to their role, its influence in this case was less far reaching. Moreover, in contrast to these two workplaces there appeared to be little evidence within Mail Centre 2 of the organic fulcrum of workplace activism upon which worker leadership within the

Royal Mail has traditionally rested (Gall, 2003: 146). While this may have meant that local representatives here were relatively free from the pressures of supporting independent rank and file initiatives that such activism gives rise to (Darlington, 1993: 21; Hyman, 1975: 161) it on the other hand served to dilute their potential bargaining power. As Ironside and Seifert (2000: 17) argue, efficacious collective bargaining by trade unions implies the use of power within negotiations, namely the potential or actual mobilization of union members to harm, disrupt and distort the employer's business. It will be recalled that much successful strike action within recent times in the Royal Mail has itself been underpinned by the type of independent workgroup activism that was largely absent within Mail Centre 2 (Darlington, 2002: 98). This suggests that the representatives' adoption of a partnership approach may, in this workplace, have been born as much out of expediency than an ideological commitment to a cooperative model of workplace relations.

Although this dearth in membership activity might in more established Royal Mail sites be influenced by particular workplace history and its effect upon patterns of behaviour (Edwards, 1988: 202; Batstone et al., 1977: 11), it will be recalled that Mail Centre 2 was itself less than three years old. Much has been written about the detrimental effects of these greenfield environments upon worker organisation (see, for example, Mckinlay and Taylor, 1996). However, the workplace itself was comprised of workers and reps from a number of defunct Royal Mail sites that each had a tradition of activism which the latter had in their capacity as union reps transported into this new setting. Moreover, the technical organisation of work and lax nature of managerial control could not be deemed such as to inhibit trade union activity (Rose, 1998: 111). Here then, the structural effects of union policy, managerial approach, and accelerating modernisation in this instance had appeared to evoke a cleavage in the levels of union identity and commitment amongst a group of workers who were subject to a largely uniform set of terms and conditions of employment. It follows that any understanding of workplace behaviour and in particular the propensity of workers to adopt a collective union-centred outlook within Mail Centre 2 must again extend to a consideration of the manner in which these structural forces themselves interacted with a number factors that were specific to the locale itself.

As with all the other workplaces under investigation, membership levels within Mail Centre 2 were high standing at around 85 to 95 percent. As has been outlined above, in line with other workplaces under investigation, the union had been unable to stop an increase temporary employment amongst the workforce. There were, however, important differences with regard to the issue of worker recruitment in comparison to the other three workplaces. This potentially militated against the local union's ability to maintain a context in which to defend previously sacrosanct areas of worker control. In particular, recruitment difficulties meant that management in Mail Centre 2 had in recent times looked outside the local area to attract workers. This had resulted in a large influx of students, young and inexperienced workers, and a sizeable number of Asian workers, from a neighbouring town. In contrast to the other three workplaces management were more disposed to offering a range of substantive contracts to new starters in order to bolster both recruitment and retention. Nevertheless, there was, as the following interviewees point out, a significantly high turnover in numbers of these workers:

> *There has been about 200 hundred new staff that have started over the last couple of years that I would describe as 'green labour'. Lots of them have come from places where there is no union presence such as call centres or retail and many have come straight from college. Although they're mostly in the union they tend to be more individualistic in outlook and don't really bother with union issues and things. Many of them don't stay that long and move on to other jobs* (Workplace Representative/OPG 12, Mail Centre 2); and

> *Although there are quite a number of people who are up for dealing with things through strikes and other action, there's still a lot of new starters who don't stay long and who are, along with one or two other groups of people not really interested* (Workplace Representative/OPG 13, Mail Centre 2).

Under these circumstances, union attempts to realise a collective union-centred identity amongst the wider workforce would have faced a number of countervailing influences. Firstly, the majority of young inexperienced workers here would have no standard of comparison when assessing the fairness of managerial systems of control (Edwards and Scullion, 1982: 76) which in this case included the encroachment on some areas of

custom and practice. Secondly, those new starters who did have prior work experience were more than likely now to be working in comparatively more benign surroundings than the warehouses and call centres where they had previously worked. And thirdly, the large contingent of Asian workers, who here often looked to group elders before the local union to resolve issues, constituted a group of workers who, did not always engage with union structures in the way that more established groups of workers might do (Healy and Kirton, 2000). As will be argued below, such a context would create challenges for both the legitimacy of a local union that lacked the on-site presence of a senior network of supporting officials and the process through which it identified the collective interests of the workers in question (Simms and Charlwood, 2010: 136). Moreover, the set of diverse and transient, characteristics pertaining to this workgroup would, along with a general lack of experience of workplace unionism, render it more difficult for local reps to cultivate a sense of collective identity and injustice that is essential to effective worker mobilisation (Kelly, 1998: 44).

Section Two: The extent and nature of non-union based forms of individual and collective job controls.

In contrast to the preceding section, attention now turns to those forms of worker action within each workplace which may be regarded as being non-union based. These can be either individual or collective and essentially involve worker practices that take place in isolation from, or even in contravention of, the local union and its policies. Worker action in this sense does not, therefore, resemble a wider organisational approach which Edwards identifies as seeking to influence issues such as the division of tasks, allocation of overtime and staffing levels (Edwards, 1988: 196-7). Overall, evidence so far suggests that local union organisation in the offices under investigation has, by and large, managed to retain much of their long-standing influence over such issues (Gall, 2003; Beale 2003). This has, at times, been quite clearly bolstered by the independent yet union-centred action of the workforce themselves who on the whole, have exhibited high levels of commitment to and identification with their local union officials and representatives. However, fieldwork has also uncovered a propensity amongst some workers to actively make sense of, and to achieve a degree of control over, their work experience (Salaman, 1986: 21) through actions and mediums that had little to do with the collective principles

of trade unionism This study now moves on to examine to what extent such practices exist and the factors that have influenced these.

Delivery Office 1

Although there was clear evidence of well-established union-based control mechanisms within Delivery Office 1, a minority of workers undertook working practices that were individual and instrumental. This contrasted sharply with the situation here some four years earlier where, except for a few isolated examples, the workforce largely observed local union policy and the long-standing, if often informal, norms of the wider collective. As this chapter has earlier intimated, this minority tended to consist of those workers who were termed, 'new starters', 'non-unionised individuals' and 'unionised-individuals'. One notable practice, which had been a particularly sensitive one for the union, was that which involved some of these workers working through meal reliefs and starting work before duty time. Whilst the actions of new starters here is perhaps understandable, the practice allowed other established staff to finish earlier and in some cases boost earnings through the delivery of unstaffed delivery rounds within their own duty time. The very same practices, on the part of two individuals had been at the heart of the protracted dispute in this office several years earlier. This had resulted in the dismissal of the main body of the local union who were accused of attempting to stop the practice through 'bullying and 'intimidation' (see Lyddon, 2009). As such, local representatives, albeit still well organised and effective, were now reluctant to directly challenge, and therefore forced to dilute their opposition to, a mode of behaviour which they regarded as posing a threat to both job security and, worker health and safety. For their part management largely here rebuffed formal union protestation instead cloaking these practices in the standard HRM-based discourse of personal choice and increased efficiency. As Edwards (1988: 192) notes, management at times not only accept but often take for granted such fiddles and breaches to health and safety since they help speed up production and pose little threat to managerial prerogative.

Royal Mail's championing of the individual rights of employees and the ever-present spectre of the previous dismissals seemingly impacted upon union-centred effort controls. Firstly, it served as a countervailing pressure (Beynon, 1973: 102) upon both the

collective consciousness and willingness of shop stewards and activists to combat a practice that had breached both jointly agreed patterns of attendance and health and safety procedures. Secondly, it provided opportunities amongst a minority of workers for the development of other types of behaviour which were non-union based and on the whole, individual. One such practice involved the discarding by these workers of cumbersome delivery trolleys in favour of delivery pouches which enabled speedier delivery of mail and earlier finish times. This again constituted a violation of safety standards and was potentially subject to disciplinary action. Once more, as the following interviewee points out, a management that was pressed for time and restricted in its flexible utilisation of workers turned a blind eye or at best paid lip service towards outlawing it if pressurised by the union:

> *We sometimes have difficulty getting management to clamp down on people running around without their proper delivery equipment. Everybody likes to make a bit of time but some of these are rushing around and putting their health at risk. Management either pretend they haven't seen it or stall if they can* (Delivery Representative 4/OPG 16), Delivery Office 1).

The coexistence within this single workplace of what amounted to two different modes of bargaining behaviour serves here to highlight the limitations of wider organisational patterns of workgroup behaviour (Edwards, 1988: 197) and led, in this instance, to a somewhat ironic outcome. This is that a small minority of non-militant workers were able to exploit and at the same time violate a set of control measures that had been developed by a more union-centred majority whom they largely regarded as being too militant.

Another practice that was periodically carried out by some workers within Delivery Office 1 involved the deliberate sabotaging of delivery vans. This would invariably result in the temporary replacement of regular vehicles with reserve vehicles that were not installed with the latest surveillance equipment. As the following interviewee points out, this brought about a number of benefits for those concerned:

> *If you can manage to get your own van taken off the road and get a replacement, they have no idea as to where you are. You can go home like the old days or just*

park up anywhere you like and have a sleep or read the paper (OPG, 11, Delivery Office 1).

Edwards (1988: 197-8) notes that essential acts of sabotage like this may, as a phenomenon, vary considerably between work groups and the bargaining models to which they have access to. While such action on the behalf of strictly controlled workers is likely to be an act of spontaneous frustration, other more utilitarian types of sabotage (Taylor and Walton, 1971) are a result of attempts by workers to make the job easier. In the case of Delivery Office 1, reserve vehicles allowed workers to park up and 'make time on the job' whilst further enabling them to slip off route, or take breaks at home without fear of being detected. Although for Edwards (1988: 197) these types of sabotage may be more developed where there is a collective approach, in this case the action was very much individualised, covert and therefore not underpinned by the capacity of the wider group to defend it. As such it constituted an attempt by individuals to create a degree of distance from a technological system which potentially provided increased scope for managerial control over their labour process; a system whose implementation the union, whilst able to mediate through the omnipresent threat of negative sanctions, was unable to halt.

