Corporatism or cop-out? The impact of social partnership on union-member relations

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Abstract

This article presents empirical data on the perceptions of national level social partnership in Ireland. It looks at the impact of the Irish social partnership process on the union-member relationship and the implications of the different views at workplace level of national partnership agreements.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, virtually all sections of the Irish trade union movement were

suffering, albeit to varying degrees, from the most sustained and serious

losses in trade union membership recorded since the 1920s (Roche, 1997).

Rising unemployment levels and falling union membership, as well as a

mounting national fiscal crisis, provided a context for the Irish Congress of

Trade Unions (ICTU) to seek a return to centralised bargaining. This has

resulted in the conclusion of a series of tripartite social pacts (seven at the

time of writing) since 1987.[1] As a result, the government and various state

agencies have gained direct influence over pay determination in the economy,

while the state has effectively 'co-opted' federations of unions and employers

into the process of governance (O'Donnell and Thomas, 1998). At a macro

level, the national agreements to date have coincided with unprecedented

economic success. Employment levels have increased dramatically, real

increases in disposable income were delivered while keeping industrial

conflict at low levels, tax reform has been embarked upon, and the national

finances were transformed (Hardiman, 2004). The contents of the agreements

have been progressively expanded, from an early focus simply on the

questions of pay and tax reform, to the plethora of issues that now feature

(migration, waste management, alcohol/drug misuse, housing policy, etc.).

Social partnership has, therefore, for two decades, provided the framework

within which Irish industrial relations (IR) have been conducted. While much

literature has focused on the macro picture (particularly the economics of

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[1] *Towards 2016,* agreed in 2006, was signed after this research had been completed.

social partnership) from the perspectives of the state, employers and the trade union movement, the voice of the ordinary union member has been heard but faintly; basically, only in relation to the results of the ballots on whether to accept or reject the latest deal. Evidence of the satisfaction or otherwise of ordinary union members with the process has been virtually non-existent (cf. D'Art and Turner, 2002). The aim of this article is to investigate the perceptions of the partnership process amongst ordinary members at workplace level and assess the implications of these perceptions for the union-member relationship.[2]

PARTNERSHIP AND UNION MEMBERS

Union members, for various reasons, might be expected to welcome a partnership strategy. Firstly, recent national research shows that Irish union members increasingly prioritise a 'collaborative union posture' (Geary, 2006: 108; see also O' Connell et al., 2004). The incidence of industrial action has declined in Ireland in recent years, a phenomenon that had been observed in most European countries (Waddington and Hoffman, 2000), and old 'adversarial' industrial relations have been castigated as destructive and irrelevant in the context of intensified global competition (Kelly, 1996). Thus, as employees are less willing or likely to engage in collective action, a

[2] Note that this article is concerned solely with data on perceptions of the impact of the *national* partnership agreements. The national agreements from 1996 on have encouraged the development of partnership structures and processes at the level of the *workplace*. The evidence suggests that the diffusion of workplace partnership, as conceived of in the national agreements, has been quite limited (O' Connell et al., 2004). It is most advanced in the public sector, and workplace partnership structures were present in the local authority in which this research was partly conducted. However, the two processes are distinct and the interviews with local authority staff revealed a clear appreciation of the distinction. The survey questions on partnership, too, clearly specified information was being sought on the *national* partnership process.

partnership strategy geared towards consensual employment relations reflects the demands of the contemporary workforce and may reduce the negative image that associates trade unions with militancy and conflict (Cohen and Hurd, 1998).

One the main potential benefits of a national partnership strategy for unions might be an enhanced *institutional* role that provides access to power resources (Frege and Kelly, 2004). Greater interaction between union leaders and key representatives from government and business can also result in increased trust between the parties (Teague, 2001). In the Irish context, the social partnership agreements emerged around the formula of offering pay moderation for tax concessions, but the process has developed whereby the state now agrees to address broader supply side issues (training, infrastructure, health, housing) in conjunction with the social partners and to reform social and welfare policy. Trade unions, therefore, can gain influence over a broader range of issues that affect members' working lives and expand the bargaining agenda beyond the traditional concerns of workplace pay and conditions (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004).