The union's inability to halt Royal Mail's unilateral introduction of a set of sophisticated data gathering technologies, highlights the point that while workers might be capable of exerting influence over the conduct of work, they enter a terrain whose contours are largely shaped by management (Edwards, 1988: 194). This is key to an analysis of patterns of worker behaviour since the manner in which a particular production process is structured will, as has been argued with regard to Royal Mail's Mail Centre network, influence the nature and efficacy of shopfloor organisation. In general, the propensity of shop stewards to carry out a leadership role based on the promotion of collectively based union values amongst their membership is more likely when the nature of work itself is such as to foster peer rather than management contact (Batstone et al., 1977: 152). This study has highlighted both the scope that existed for worker interaction and the collectively-based union-centred model of workplace organisation that this helped to sustain within Delivery Office 1. However, the implementation of the BT 2010 Agreement had ushered in significant change which had removed a traditional method that had aided

union influence over the behaviour of workers. Now, rather than travelling out to, and returning from, their delivery rounds in twelve seat vans, workers travelled out in pairs and where possible were allowed to go directly home when finishing. Away from their peers and the stewards themselves, who had historically tended to drive vehicles which transported the workers out in groups, those who so wished had greater freedom to undertake behaviour that contravened union policy. Furthermore, under this system, workers had the option to drive home after finishing delivery in their designated work vehicle which they were permitted to keep at their home address. Many interviewees had noted that the requirement to return the vehicle the following day had, since their vehicles were utilised on a daily basis, acted to deter workers from taking organised and rotational ad-hoc sick leave. This meant that the workers had lost some influence over a collectively-based mechanism for increasing reward, in the form of overtime earnings, during periods when mail volumes had been low.

While the issue of overtime itself was an area that local union had, retained its traditionally significant influence over, there were signs that there had been some change her. A minority of workers were prepared to undertake overtime at a rate which undercut that which was agreed by the union. Again, this was facilitated by the cessation of group-based transportation, both to and from deliveries, and the subsequent reduction of social pressure to observe what amounted to a type of output restriction by the wider workgroup here. That said, these behaviours were common knowledge throughout the workplace and typically evoked the following responses amongst many of those interviewed:

> *Some of those will do anything for overtime, it's terrible really after everything the union's done to make sure we get paid properly; greedy pigs* (OPG 4, Delivery Office 1);
>
> *They cause so much ill feeling the office's split because of it. They're wrecking the job.* (OPG 1, Delivery Office 1); and
>
> *The bosses know who to tap up when there's no one about. The trouble is it spoils it for everyone else because they'll go to the ones who will do it for less first* (OPG 7, Delivery Office 1).

Such animosity is indicative of the way in which the inherent antagonism between workers and managers within a capitalist mode of production is translated from hierarchical domination into lateral antagonism. From this viewpoint, all conflict is mediated on an ideological terrain (Burawoy, 1979: 67) which in this case involved the opportunity to increase levels of earnings. In cultivating a covert system of unequal reward, management, whether intentionally or not, had helped to sustain divisions within this workplace by converting management-worker conflict into competitiveness and intergroup struggle (ibid.).

Delivery Office 2

It will be recalled that in contrast to their colleagues in Delivery Office 1, workers within Delivery Office 2 on the whole appeared to be less collectively inclined towards regulating their workplace. One specific example that was evident during the time of fieldwork concerned many of the workers voluntarily foregoing their designated meal break during the period in which they carried out the indoor element of their workload. Instead they spent this time sorting and preparing mail for their forthcoming delivery rounds. A significant number also began work before they were officially scheduled to, sometimes to the extent of an hour per day. In truth, this had been a situation that had prevailed for some years in this workplace. Some years ago, the researcher, as part of a branch delegation, had attempted to try to resolve this and warn against its potential threat to job security. It had, as far as could be gleaned however, become more commonplace in the last three years. The workplace representatives had made some attempts to curb this but, as the following points out, had enjoyed little success:

> *We've tried to tell them about going out early and working breaks but they won't listen. They just want to get done and get home* (Workplace Representative /OPG 14, Delivery Office 2).

As this chapter has earlier intimated, and as the following responses suggest, there appeared to be two widely differing reasons held by workers as to why they carried out a practice which directly contravened union policy. Both highlight the limitations of union organisation here and the union's inability to stop what had been a change to the nature of effort bargain in terms of the labour process of some workers:

I work my break because I can make at least an hour a day and get home early (OPG 9, Delivery Office 2);

By working my break, I can get out as early as possible and finish early (OPG 12, Delivery Office 2);

If I didn't work my break I'd never get around in time. If I just work to my time and bring stuff back it will be there waiting for me the next day, there's just so much more mail these days (OPG 6, Delivery Office 2); and

Working my break and starting early is the only way that I can cope, I'd never finish if I didn't. It's just got harder and harder (OPG 8, Delivery Office 2).

This cleavage of opinion and the inequity to which it pertained reaffirms this study's earlier observation with regard to this workplace. This is that a cluster of factors that were historical, cultural and structural, had militated here against the development of a dominant system of norms and values that might be deemed as embodying the basic principles of trade unionism (Batstone et al., 1977: 24-7). These principles concern both an emphasis upon unity and collectivity and some idea of social justice whereby those within the collectivity are treated fairly and equally (Brown, 1973: 133; Batstone et al., 1977). The presence of such values helps to facilitate the greater centralisation of power within the domestic organisation (Batstone et al., 1977: 24). It follows that had it been imbued with greater institutional power within this workplace the union would have been better equipped to more effectively and evenly regulate what had been increasing volumes of mail and decreasing staffing levels, and thereby avert the following situation; a situation in which worker attempts to individually control their workload was to end in disastrous consequences for those concerned.

A longstanding, informal practice amongst some postal delivery workers has been that of holding some items of mail back from one day to another as a means of reducing the number of deliveries per day (Harper and Emmert, 1963). This involves undelivered mail being taken home and 'smuggled' back into the office for delivery the next day. To remedy this Royal Mail management have historically carried out periodic 'on the spot' searches of worker's delivery pouches on their arrival in to the office Those caught face

potential dismissal and, depending on the amounts of mail they are found with, the possibility of a home search from the Royal Mail's investigation branch followed by possible prosecution. Within Delivery Office 2, there had, within recent months of the research, been three workers dismissed on the grounds of this practice. Two of these it was understood, had been unable to cope with their day to day workload and had been found to have significant volumes of mail at their homes. While the action on this occasion was both individual and, since it could not be formally defended by the domestic stewards, non-union based, it was, along with the sanctions that it gave rise to, inextricably linked to the specific nature of workplace organisation within this workplace. As the following union official notes:

> *In comparison to Delivery Office 2, the bag searches don't usually happen in Delivery Office 1. This is because the union and the blokes would do something in response like a go-slow or maybe a stoppage here and there. You know? Just to make sure that management would think twice before doing it. Management know that some people occasionally bring stuff back but it isn't worth their while challenging this; besides, the walks aren't that big anyway*. (Branch Union Official).

This suggests that, had workplace organisation within Delivery Office 2 been more union-centred, then the subsequent bargaining awareness and power associated with this would have perhaps allowed the 'bringing back' of mail to remain a managerially-acknowledged, if illegitimate, aspect of job regulation (Edwards, 1988: 197). Moreover, and as the previous interviewee intimated, the existence of a strong organisational mode of bargaining, would result in there being less of a need for workers to carry out the practice since they would have had other means of controlling the effort bargain (ibid.: 198).

Somewhat ironically, a number of workers within this workplace, as was the case in Delivery Office 1, were able to use long-standing collectively established mechanisms of workplace regulation to realise individual non-union centred aims. In this case for some, rather than serving to prevent managerial favouritism and victimisation, the traditional system of seniority whereby jobs are allocated on length of service (Gall, 2003: 29) was a

means, as the following responses suggest, of individually mediating managerially-driven change, potentially at the expense of other work colleagues:

> *If my job changes too much and gets harder I'll wait until another one comes up and pick that* (OPG 9, Delivery Office 2); and
>
> *some of the ones who've been here for ages aren't that bothered if their jobs get worse, they'll just wait until there's another re-allocation of duties and pass the crap onto somebody who hasn't been there as long'* (OPG 2, Delivery Office 2).

In a similar sense, some workers sought to gain individual control over the effort bargain through the medium of collectively agreed systems of annual leave and paid sick leave. Thus, when approaching their chosen period of annual leave some workers would slow down towards the end of the week which often resulted in a backlog of mail for their designated delivery round. The same strategy was deployed by a number of those workers who confessed to taking sick leave that was, at least from the perspective of the employer, 'not genuine' and pre-planned. In both instances the resulting absences would be covered by more junior floating staff who often, due to their precarious contractual status, would clear all mails that had built up thus leaving a clear round for the duty holder on their return. The resentment that both this and the other form of 'off-loading' outlined above caused amongst more junior staff again meant that far from being union-centred, the practices themselves threatened wider workgroup solidarity within the workplace. As Edwards notes (2010: 39), in that they might be explained in terms of a need to escape, such individualised modes of accommodation do not alter, but in fact help reproduce, existing relations and managerial patterns of control.

Again, it is useful here to consider the interaction of what Edwards refers to as a cluster of influences (1988: 201) and their effects upon patterns of workplace behaviour. An internal labour market system that had long provided the union with influence over the organisation and allocation of work fostered a culture of individualism amongst some workers and redistributed conflict in a lateral manner (Burawoy, 1979: 106). This situation was by no means a given, since the system itself has historically comprised of important control mechanisms which have been important for postal workers' unity and collectivism. However, the more marginal everyday role played by the domestic

organisation in Delivery Office 2 rendered its members less likely to employ the type of collective means (Batstone et al., 1977: 10, 129) that would guard against such individualism. Any lack of solidarity-based action on behalf of the members was further stimulated by the socializing effects of the behaviour and collective consciousness of both workers and stewards in the past (ibid, 153). As has been earlier highlighted, this can be characterised as being based on acquiescence, moderation and, at times, inactivity.

Mail Centre 1

While collectively-based union-centred control mechanisms featured strongly within Mail Centre 1, evidence pointed to the presence of behaviours by a number of drivers and indoor staff that were individual in both action and sentiment. Before turning to these, it should be borne in mind that they, particularly with regard to the indoor staff themselves, differed somewhat to those within the two delivery offices; in doing so they echo Edward's (1988: 200) observation that certain features of the nature of work facilitate the development of particular responses. Delivery office work is in many workplaces dominated by intense time-pressures and the difficulties of delivering an ever-increasing volume of mail (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 15). Individually designated rounds mean that workers themselves are solely accountable for their workload and thus-short of going absent, have no real scope to reduce their output levels. Any attempt to so would effectively increase workload later in their working day and furthermore threaten any opportunities for 'job and knock'.

By way of contrast, in the modern factory type setting of the Mail Centre (ibid.: 16) workers on the whole have less individual accountability over their output, and less opportunity to (at least legitimately) pursue 'job and knock'. Such a context, in the case of Mail Centre 1 gave rise to a number of practices which, in effect, did not reflect the general culture of collectivism amongst the wider workgroup itself. These had appeared to remain fairly marginal in recent years and were not commonplace. This suggests that the union had managed to limit a growth in individualised actions that might threaten its ability to regulate its traditional areas of influence.

The most common form of individually based, non-union centred practice within Mail Centre 1 involved workers turning up late for their shift and then falsifying the signing on

time to that of their official start time. Although this did not appear to be widespread, it was for some, a frequent means through which they sought to alter their effort bargain. The local union had, when it formed one aspect of wider trend of managerial unilateralism, defended the occasional incidences of such behaviour. However, in that this threatened job security and wider solidarity, it was largely unsupportive of those who carried this out on a regular calculative basis. The following interviewees sum up the situation:

> *I try to pinch time off them at least three times a week by turning up a bit late. It makes you feel a lot better and is a bit of a perk. The work still gets done anyway* (OPG 10, Mail Centre 1);
>
> *Sometimes I will turn up late and sign on as if I'm on time. It's one of the few ways that we indoor workers can make any time really. They keep wanting more and more out of you when you are here so it's only fair really to try and claw a bit back from them* (OPG 1, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *There are one or two here who threaten to spoil things for everyone and expect them to pull the workload in for them. If management see them sneaking off every five minutes then they will try to take jobs out-it stands to reason* (Local Official, Mail Centre 1).

Additionally, some workers would choose a time when management were not at hand to take unofficial breaks for up to 30 minutes at a time. This again was a minority practice and was something, as the following points out, that the local union had largely managed to limit:

> We've said to members that if you sneak off and leave the work for your mates, when it comes to jobs, yours will be the last we will defend (Workplace Representative/OPG 14, Mail Centre 1).

The individual and opportunistic nature of this differed from the more collectively-based manner in which certain workers in this workplace had developed periods of 'down time' throughout the day. Nevertheless, as the following comments indicate, it was similarly

underpinned with a desire for self-determination and an escape from the coercive constraints of authority (Collinson, 1992: 137):

> *I try to sneak off for extra cups of tea and things when I can. It's just good to hide for a while and do your own thing. Ok it may mean me putting extra work onto somebody else but its everyman for themselves. They can do it if they want to as well anyway, the work still gets done. You don't get paid anymore for working harder.* (OPG 9, Mail Centre 1);
>
> *Lots of people sneak off for a bit when they can. It's easier that way because management don't notice when one or two of you are missing. Why should I flog myself?* (OPG, Mail Centre 1); and
>
> *The best thing about pinching time like this is that you actually feel like you have won something back from management* (OPG 10, Mail Centre 1).

This logic extended to a minority of the driving staff within this workplace who were able to create some space through the subversion of an official system of control which nevertheless contributed to management's overall aims (Edwards, 1988: 193) of accelerating production. This involved drivers photocopying the barcodes that were set at particular collection points to ensure that workers were not collecting mail early in order to 'make time at the end of or in between duties. By keeping an 'illicit' copy of the bar codes, drivers were able to collect the mail early then scan the code at the designated time and thereby conceal any time that they had made. In contrast, a number sought to gain control over the effort bargaining by purposefully seeking out traffic jams to 'waste time' in when collecting mail. The logic in both cases, as the following respondents indicate, had parallels with that which underpinned those individual practices within the indoor function of the Mail Centre:

> *I do this because it allows me to make a bit of time. If management saw the real times they'd just put more work on me and I don't get paid enough for that* (OPG 2, Mail Centre 1); and

> *If management find out that you're making time they'll just put more work on you. It would be stupid to let them know how much time you can really make on some duties* (OPG 10, Mail Centre 1).

Here then, even though workers may have seen their behaviour in terms of a form of resistance against management, modes of accommodation were individualised and non-union centred (Edwards, 1988: 195). What is more, the manner in which these workers avoided extra work had implications for the wider workgroup, some of who would end up absorbing this work into their own workload and who on the whole, as these respondents point out, did not take kindly to it:

> *You always get some who are bone idle and in it for themselves, it gets viewed as really bad by all the rest* (OPG 3, Mail Centre 1); and

> *There's always one or two who try to dodge out of work and the rest give them stick about it. Most people have got more respect for the mates than to start off-loading stuff on to them* (OPG 4, Mail Centre 1).

Again, the union in this workplace actively discouraged these actions and had managed to help ensure that they did not gain any customary legitimacy amongst the wider workforce (Brown, 1972). In a less union-centred environment, such actions might have been seen as amounting to an escape valve for workers discontent which does little to alter the nature of managerial control (Edwards, 1988: 195) or the development of effective union-centred workplace organisation. As has been earlier pointed out, the former had more recently taken on a more punitive appearance which had only been tempered by the collective efforts of the wider workgroup and their representatives.

In sum, individual worker action here can be seen to have taken the form of a similar 'game playing' process to that which Burawoy (1979) identifies in his study of factory piece-workers. Whereas for the latter this involved the increasing of output to attain productivity bonuses (ibid.: 51), those individuals within Mail Centre 1 appeared to some extent to be concerned with reducing output to a level at which they regarded as worthy of the remuneration which they received. Burawoy (1979: 224) goes on to note that 'game playing' in this sense provides workers with an adaption or mental escape from the

deprivation of monotonous work. However, strong workplace organisation had as it has earlier been argued, allowed workers within Mail Centre 1 on the whole to enjoy relatively high levels of shopfloor autonomy. The efficacy of this organisation was reflected in management's reluctance to use available data gathering information from swipe cards and closed circuit to punish those individuals who turned up late or took regular unauthorised breaks. As was the case in both Delivery Offices 1 and 2 then, collectively-established mechanisms of worker control had here provided scope for the emergence of individually based non-union centred behaviour by a number of workers. That said, the institutionally centralised nature of the union within this workplace rendered it able to exercise sufficient ideological influence over the behaviour of its members (Batstone et al., 1977: 4) as to ensure that these remained marginal and minority-based activities.

Mail Centre 2

As was the case in all other workplaces, some indoor staff and drivers within Mail Centre 2 engaged in certain practices that were individual and non-union-centred. Evidence suggests that in the relatively new environment of Mail Centre 2, local representatives had found it more difficult than in their previous workplaces to stop here what constituted a threat to their long-term bargaining position, as the following representatives point out:

> *In the old workplace this would have never have happened. We were so organised that nobody would have dared ignore what the union was trying to do* (Workplace Representative/OPG 13, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *It's been harder since the move to stop people from going against union policy. Some of them will cut their own throats* (Workplace Representative/OPG 12, Mail centre 2).

Like their counterparts in Mail Centre 1 some workers here would in effect fiddle the effort bargain (Edwards, 1988: 200) by turning up late for work and falsifying their signing on time to that of their official start time. This had acquired the status of an almost semi-legitimate practice which management as the following interviewees point out, to some degree accepted:

I often turn up a bit late and then sign on at my official start time, loads of people do it and management don't say anything unless someone really starts taking the mickey (OPG 6, Mail Centre 2);

Management I suppose see it as a bit of a means of keeping people happy with the job, as long as it's not too often then they're OK about it (OPG 8, Mail Centre 2).

Edwards notes that some of the most obvious determinants of what can be seen here as worker bargaining behaviour are structural factors such as the shape of the product market and how these interact with a cluster of other influences (1988: 201-2). In the case of Royal Mail, the nature of the product market can be characterised as being one of increasing internal and external competition which for Royal Mail in terms of Mail Centre 2 was compounded by local recruitment difficulties. Management sought to mediate the effects of this through the relaxation of start times amongst a group of workers which evidence suggests were somewhat inactive at a workplace level and divided in terms of their identification with and commitment to the workplace union.

For its part the union could not condone, nor indeed stop a practice which might further down the line threaten manning levels and the job security of its members. Despite their prominent position within the workplace, the local reps it would seem could not effectively propagate amongst the wider workforce a set of trade union-based principles (Batstone et al., 1977: 11) that would serve to discourage this action. Rather than a concession which a strong workgroup had collectively wrung from its supervisors, the action here was individual, opportunistic and in breach of local union policy.

Some workers also sought to make time through leaving their shift early which it will be recalled in recent times involved individuals sneaking off unnoticed before their workload had been completed. This, unlike the practice of starting late, was met with a significant level of managerial opposition since it threatened the time-critical process through which mail was dispatched to its outbound destination. The local representatives also opposed such behaviour since it potentially opened the door for managerial proposals to remove man-hours or, should it harm performance, the prospect of work, and therefore jobs, being relocated to another Mail Centre. The local representatives here were comparatively less successful in curbing this than they were in their previous workplaces.

This was in part down to the ways in which a tight labour market tempered managerial actions against any offenders who were found to be leaving early:

> *Nobody's ever been sacked for this or anything else really, they'd just get a bit of a telling off unless in was continual* (Local Rep, Mail Centre 2); and
>
> *Ok management don't like it but they don't really want to sack anyone for it as they'd have nobody to do the job* (OPG, Mail Centre 2).

While Edwards then identifies the stimulus of competitive labour markets in, at times, intensifying supervisory control (1988: 200), this was mediated in Mail Centre 2 by conditions that were specific to its local context. If managerial action here served to simultaneously assist the secondary adjustments (Goffman, 1961) of workers and threaten their long-term job security, this was in turn itself related to the nature of local union organisation. Although union-centred workplace activism had ironically served to potentially facilitate the same type of non-union centred behaviour in Mail Centre 1, union organisation bolstered by the on-site presence of the local Branch was sufficiently strong to ensure that it remained a marginal activity. It will be recalled that Mail Centre 2 however, was sited some distance away from its parent branch. As such workplace reps here lacked the same immediate access to a network of senior officials who could add support to their attempts to dissuade workers from engaging in this action (Batstone et al., 1977: 64).

Like a number of their colleagues in Mail Centre 1, some drivers in Mail Centre 2 also regularly subverted the bar code system of surveillance in order to make time at the end of or in between shifts. In the previous sites that formed to make up Mail Centre 2, this practice was very rare, it was here however, if not widespread, quite common amongst collection drivers. As the following interviewee suggests, this was accompanied in the case of some drivers by the use of intimate knowledge of the area to devise quicker routes than those that had been prescribed by Royal Mail's latest soft-wear package. The software in question, theoretically, planned the most efficient routes for driver collections and calculated collection times from commercial customers and Post Office's sites down to the last second:

> *Royal Mail likes to think that they've got all the answers as to how quick we can do the job through their latest technology. They can't know all of the short cuts though and all of the quicker ways in which we avoid traffic. There are plenty of routes and back streets and bus lanes that you only get to know by actually working on the job. Their computer systems are unable to cater for these* (OPG 8, Mail centre 2).

The use of tacit skills in this sense is concerned less with challenging management but more with employees discovering ways to make life at work tolerable (Marchington, 1992: 156). In this sense, unlike the example in Delivery Office 1 where the wider workgroup collectively used their tacit skill as a form of sanction in their quest for workplace control, the apparent willingness of workers to effectively contribute to managerial goals (Edwards, 1988: 189) here served to reproduce the very conditions which bolstered management's control (ibid). In that they were carried out covertly by lone workers and constituted a recognised sack-able offence which could neither be endorsed nor readily defended by the local reps, such practices were both individual and non-union based.

In addition to the above, the fieldwork research uncovered a particular example of worker behaviour in Mail Centre 2 that was both collective and non-union centred. This involved a number of workers who were union members formally writing to the Chief Executive of Royal Mail in an attempt to speed up their transition from temporary to permanent employment. This took place through the medium of an Employee Question and Answer forum in the organisation's quarterly staff magazine journal. As Salamon (2000: 380) suggests, this initiative is but one of what are broadly termed Employee Involvement Schemes which include appraisal, suggestion schemes and attitude surveys. Such schemes have grown in popularity in recent years and seek to raise worker awareness of business needs and increase productivity whilst negating or incorporating unions into organisational frameworks (Ramsay, 1997: 211-2). Unsurprisingly, the local reps here bemoaned this behaviour and pointed to their own success rate in helping bring about swift substantive employment amongst temporal. Despite its previous success in staving off managerial-based normative controls and its significantly centralised position in Mail Centre 2 the union in this instance was found wanting and unable to mobilise bias

(Schattschneider, 1960: 71) in its favour amongst a particular strata of the wider workgroup whose members were often unfamiliar with the concept of workplace unionism and given to leaving after short periods 'on the job'. In a tight labour market such workers may be regarded as occupying a strategically powerful position in the production process (Turner et al., 1967: 223) and be more likely to by-pass the union in favour of mediating workplace issues through outside bodies.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the findings from four separate workplace studies into how workers have reacted to managerial driven change within the context of the on-going marketization of the Royal Mail. This has involved an investigation into both formal and informal modes of worker behaviour at the point of production and moreover, how these workers identify with the trade union in their respective workplaces. The researcher has at times drawn on his own work experience as a means of moving both enquiry and knowledge further along (Wall, 2006). Findings have highlighted that in comparison to their counterparts within the wider public services (see Worrall et al., 2009), workers in all the workplaces under investigation had been reasonably successful in tempering the impact of marketization on their labour process. That said, all case studies reflected a degree of change in terms of the level of control held by local workers and their union over their work and workplace environment at the time of the study when compared to the recent past. This is discussed below through an evaluation of the impact of new technologies, what has been a growth in growth in both casual and temporary forms of employment and employee involvement initiatives on the frontier of control (Goodrich, 1920) in each of the workplaces under investigation.

Delivery Office 1

The research has shown that the local workforce and its union had managed to retain largely similar levels of influence over their work environment as they had some three years earlier. The effort bargain between Royal Mail and their workforce here had not appeared to have changed in the last three years nor too had the latter's influence over a range of issues including resourcing and annual leave allocation. However, the introduction of new technologies had helped management make some inroads into the

long-standing methods of job regulation amongst what were, even by Royal Mail standards, an extraordinary well organised group of workers. The first of these technologies were surveillance based types of software which presented management with the opportunity to challenge traditional forms of custom and practice (Brown, 1972: 58) and support their arguments for greater efficiency. In practice however, these had barely dented such customary practices like 'job and finish' and the appropriation of unofficial breaks in what were largely no-go zones for local management. When a challenge to the former did arise the workgroup was sufficiently organised to repel this through the collective expression of a go-slow. Neither had surveillance eroded other workgroup controls over the effort bargain such as job allocation and work speeds. The balance of power in this sense had remained largely the same as it had when the researcher had spent time in this workplace some two years earlier.

Workgroup ability to hold the line here was related to the institutionally embedded nature of the local union itself, and the relatively high numbers of workplace representatives who adopted a leadership role in the workplace. These circumstances provide workplace unions with greater scope for promoting a set of values and beliefs which operate in their favour (Batstone et al., 1977: 10). Steward power here was bolstered by their close communicative and physical proximity to their parent Branch and the support that this provided in terms of up to date information of events, theories of management and membership behaviour, and potential support and control over errant stewards (Hyman, 1975: 168; Batstone et al., 1977: 64-65, 74). Added to this was the workplace's strong history of action which, as Hyman notes, can provide workers with credible examples and remedies for generating a sense of grievance that is essential to the efficacy of shopfloor control (1975: 154). This environment was conducive to the union's ability to stem a down-stream employee involvement initiative which sort to enhance managerial control vis-a-vis that of the local union (Beale and Mustchin, 2013).

Such a context could not however fully counter the effects of the second type of technological change. This involved new types of machinery that standardized patterns of work, and pre-sorted mail in the dispatching Mail Centre that was previously sorted in Delivery Office 1 itself. Outdoor delivery durations had subsequently increased and served to dilute collective control over some areas that the workgroup and their union

had historically held considerable sway over. Change here meant that workers spent less time with both the union and their work colleagues. As such, errant worker behaviour was less subject to what Lupton (1963: 155) terms as the often well-defined sets of behavioural norms and informal sanctions through which workers protect group interest and solidarity. Consequently, in contrast to the main body of workers, a minority of individuals were now less reticent when it came to undercutting overtime rates to attract managerial favour. In sum, technology had assisted management in permeating an area of shopfloor life that had previously been held as sacrosanct by the wider workforce and their union.

The union had also managed to limit, but not stop an influx of non-standard contract holders into Delivery Office 1. These had acted as a channel through which management were able to pick a way both at union regulation over overtime rates, designated start and finish times and the collective culture of the wider workgroup. This was due to the former's precarious employment status (Drago, 1996) which rendered them managerially-compliant and furthermore, in some cases, reluctant to join the union. This had served to dilute what some five years earlier had been a *de-facto* closed shop in this workplace. While these formed only a small group of the staff in Delivery Office 1, their susceptibility to what was an anti-union narrative from a minority of substantive staff held potentially negative implications for the long-term solidarity of the wider workgroup and their union. Hindering the union's attempt to maintain their previous level of steadfast opposition to such an initiative was the omnipresent threat of privatisation and the stewards' first-hand experience of employer reprisals relating to the right of individuals in this workplace to break union policy. This latter point may help explain what had, in the last two year or so, been the emergence of a number of practices on the part of a minority of individuals which went against union policy.

Delivery Office 2

This study has argued that there had been a long history of worker moderation within Delivery Office 2. The local union, while involved in general negotiations over change, had historically played a comparatively more marginal part in day to day issues than those in many other Royal Mail workplaces (Gall, 2003). Evidence has shown that such an

environment did not constitute a blank canvass upon which management were, through the medium of new technology and a national, jointly agreed, restructuring initiative, able to freely redefine the effort bargain. On the contrary, the intricate nature of their members' rural-based delivery jobs provided an effective basis for the union to defend existing job patterns in the face of a new software package which sought to reduce worker headcount.

That said, the union and its members here could not stave off management's quest to introduce greater intra-workplace cooperation (Drago, 1996: 540). Except for an occasional glimmer of resistance, workers now covered unforeseen spikes in mail traffic and unforeseen absence within their own duty times. In doing so, the workforce in Delivery Office 2 had given some ground on job demarcations and set workloads that had been a longstanding feature in this workplace. This, along with the general 'benign' sovereignty that they held on the shopfloor itself, may explain why management felt little need to employ other new technologies in the form of a range of available surveillance software in their quest for ever greater efficiency. Unlike the other workplaces under investigation, this benign sovereignty was reinforced through the medium of a weekly employee involvement session that itself effectively helped to marginalise the voice of both the local and wider union in this workplace.

Management's successful encroachment into some of the traditional job demarcations of workers in Delivery Office 2 in recent times had been assisted by the union's inability to stem what was an increase in temporary workers in this workplace. Not only were these, in line with Heery and Abbot (2000) less likely be union members, their vulnerable statuses meant that they were a channel through which management could introduce greater levels of job tractability that could be subsequently used as a coercive precedent towards permanent staff. Again, much more so than any of this study's other research sites, management conveyed their objectives convivially to individual workers rather than the local union. This highlights the ways in which social relations of work can prevent the emergence of open struggles around the effort bargain (Edwards, 1988: 197).

In spite of this, membership levels in this workplace had remained at the same level of 90%, as they had when the author last visited here as a union official some three years

earlier. Moreover, the workforce here had recently shown what appeared to be new found signs of resistance to two instances of management action that had been traditionally absent in this workplace. This may have suggested an emerging propensity amongst these workers to collectively challenge traditionally accepted areas of management jurisdiction here. However, any such proposition, in an environment where the long-standing propensity of workers to mediate any increase in their workload through individual actions that were at odds with collective shopfloor organisation, must be tempered with caution.

In sum, though they demonstrated a capacity to formally resist Royal Mail's national change initiative (Business Transformation Agreement 2010), the local union and its members had been less successful in maintaining their prior positon over the frontier of control than their colleagues in Delivery Office 1. Worker behaviour in Delivery Office 2, in part, reflected a different set of historical circumstances than did so in Delivery office 1. These formed one of and at the same time interacted with a particular cluster of influences (Edwards, 1988: 201) which were responsible for shaping the pattern of relations in this workplace. Here then, a history of worker moderation and a relatively peripheral position in both the regional mail network and the structure of the local branch, had led to a more marginal role on the part of local representatives and less collectively-centred modes of behaviour amongst its workgroup as a whole.

Mail Centre 1

Findings also highlighted that workers and their union in Mail Centre 1 had maintained similar levels of control over working practices, resourcing and overtime allocation as they were some three years prior to this study. As with all recently built Mail Centres, Mail Centre 1 was furnished with new surveillance-based technologies (see Jenkins et al., 2002) that potentially increased management influence over the local workforce's labour process. These included swipe card access, satellite vehicle tracking and closed circuit camera systems. In practice, these had not enabled management to eat into established collectively-based workforce controls such as unofficial rest periods and job demarcation. This was largely because management had, so far, been reluctant to use the data that these generated in such a vein. When they had at one stage attempted to monitor start

times, they had been forced to retreat when threatened with a collective 'work to rule' in the form of a tried and tested time consuming tactic of en-masse signing in. Perhaps their attempts in this workplace to reconstitute long accepted processes around discipline and absence were a precursor to the more punitive use of such technologies by management. That the former had been driven back through an unofficial 'sit in', along with the threatened 'line up', explain why available opportunities for closer worked force monitoring had, at the time of fieldwork, remained in abeyance.

Technological changes in production itself had however enabled management to peg back some unofficial early finish times. As such, workers now spent more time together which increased sociability and importantly greater scope for Branch Officials and local stewards to propagate, amongst them, a commitment to union principles and the achievement of collective goals (Batstone et al., 1977: 24, 56). The effects of this were evident in the continued, largely successful reactions of shopfloor workers to creeping managerial incursions into job demarcation. Ironically, here then, technological change had helped to bolster union influence and their ability to ward off management incursion into an area of workplace relations that they had long held influence over.

As with Delivery offices 1 and 2, the local union had conceded some ground on their long-held opposition to temporary working. An increase in temporary workers in Mail Centre 1 had, unlike Delivery Office 2 in particular, not appeared however to have acted as a vehicle through which management could make inroads into worker job controls in this workplace. Temporary workers here adhered to the same standards of job demarcation as their full time colleagues. Moreover, a considerable percentage of these were unionised in a workplace where membership levels stood at the same level of 85-90% as they had some five years earlier. In this workplace more than all others, there was less of likelihood for temporary workers, or substantive ones for that matter, to engage in working practices which were at odds with the wider collective and their union.

Union success in maintaining traditional levels of shopfloor influence when faced with the introduction of employment models that have been seen to divide rather than collectivise workers (Heery and Abbott, 2000: 156) was related to three main factors. Firstly, a network of local activists that helped to ensure adherence to wider workgroup norms

(Batstone et al., 1977). Secondly, the supportive on-site presence of the parent branch itself. And thirdly, the permanent workplace presence that their actual jobs themselves in the Mail Centre afforded the workplace representatives here. Such an environment further enabled a network of union-minded officials to effectively counter the potential corrosive influence of a range of ideational control-based initiatives (Rosen and Baroudi, 1992: 217) such as team briefing sessions upon workgroup solidarity.

Mail Centre 2

The relatively new environment of Mail Centre 2 was a product of a recent merger of three defunct mail processing centres. It provided fertile terrain for management to dilute the previous considerable level of workplace control that the union and its members had enjoyed prior to their moving here. The presence of technologies such as CCTV, vehicle recognition systems, and swipe cards had, if not overtly so, certainly affected some areas of shopfloor life that the union and its members had in the past steadfastly defended. Here management had again largely refrained from using available data from swipe card systems, CCTV and vehicle recognition systems to exercise tighter control over workers. However, this was predicated on the tacit understanding that the workplace stewards would not oppose some increased flexibility on the part of workers on the shopfloor. Many interviewees felt that they had less job autonomy since they moved to what was a relatively new workplace and had, albeit, partially, relinquished their traditional veto around deployment to other tasks. The union nevertheless still maintained its same significant levels of influence over issues such as duty patterns, work organisation and health and safety.

Trade union membership levels within Mail Centre 2 remained at the levels at which they were some three year earlier when the Mail Centre first became operational. However, like their colleagues in all other workplaces under investigation, the union in Mail Centre 2 had been unsuccessful in the last two years in halting an increase in non-standard contract holders. Heery and Abbott's (2000: 154) observation that such changes have been perceived by unions as to pose a threat to their power is born out here. For example, since they could be utilised more flexibly than substantive staff, an influx of temporary workers had seemingly reduced the union's traditional levels influence over

overtime levels and annual leave in Mail Centre 2. Unlike temporary workers in the other research sites, most here were young, contractually and culturally diverse and transient. The young inexperienced workers in particular, would have no standard of comparison when assessing managerial systems of control (Edwards and Scullion, 1982: 76), which here included the encroachment into some traditional areas of custom and practice. What is more, many came from a community which did not traditionally look to the union to resolve workplace issues (Healy and Kirton, 2000).

Such circumstances meant that, unlike, Mail Centre 1, the union in Mail Centre 2 had failed to maintain what had previously been a strong sense of collective identity amongst the workforce. This may go some way towards explaining the workplace representatives' inability to preserve the same tight veto that they held when first moving to this workplace over a range of individual practices that potentially undermined their wider bargaining position. That said they had worked hard in countering Royal Mail's growing strategy of direct employee communication. A decline in influence here was again, temporary workers and technology notwithstanding, further related to the recent workplace merging into one new site. Local representatives were now, like their colleagues in Delivery Office 2, geographical and communicatively some distance from what was their industrially aware and effective parent branch and its cohort of senior officials. Again, closer proximity would have provided greater access to the resources through which trade union values could be reaffirmed and steward leadership sustained (Batstone et al., 1977: 41, 253).

Having summarised this thesis findings, attention now turns to what is its concluding chapter which is comprised of two sections. The first of these involves a discussion about the contribution that a contemporary workplace-based study of this kind adds to the wealth of existing literature on the Royal Mail and change within the wider public services. This involves an evaluation of the appropriateness of the study's main theoretical frameworks and the continued value that these might bring to current industrial relations research. The second section reflects on the wider practical and analytical lessons that might be drawn from this study. Firstly, this examines what the findings form the cases in question might say about the effectiveness of new-wave models of management when faced with organised and combative shopfloor unionism.

This is followed by a consideration of what other public sector unions might learn from the policies, structures and priorities of the CWU at both a national and local level.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses two main issues. First is the distinctive contribution that this thesis adds to the existing body of work on industrial relations within the Royal Mail and the wider public services. It is argued here that this study provides a current insight into shopfloor relations in a post-privatised Royal Mail through a unique focus on the informal and formal shopfloor actions of postal workers. In doing so the author importantly addresses a dearth in shopfloor-based analysis of worker action in recent decades by way of a study that is novel, insightful and valuable in terms of a basis for future research. This is followed by an explanation of the thesis' use of Batstone et al, (1977) and Edwards (1988) as its main analytical framework, as opposed to more recent material. From this viewpoint, the fusion of what are two ostensibly dated studies provides the most effective conceptual basis from which to analyse worker agency in an industry that is quite different from most others.

The second section is a conclusion which reflects on the wider analytical and practical lessons that might be gained from this study. Firstly, this involves a consideration of what the findings of a study, which follows the traditions of the classic workplace-based studies of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s might add to current academic understanding of the limits of modernisation and new management practice on the actions of organised workgroups and individual workers. Secondly, attention focuses on what trade unions might learn from the cases here. This involves a discussion about the comparative effectiveness of organic autonomous shopfloor organisation on the part of the CWU and how this is bolstered through close linkages to parent branches and their officials. The adoption of similar such structures and policies, it is argued, may go some way towards revitalising what is currently weak shopfloor organisation within many parts of the public sector (Bach, 2010; Bach and Stroleny 2013).

Discussion

Industrial relations within the Royal Mail have attracted considerable academic interest in recent decades, some of which has been drawn upon to support this thesis. For example, Clinton's (1984) focus on trade unionism within the Post Office itself is written from the position of a historiographer, and, as Gall (2003: xi) notes, locates developments within a

wider context. Batstone et al (1984) too initially adopt a historical perspective as a lead in to their analysis of labour relations and management strategy within both the postal and telecommunications arms of the Post Office. More recently, Martinez Lucio et al (1997) and Martinez Lucio et al et al (2000) have examined change in the form of rationalisation, restructuring and organisation within the Royal Mail. As liberalisation began to take hold within the industry both Beale (2003) and Gall (2003) examined militancy amongst postal workers in response to the encroachments of the free market. Finally, both Beale and Mustchin (2013) and Beirne (2013) provide an insight into the actions of workers and managers within an industry that appeared to be rapidly accelerating towards full liberalisation. This thesis has sought to build upon this body of research and, in doing so, provide a contribution to studies of both UK postal workers and contemporary industrial relations that is both unique and important in providing a firm foundation for future research.

Much of this study's fieldwork took place during 2013 -2014. As such, it is the first of its kind to carry out an analysis of industrial relations within what was a transitional phase, during which the Royal Mail moved from a nationalised industry through to privatised entity. Its focus then is more contemporary than that of both Beale and Mustchin (2013) and Bernie (2013) who, concentrate upon the period 2009-2010. Since this research preceded the government's decision to privatise the industry (see the Postal Services Act 2011) their analysis could not extend to the effects of imminent and certain privatisation on the perceptions, long-standing behaviours, and strategies of postal workers and their representatives in the workplace itself. Moreover, the above took place during the early stages of an efficiency agreement in which the CWU had committed to a workplace rationalisation scheme with resultant (jointly agreed) mail centre closures and subsequent job losses. By undertaking an analysis some four years later, the author was able to gauge the agreement's impact upon the ways in which postal workers identified with their union. Key to this was an insight into current workplace employee involvement schemes which, in itself, provides an update of an issue that was central to Beale and Mustchin's area of interest.

The detailed nature of this study and its workplace focus goes beyond the research undertaken by both Gall (2003) and Beale (2003) by explaining, in significantly more

detail, the complexities of industrial relations in a variety of Royal Mail workplaces. Gall, as well as Beale and Mustchin, carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of full time, local and lay officials. However, neither study really penetrates the loci of the shopfloor itself to the extent of identifying the ways in which both actual union agency and independent worker action might mediate and temper management action in the wider struggle for the frontier of control (Goodrich 1920). Since the focus of this research extends to 'ordinary' postal workers both union members and some non-members, it is able to provide a much deeper analysis of the relationship between the formal and the non-formal modes of behaviour of these workers. This serves to enhance understanding of, and shed new light on, the intra-workgroup and worker-union tensions that lie below the waterline of an industry characterised by a high degree of occupational uniformity (Gall, 2003).

In terms of its choice of research settings, this thesis brings a dimension that is absent from existing literature relating to modernisation within the Royal Mail. Beale, both in his study in 2003 and later with Mustchin in 2013, concentrates on a single Branch within the North of England. Gall (2003) alternatively focuses on one Royal Mail Delivery Office along with interviews with a range of union officials from different parts of the UK. As such, neither examines the context-specific pressures which shape the differences between postal workers actions in both an intra-branch and regional sense, nor their particular responses to workplace change. This study has gone some way to addressing this through a detailed comparative investigation into four workplaces that differed in terms of size, history and setting and which included two workplaces from the same branch. The variation in workplace responses and richness of data that the fieldwork process uncovered, in terms of local union approach, workplace traditions and localised worker practices has additionally opened up new avenues for potential research in the future.

In their analysis of restructuring within the Royal Mail in the late 1990s, both Martinez Lucio et al. et al (2000) and Jenkins et al (2002) note the growth of automation in the UK postal service. The latter further identify the growth of more peripheral forms of employment that has accompanied automation and its impact upon the identity of Royal Mail workers within the context of what were, at the time, relatively new green-field mail centres. Some 15 years later, this study provides a detailed exposition of the limited

impact of these developments upon the labour process of postal workers from the vantage point of a fully liberalised Royal Mail. Such a perspective offers valuable insights into how worker agency has contributed to what Beale and Mustchin (2013) refer to as a remarkable resilience on the part of the CWU to market-driven downward pressures. Again, this provides the basis for future research in the form of a longitudinal study which gauges developments in these areas in perhaps 3 years from now when privatisation of the industry has had time to fully take root.

In contrast to the existing extensive body of work relating to restructuring within the UK postal service, this study is unique in that it undertakes meaningful analysis into workplace change through the eyes of a former worker, lay activist and union official who spent many years working in the Royal Mail. Here the author's wealth of experience and former status facilitated a study that is more intimate and informative than others in this field. The researcher's background was crucial in quickly establishing a kindred level of trust and confidence that went beyond that which is considered vital to the success of the qualitative interview process (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In tandem with the author's intimate knowledge of the intricacies of the job and shopfloor life within the Royal Mail this provided informed access to a range of worker opinions and at times illicit workplace behaviours that lay undetected by, and indeed out of the reach of, preceding researchers.

In a wider context, this thesis makes an important contribution to extant studies of marketization of the public services. This is an area that has attracted much academic interest in recent years (see, for example, Whitfield, 2006; Mooney and Law, 2007; Kessler and Bach, 2012). However, few studies, if any, have sought first hand insight of this through an analysis of the actions and perceptions of workers at the level of the shopfloor. This is symptomatic of a wider sea change in the study of industrial relations where there has been a shift away from empirically based qualitative research in recent years (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000:145; Brown and Wright, 1994). This thesis has attempted to address this gap through an overdue detailed workplace-based study that examines the impact of marketization upon an area of the public sector whose workforce have exercised, and in many respects continue to exercise, unusually strong levels of workplace controls. In doing so, it is able to unearth both a range of union tactics and strategies as well as worker actions which provides an effective basis for future research

into wider public sector industrial relations. Of particular interest here should be whether popular narratives which view the inevitable weakening of trade unions in the face of marketization are valid.

This thesis brings further value to the field of industrial relations research through its in-depth investigation into two greenfield Royal Mail sites. Until now, most studies of greenfield workplaces have focussed upon the effects of these on newly formed groups of workers. As Hallier and Leopold (1996: 49) argue, new site, layout and workforce offer management a blank piece of paper on which to establish a set of commitment-based working practices that are free from the constraints of brownfield sites. This study involved an examination into the actions of two groups of postal workers that had largely been transferred from their previous workplaces to purpose-built mail centres. In doing so it provides an important, and as yet absent, investigation into how pre-existing well-organised groups of workers have responded to a series of pressures that have for some, helped maximise the scope for managerial control and workforce compliance (McKinlay and Taylor, 1996).

Such comparatively high degrees of union density and unrivalled levels of workforce job controls have, in recent years, served to distinguish industrial relations in the Royal Mail from both most other public services (see Bach, 2010) and the wider UK labour market as a whole. While this provided an interesting arena in which to conduct a unique close up investigation into the effects of marketization at the point of production, it presented a two-fold challenge to the researcher. Firstly, there was the issue of how to effectively analyse what research (see Gall, 2003) had indicated was a variety of responses to on-going restructuring from workers employed by a single employer under relatively uniform terms and conditions and represented by a single union. Secondly, the research required conducting an investigation into modes of worker actions and attitudes that had, lamentably, long ceased to be central to academic debate in the field of industrial relations. These factors crucially shaped this study's conceptual framework which is both innovative, yet, appropriate for an industry in which worker-management relations are still based on the traditional negotiation of order. So too, as the following suggests, did the character of existing public sector studies.

As with the Royal Mail, there is a wealth of literature relating to restructuring within the public services. Again, this proved invaluable in enabling the researcher to examine change within the Royal Mail through a discussion of marketization and both the nature and effects of new public management in the wider public sector. While this was the case, extant studies, a number of which are discussed below, appeared unsuitable as a basis from which to conceptualise this study's micro-political analysis of worker action in four densely unionised, and largely, well-organised research sites. Bach and Kessler (2012) for example, provide a recent study of the modernisation of the public services. This offers an integrated account of changes in the management of the employment relationship in the public services by combining insights from public sector management literature and draws on the workplace traditions of employee relations. The authors here develop a framework which connects upstream changes in the organisation and management of public services to downstream developments in employee relations (ibid, 16). However, this is largely a top-down focus upon relations within the NHS, local government and the civil service, and as such, is inadequate as a foundation from which to analyse action on the part of an occupational group that has, on the whole, displayed much higher levels of resistance, and shopfloor organisation than others in the public services in recent decades.

Alternatively, Massey and Piper (2005) examine the political, economic and social forces which have been the driving force behind modernisation of the public sector. This provides a lens through which to examine the central tenets of new public management which they identify as a managerialist perspective on the delivery of public services (ibid, 5). Again, the study offers useful insight into the form and nature of market driven styles of management. However, it is unsuitable as means of providing meaningful insight into this study's central concern of how such models might be mediated by workers' action at the point of production. Fairbrother (1994) on the other hand examines restructuring in the civil service by way of two case studies as part of a wider research project on workplace management and local trade unionism. Although the author does seek insight through the views of local union officials, the focus does not extend to a first-hand consideration of the views and actions of 'ordinary workers' and as such is inadequate for a study that places much emphasis on the informal action of workers on the shopfloor.

Neither does Fairbrother really discuss to any extent the role of worker representatives, who, in terms of the Royal Mail, play a key role in workplace organisation and shopfloor industrial relations. Finally, at the time of his study, there had been relatively limited delegation of managing change to local managers from the centralised civil service structures. Such a direction of travel has been a key feature within the Royal Mail in recent times and has had a significant impact upon shopfloor relations here.

In their 2005 article Kirkpatrick and Hoque examine to what extent decentralisation of employment relations has taken place within the public sector from the 1990s which they compare to developments within the private sector. In doing so they provide insight into how market driven change within the public services has been sought through the dissemination of new HRM-based management ideas, attempts to erode national bargaining and the replacement of some large unified service providers into smaller more focused business units. Such a focus usefully draws attention to some of the pressures shaping local management action within the Royal Mail currently, the limited nature of decentralisation in practice and how this has often been resisted by both and workers and their managers. However, Kirkpatrick and Hoque (2005), analysis is drawn from a national survey of 2191 workplaces and focuses on the responsibilities of and authority of local level managers with responsibility for employee relations (ibid, 107). Their focus does not extend to a qualitative analysis of the views of workers themselves or the ways that they both formally and informally react to marketization at the point of production. As such, the study itself was inappropriate as an overall conceptual framework from which to analyse the central concerns of this thesis.

Located in the private sector, Darlington's (1993) case study of three Merseyside manufacturing plants does focus on relations at the locale of the shopfloor. Building on Beynon's 1973 study of plant based trade unionism' Darlington examines the impact of economic and political pressures upon shop steward organisation in the 1990s. This provides useful insight into how shopfloor organisation might fare in the context of market-driven restructuring such as is now the case in the Royal Mail. What is more, it too examines the contradictory nature of shop steward's organisation through a Marxist conceptual framework (ibid). Though the author did at times draw upon this study, its value as a wider framework from which to understand the primary concern of this thesis

was limited. This is because Darlington's (1993) research sites are three individual workplaces in which each workgroup and their representatives are covered by separate terms and conditions of employment. As such, his evaluation of shop steward action cannot extend to the more uniform nature of workplaces within the Royal Mail or shed light on the types of often informal illicit forms of behaviour carried out by ordinary postal workers within the sites.

Though written nearly thirty years prior to this thesis, Edwards' (1988) study of conflict and accommodation appeared to be the most appropriate means of understanding how an occupational group often attributed with significant levels of shopfloor control (Gall, 2003) responds both formally and informally and individually and collectively to the pressures of market-driven change. What was particularly salient was Edwards' concern with the manner in which workplace relations and in particular, the actions of specific workgroups are shaped by a cluster of both external and internal influences and their interaction (ibid, 201). In the Royal Mail such pressures have taken the form of management's requirement to introduce market-driven change as a result of the increasing liberalisation of the UK postal service. Change, as in other area of the public sector, has not been clear cut but mediated by context and worker agency (Worrall et al., 2009)

Edwards' exploration of a variety of workgroup actions was, therefore, crucial to the analysis of an industry in which workers have displayed, and continue to display, a wide range of responses to managerial driven change (Gall, 2003). Both the unevenness and sources of these responses can only be understood through the close-up investigation of the processes through which management and workers negotiate order at the point of production that Edwards' approach brings. This attention to shopfloor based agency provided immeasurable value to a study of an industry where the employer has increasingly attempted to restructure relations with its employees and their union at the loci of the workplace itself (Beal and Mustchin, 2013; Beirne, 2013). Moreover, Edwards' discussion of the nature of workplace fiddles around the effort bargain provided the necessary arena in which to discuss a host of often illicit types of action by postal workers that this thesis unearthed. While perhaps dated then, this approach offered greater

insight than extant literature relating to the effects of market-driven change upon public sector workers.

Useful as it was, Edwards' (1988) study presented the author with two issues. Firstly, unlike those workgroups in his study, workers within the Royal Mail had, as this thesis has pointed out, exhibited a range of responses to relatively *similar* occupational pressures. Secondly, Edwards' study does not really focus on the role that trade unions themselves might play in mediating market-driven change at the point of production. Such a concern is essential in an industry in which trade unions are well organised in the workplace and have on average membership density levels of 85%. This thesis, therefore, drew upon Batstone's et al's (1977) study of shop stewards which relates to a period when shopfloor organisation resembled that which is currently present in many Royal Mail workplaces.

What Batstone et al (1977) brought in particular to this study was insight into the factors that influenced the variety of workgroup responses to change on the part of postal workers through its focus on the nature of domestic trade union organisation and the effects of this upon worker agency. Much attention in this thesis focuses on the role of workplace stewards, who play a vital role in mediating change in the Royal Mail, and who moreover, given the downward direction in which change is being pursued (Beirne, 2013), will continue to do so. Again, this contrasted sharply with more recent literature which was not sufficient in helping to identify those factors that affected the variety of postal worker's responses to change or the foundations upon which unparalleled levels of workplace organisation exhibited by many contemporary groups of these workers rests. Finally, the postal workers in the four workplaces studied had a relationship with their domestic union organisation that was, on the whole, much closer to the manual work factory setting of Batstone et al's study than the less unionised largely white-collar current public services. In light of these arguments, Batstone et al.'s (1977) and Edwards' (1988) studies were fused together to make a framework that is robust and appropriate for an investigation into shopfloor industrial relations within the Royal Mail.

Beyond this study itself, the framework that the researcher adopted, far from being outdated, holds on-going value for research in contemporary public sector industrial relations. As has been earlier highlighted, a now privatised Royal Mail will, as their latest

agreement with the CWU indicates, continue to seek greater efficiency through workplace restructuring and work intensification (see agenda for Growth, Stability and Long-term Success 2014). The framework is a tried and tested model through which to effectively gauge the longer term effects of these pressures upon working practices and workplace trade unionism in a fully privatised UK postal industry. Such an approach would enhance current analysis in the wider public sector in two primary senses. Firstly, as an effective means of revisiting a fully marketized Royal Mail it would yield findings that could provide a basis from which to compare and analyse the relative lack of organised resistance to marketization in other areas of the public services. Secondly, the framework itself would be appropriate to an analysis of intra-sectoral differences regarding worker responses to market-driven change in a given service delivery. Areas of interest here for example, would be the civil service and local government where Bach and Stroleny (2013) identify a trend towards localised managerial attacks on incremental pay progression, allowances and starting salaries.

In summary, this thesis provides a current micro-political insight into worker action in a now privatised Royal Mail. As such, it makes an important contribution to the study of workplace relations within the UK postal service and the effects of market-driven change on postal workers and their labour process. It seeks to do so through a conceptual framework which is robust, innovative and appropriate to an area of the public services that is quite different from that of its wider constituents. Its findings provide significant opportunity for future research into the actions of postal workers as the full effects of privatisation begin to take hold. Finally, the findings from this study serve as an important benchmark by which to assess some of the current dilemmas faced by workers and their trade unions. This issue is discussed more fully in the following and final section.

Conclusion

This study has examined what, at first sight, might seem like an example of outdated industrial relations in a sector of the labour market where workers are still heavily unionised and exercise strong levels of job controls. In a time when workplace trade unionism in the public services has been regarded as being in retreat (Bach, 2010), analysis of until what was recently one of few remaining public corporations provides

wider lessons to the practical and academic spheres of industrial relations. This chapter now discusses this by first examining the analytical importance of a case like this. This is followed by an evaluation of what trade unions might learn from the findings of this thesis in terms of the linkages between workplace and union leadership.

This study has highlighted the continuing value of Edwards' study of *Conflict and Accommodation* (1988) in helping to understand contemporary unionised work group resistance to changes to the labour process. However, it has also demonstrated its on-going importance in providing insight into the ways in which groups or individuals respond informally to changes to the labour process. In following this lead, this study's exposition of the ongoing incidence of individual and informal worker resistance reveals two important analytical lessons relating to what is a currently an under-researched area of industrial relations. These are firstly, that, despite the prevalence of ever more sophisticated methods of workforce surveillance, informal, and often illicit, forms of individual worker adjustment continue. This was evidenced for example in the practice in both Delivery Offices 1 and 2 of workers bringing undelivered mail back from delivery rounds to be delivered the following day. That the very same practices were identified over 50 years ago by Harper and Emmert (1963) study of postal workers highlights that certain occupational contexts provide the opportunity for particular types of informal working practices to emerge and flourish. Given that newly recruited workers were both aware of and at times involved in the above, it would seem that tradition and worker socialisation continue to play an important part in in helping to sustain certain fiddles and malpractice.

The second point is that unions can at times facilitate the types of informal practices which actually undermine job security and long-standing mechanisms of collective control. In Delivery Office 1 for example, some individuals were able to take advantage of the wider groups veto over flexible working to wring concessions out of management whilst breaching group norms around breaks and overtime rates. The strength of the union in this workplace had, ironically created space and scope for these workers to develop practices that were both illicit and, ironically, in contravention of union policy. Such an analysis reflects both the continuing validity of and need for traditional sociological workplaces studies such as those by Roy, Lupton, Buroway and Edwards.

Recent studies have suggested that, in a pervading climate of marketization, trade unionism within many areas of the public sector has become, on the whole, increasingly ineffectual in mediating managerial driven change within the workplace itself (Bach and Stroleny, 2013: 350; Bach, 2010). The cases from this study have shown that this is by no means inevitable and have highlighted that local trade unionism and organic worker agency can be effective in limiting the effects of such change. In doing so it serves to warn against uncritical acceptance of more popular narratives relating to the inevitable decline in public sector trade unionism. What the study fundamentally highlights is that effective resistance to modernisation by public sector unions cannot be realised through top-down models of unionism that mask weak workplace organisation. It must be predicated on strong shopfloor organisation on the part of workplace representatives who are able to maintain a sense of solidarity and trade union consciousness amongst their membership.

This depth of shopfloor organisation can, as this study has shown, act as a bulwark against 'softer' forms of management control systems such Employee Involvement initiatives that seek to weaken or marginalise trade unionism at ground level. The case studies here have highlighted that it is possible for workplace representatives to reconstitute such forums into platforms which conversely promote workplace trade unionism and serve as a channels through which to communicate to members. This provides important insight into an area of industrial relations which has, according to Beale and Mustchin (2013: 2), experienced relatively few contributions in recent years. Moreover, it suggests that meaningful analysis of the impact of such initiatives must consider the role played by workplace unionism and the degree to which its agents can provide a counter narrative that articulates both its policies and aims and the interests of its membership.

Attention also focussed on two Royal Mail greenfield Mail Centre sites and in doing so, as has earlier been argued, offered an alternative but important insight in this area of industrial relations. A range of authors (Hallier and Leopold, 1996; Guest and Hoque, 1994), have noted that such sites offer management the opportunity to start anew often through recourse to a set of HRM-based practices and philosophies which seek to elicit employee commitment by breaking with the past. The two workplaces here offered the opportunity to assess the impact of these circumstances on pre-organised as opposed to newly formed groups of workers. Evidence highlighted the limitations both of Greenfield

workplace layout and its associated forms of ideational management control systems in the face of organised workgroups that have strong traditions of mobilising against change.

As Jenkins et al (2002) have pointed out Royal Mail's increasing preference for consolidating mail processing into these out-of-town greenfield sites has been associated with a steady increase in non-standard, flexible forms of employment. The impact of this upon the frontier of control in all workplaces under investigation was a key concern of this study since such categories of employment can pose a threat to the security of existing employees and the power of their union (Heery and Abbott, 2000: 158). Evidence highlighted the benefits of a model of workplace unionism which, in line with Fosh (1993), sought inclusivity and participation amongst non-standard workers. Such an approach had gone some way towards limiting management attempts at making inroads into working practices and trade union organisation in the case studies here. This serves to endorse what has been a shift by both the CWU (Jenkins et al, 2002) and many other unions in the UK away from policies in recent years which had often previously sought to exclude and discourage contingent workers from union membership (Heery and Abbott, 2000).

Jenkins et al. (2002) also identify the advanced technological production methods that have been integral to this shift towards mail centre production and which contrast significantly from the more manually-based work processes in the workplaces that they have subsumed. This thesis has examined the effects of these and the latest in a range of workforce surveillance mechanisms both on shopfloor organisation and working practices of UK postal workers. Its findings indicate that these workers have been reasonably successful in mediating the effects of such pressures both on the effectiveness and legitimacy of local trade unionism and on a host of long-standing, often informal working practices. This success, and in particular management's reticence to fully exploit such mechanisms was, in part, down to the potential or actual use of negative sanctions by the workers under investigation. Any investigation into the effectiveness of technologically-based managerial control strategies must, therefore, consider the ways in which actual or anticipated resistance on the part of workers can affect both their development and implementation. That the implementation of such technologies, particularly in Mail

Centre 1, formed part of a wider more aggressive approach by management that served to add to their perceived illegitimacy on the part of workers underlines an important point. This is that the given direction of a strategy pursued by management may address resistance in a way that acts to strengthen it (Ezzamel et al, 2001).

This study's analysis of an occupational group that, in contrast to most others (Lyddon, 2009), has exhibited significantly high levels of strike action in recent years also provided important lessons for the study of industrial action in contemporary employment relations. Nearly twenty years after Kelly (1998), its workplace based focus reaffirms that effective mobilisation is best realised through a network of workplace stewards and activists who hold the support and confidence of their members at ground level. Even in the constraining context of increasing workplace rationalisation and pressure to reform, these actors can still play a key role in the process through which workers develop the sense of injustice and common interest that underpins collective action (Kelly, 1998). In the cases under investigation this involved justification and nurturing of worker grievances which served to disaffirm a range of counter mobilisation strategies through which Royal Mail management sought to negate collective action.

Meaningful academic analysis of strike activity must, therefore, play close attention to the factors which either inhibit or facilitate local unionism in the micro-political process of mobilising their membership. This must firstly involve a workplace-level focus of the impact of commitment-based models of HRM upon membership perceptions of both the legitimacy and efficacy of their local union. And secondly, an evaluation of the policy which national unions adopt towards ground level organisation and the autonomy and direction that they bestow upon their local shop stewards. The cases here additionally provide wider lessons for other trade union. Much of this, as will be argued below, has to do with the linkages between the workplace and union leadership and how these might affect the ability of unions to mediate managerial- driven change.

The empirical findings have highlighted that the development of an appropriately autonomous and empowered union organisation at the level of the shopfloor itself should be crucial to any wider strategy through which public sector trade unions might seek to limit the impact of marketization. This involves local stewards occupying a

considerable level of institutional centrality and carrying out what Batstone et al (1977) term as a leadership role with regard to their union position. In such circumstances stewards in the workplaces under investigation were able to successfully identify and shape issues in the workplace whilst imbuing amongst the wider workforce a commitment to union principles and the achievement of collective goals (ibid, 24, 56). This was particularly the case in both Delivery Office 1 and Mail Centre 1. Here workers espoused high levels of union loyalty and deployed a range of regulatory controls that were indicative of the type of workgroup behaviour which Edwards identifies as being able to exert considerable collective control over the organisation of work (1988: 196).

It is true that a top-down approach has often characterised organising activity on the part of unions within the UK. However, some unions, notably Unison and the PCS in the public services have, in recent years, made considerable efforts to support and strengthen the sort of self-activity exhibited by postal workers in the workplace (Darlington, 2010). That said, a dearth of experienced workplace level organisation continues, according to Bach and Stroleny (2013) to contribute to the on-going wane in public sector trade union influence in the public sector. This thesis has highlighted specific features of postal workers' organisation which might serve as best practices for others to both revive workplace unionism and defend or advance their members' terms and conditions of employment. Of particular importance is the relationship between a unions' parent branch and its constituent workplaces. Findings indicated that steward's strength is bolstered by their closer proximity to their local branch particularly when this entity itself contains experienced officials which together provide the following resources: up-to-date information of events; theories of management and membership behaviour; recipes of various forms of action and support and control over errant stewards (Hyman, 1975: 168; Batstone et al. 1977: 64-65, 74). Such a model might provide much needed support and advice to shop stewards in a public sector characterised by weak shopfloor organisation and declining union density (Bach and Stroleny, 2013)

This study has further pointed to the need for unions to where possible invigorate a much broader layer of grass roots activists who are not necessarily integrated into formal union structures. Evidence suggested that a network of such actors is key in stemming what is the growing twin-threat of HRM practice and casualisation on workplace union

organisation. This was evident in Mail Centre 1 where local activists had helped ensure adherence to wider workgroup norms amongst a stratum of temporary workers that in other circumstances would have been both difficult to recruit and susceptible to managerial whim (Kalleburg, 2001: 481-482; Heery and Abbot, 2000: 155). In workplaces with greater organisational depth of shopfloor activists workers in general tended to be more receptive to the arguments and values of the local union. This proved to be crucial in helping the latter to successfully counter localised Royal Mail initiatives which sought to both garner worker commitment and weaken the influence of their union within the workplace (Beale and Mustchin, 2013: 14).

Finally, this thesis earlier argued that the most effective way through which public sector unions might stem the effects of marketization is through the adoption of a more autonomous model workplace organisation. However, any initiative of this type must, where possible, include the devolution of greater bargaining rights to local stewards with regard to issues such as technological driven change. Such an approach enabled the CWU in the cases here, through the stewards' intimate knowledge both of local jobs and the context-specific pressures facing their workplace managers, to limit the impact of a range of software systems on workloads and collective union-based control mechanisms. Not only does this accentuate the limits of direct managerial control (Sturdy et al, 1992), its outcomes, in conjunction with the preceding arguments, make a timely contribution to current wider debates around union purpose. This is that workplace representational structures and challenges to management should form an important part of union debates around organisation, recruitment and renewal. These debates can themselves only benefit from greater in-depth, qualitative focus on events at workplace level by contemporary academic research in the field of industrial relations.

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Appendix One: Interviewee Profiles

Key

FT (s) - Full time substantive
FT (t) - Full time temporary
PT (s) - Part time substantive
PT (t) - Part time temporary
M - Member
NN M - Non member
WR - Workplace Representative and/or Branch Official
OPG -Operational Postal Grade

Delivery Office 1

Interviewee Number	Gender	Union status	Contractual status	Length of service in years
OPG 1	Male	M	FT(s)	8
OPG 2	Male	M	FT (s)	15
OPG 3	Female	M	PT (s)	6
OPG 4	Male	M	PT (s)	8
OPG 5	Male	M	FT (s)	20
OPG 6	Female	M	FT(s)	12
OPG 7	Male	M	PT (s)	3
OPG 8	Male	M	PT (t)	1
OPG 9	Male	NM	FT (s)	4
OPG 10	Male	M	FT (t)	1
OPG 11	Male	NM	FT (s)	11
OPG 12	Male	M	FT (s)	15
OPG 13	Male	WR	FT (s)	12
OPG 14	Male	WR	FT (s)	20
OPG 15	Male	WR	FT (s)	25
OPG 16	Male	WR	FT(s)	17

Delivery Office 2

Interviewee number	Gender	Union status	Contractual status	Length of service in years
OPG 1	Male	M	FT (s)	8
OPG 2	Male	M	FT (s)	12
OPG 3	Male	M	FT (s)	7
OPG 4	Female	M	FT (s)	10
OPG 5	Male	M	PT (t)	1
OPG 6	Male	M	FT (s)	22
OPG 7	Male	M	PT (s)	4
OPG 8	Female	NM	FT (s)	4
OPG 9	Male	NM	PT (t)	3
OPG 10	Male	M	PT (s)	3
OPG 11	Male	M	FT (s)	12
OPG 12	Male	M	PT (t)	1
OPG 13	Female	M	FT (s)	17
OPG 14	Male	WR	FT (s)	20
OPG 15	Male	WR	FT (s)	23

Mail Centre 1

Interviewee number	Gender	Union status	Contractual Status	Length of service in years
OPG 1	Male	M	PT (s)	7
OPG 2	Female	M	PT (s)	6
OPG 3	Female	M	PT (t)	1
OPG 4	Male	M	FT (t)	2
OPG 5	Male	M	FT (s)	16
OPG 6	Female	M	FT (s)	22
OPG 7	Male	M	FT (s)	15
OPG 8	Male	M	FT (t)	2
OPG 9	Male	M	FT (s)	18
OPG 10	Male	M	PT (s)	9
OPG 11	Female	WR	FT (s)	14
OPG 12	Male	WR (Branch Official)	FT (s)	12
OPG 13	Male	WR	FT (s)	28
OPG 14	Male	WR (Branch Official)	FT (s)	19
OPG 15	Male	WR	FT (s)	6

Mail Centre 2

Interviewee number	Gender	Union status	Contractual status	Length of service in years
OPG 1	Male	M	FT (s)	3
OPG 2	Male	M	FT (s)	2
OPG 3	Female	NM	FT (s)	3
OPG 4	Male	M	FT (s)	17
OPG 5	Male	NM	PT (s)	6
OPG 6	Male	M	FT (s)	7
OPG 7	Female	M	PT (s)	2
OPG 8	Female	M	FT (s)	1
OPG 9	Male	M	FT (s)	8
OPG 10	Male	NM	FT (s)	12
OPG 11	Male	M	PT (s)	1
OPG 12	Male	M	FT (s)	4
OPG 13	Male	WR	FT (s)	3
OPG 14	Male	WR	FT (s)	20
OPG 15	Male	WR	FT (s)	17

Other interviewees

Interviewee	Position	Length of time in office in years
Official 1	Local branch officer	6
Official 2	Area representative	10
Official 3	Assistant area representative	4
Official 4	Local branch officer	12

NB. The above held office in the same geographical region which covered both Delivery Offices 1 and 2.

Appendix Two: Interview Topic Guide

List of indicative interview questions:

1 What do you understand about the term 'the modernisation of Royal Mail'?

2 How, has your job changed over the last few years?

3 What would you say are the main differences in your workplace now as opposed to when you started?

4 What are your views on the CWU within your workplace?

5 Do you believe that unions still make a difference within the workplace?

6 Are you able to 'make any time' on the job, and if so what does this involve?

7 How often do you find time to discuss issues and interact with your work mates?

8 What are your views on Royal Mail management and some of the changes that are being brought in to the workplace?

9 What is your opinion on strike action?

10 How often do you see or come in to contact with the trade union?

11 What sort of things do you talk to your workmates about?

12 Do you see your position here as long term?

13 How do you feel about work time learning sessions?

14 Do you feel that the union and management should 'work together'?

15 Where would you say that your primary loyalties within the organisation lay?

Appendix Three: Ethics Information Sheet and Consent Forms

Pre-Interview Consent Form

Title of Project: 'Modernisation and the Royal Mail'. A case study of management strategies and the collective and individual responses of workers to restructuring.

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:
Michael Pender
Research Institute of Social Sciences
C/o Keele Management School
Keele University
Staffordshire, ST5 5BG

Phone: 01782 733982
E-mail: m.a.pender@keele.ac.uk

Please tick these boxes if you agree with the following statements:

1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.	☐
3	I agree to take part in this study.	☐
4	I understand that data collected about me during this study will/will not* be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.	☐
5	I agree to the interview being audio recorded	☐
6	I agree for any comments I make to be quoted in any subsequent publication of the study's findings.	☐

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature

Post-Interview Consent Form

Title of Project: 'Modernisation and the Royal Mail'. A case study of management strategies and the collective and individual responses of workers to restructuring.

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:
Michael Pender
Research Institute of Social Sciences
C/o Keele Management School
Keele University
Staffordshire, ST5 5BG

Phone: 01782 733982
E-mail: m.a.pender@keele.ac.uk

Please tick these boxes if you agree with the following statements:

1 I am satisfied with the way the interview was conducted ☐

2 I understand that data collected about me during this study will/will not* be anonymised before it is submitted for publication. ☐

3 I agree for any comments I make to be quoted in any subsequent publication of the study's findings. ☐

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature

*please delete as appropriate

Information Sheet

Study Title: 'Modernisation and the Royal Mail'. Workers' responses to managerial driven change: the case of Modernisation in the Royal Mail

Aims of the Research: To examine collective and individual responses of workers within the Royal Mail to workplace restructuring and the importation of private sector managerial strategies.

Invitation
You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study of worker responses to modernisation within the Royal Mail. This project is being undertaken by Michael Pender as part of his doctoral Studies at Keele University and is supervised by Dr. Steve French.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with colleagues if you wish. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information (e-mail m.a.pender@keele.ac.uk; tel. 01782 733982).

Why have I been chosen?
As a workplace operative you will provide insight into the ways in which workers perceive on-going change within the Royal Mail. You have been selected as part of a representative sample of workers from your workplace.

Do I have to take part?
You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms - one is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons.

What will happen if I take part?
If you agree to take part you will be consenting to an interview that takes between 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete. Any comments will be treated in the strictest of confidence and you will have the opportunity to preserve your anonymity.

If I take part, what do I have to do?
If you do take part you will be provided with a consent form to sign. You will then be invited to provide your opinion on workplace change and modernisation within the Royal Mail.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?
You will be contributing to a study which seeks to understand the ways in which workers respond to modernisation within the public services. The research is supported by the CWU and research findings may be used to inform future union policy.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?
There are no risks in agreeing to take part in this interview.

How will information about me be used?

During the interview the researcher will take notes (and if consent is given record the interview) and your answers may inform the PhD's findings and any subsequent publication based upon the PhD.

Who will have access to information about me?

Only the researcher and his supervisor Dr Steve French will have access to the interview data. All data will be treated in the strictest of confidence and again, all participants will have the right to anonymity at all times.

How will the data be protected ?
All data will be protected by being stored on a private computer with a secure password that will be locked in a secure place on university grounds that has 24 hour monitoring in place. Any transcripts will be kept in the same location in a lockable filing cabinet. No such transcripts will be shared with anyone. They will be kept for a maximum of 5 years before being destroyed securely in line with university policy.

The researcher is aware that handling such data has legal implications and is following Keele University's policy on research data management. This policy can be found on the following Keele University website: http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchdatamanagement.

Who is funding and organising the research?
This research is funded by the Communication Workers Union and Keele University

What if there is a problem?
If you are unhappy about any part of this study you may wish to contact the researcher (Mick Pender – contact details above). Alternatively, you may wish to contact the researcher's supervisor Dr Steve French whose contact details are as follows:

Dr Steve French
Senior Lecturer in Industrial Relations
Keele Management School
Keele University
ST5 5BG
United Kingdom
Tel 01782 733609
Email s.r.french@keele.ac.uk.

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Nicola Leighton
Research Governance Officer
Research & Enterprise Services
Dorothy Hodgkin Building
Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
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