In terms of pay, a corporatist strategy may find approval with union members who appreciate the 'big picture'; i.e. who appreciate the benefits for the economy as a whole of a broader, coordinated bargaining strategy (Goetschy, 2000). This is particularly important for unions and their members given the dynamics of a global economy, the growth of trans-national capital and the increasing power of such capital to 'take flight' (Streeck, 1999), which has

arguably resulted in escalating pressure, particularly on smaller states, to adopt a coordinated approach to socio-economic management (Auer, 2000). Finally, nationally bargained pay agreements generally seek to ensure greater equity in the distribution of pay increases across the economy (ibid.).

Irish social partnership, however, with its high-level political exchange between union elites, employers and government, may be viewed as having negative effects on the union-member relationship. Firstly, wage restraint or moderation (a key plank of the process has traditionally been the exchange of pay moderation for tax reform) for some rank-and-file members may appear contrary to the *raison d'être* of trade unions (D'Art and Turner, 2002). Secondly, with the tendency under bargained corporatism for power to shift towards the union centre, local union activity may dwindle or, at least, be less visible to members. This could undermine the degree of articulation of the union regime and result in a detachment of union officials, who represent the union on national partnership bodies, from local representatives and ordinary union members; what Geary and Roche (2003) refer to as the 'displaced activist' thesis.

A further problem may be members' perceptions that the union has 'sold out', as union leaders are co-opted by employers and the state. It has been argued, at least in the early days of the process, that Irish 'developmental corporatism', far from being an experiment in the 'social corporatism' of countries like Sweden and Austria, with the attendant social and labour market objectives, amounted to little more than unions agreeing to a

programme of severe measures to adjust the Irish economy first to fiscal crisis and then to European integration (Teague, 1995)[3]. Thus, corporatism might be viewed as leading to a downgrading of membership-led and resistance strategies, an undermining of workplace activism, and a long-term weakening of union structures (D'Art and Turner, 2002; Stuart and Martínez Lucio, 2005).

Before assessing these arguments in light of empirical evidence on the impact of a partnership strategy on the union-member relationship, the organisations researched and the methods used in the study will be described.

THE CASE STUDY ORGANISATIONS

The research, conducted throughout 2003 and 2004, consisted of case studies of four large, unionised organisations. The four organisations chosen were Bus Company (a public sector bus company, which essentially occupies a monopoly position in a major city), Drimeen Local Authority, People's Bank (a multinational corporate bank) and Darbco (a multinational retail supermarket). For each, a particular case study site was chosen (a Bus Company garage, a Darbco store, etc).

Union density rates are high in all four organisations, ranging from universal in both Bus Company and Darbco (where union membership is a condition of employment) to approximately ninety per cent in the local authority and sixty

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[3] Teague has subsequently written in a more positive vein on the partnership process; see, for example, Teague (2001).

six percent in People's Bank.[4] Only in People's Bank has membership

dropped in recent years (following a bitter and divisive strike in 1992;

previously, according to union officials, density rates would have been higher;

see below).

Bus Company is a union stronghold, and transport workers have a militant

trade union tradition, with historically high levels of strike frequency (Brannick

et al., 1997). Traditionally, too, this has been an overwhelmingly male, full-

time, and blue-collar workforce. More recently, increasing numbers of female

and migrant workers have been employed. Bus Company is the only

organisation where unions actively compete for members. The study focused

on members of the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union

(SIPTU; the other union recognised by Bus Company is the National Bus and

Railworkers Union-NBRU). The percentage SIPTU/NBRU membership split is

roughly forty/sixty at the case study site in Cubtown (with two hundred and

thirty two SIPTU members). The NBRU has positioned itself as a vocal critic

of the social partnership process.

SIPTU was founded (following a merger of two general unions) in 1990, is the

largest union in Ireland and represents over two hundred thousand Irish

workers from virtually every category of employment across almost every

sector of the Irish economy. SIPTU has been an enthusiastic supporter of the

social partnership process; in fact, given the size of its membership, it tends to

heavily influence the outcome of votes within Congress. Indeed, it was

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[4] Note the research focused only on union members in each organisation.

mentioned several times by respondents that the union was seen as 'having the ear of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister)'. The Bus Company branch, however, voted by a margin of more than ninety per cent to reject the 2003 partnership agreement, *Sustaining Progress*.

The key issue facing the union at the time of the research was that of deregulation of the bus market (or privatisation, as many respondents saw it). Particularly difficult for the union was the fact that almost immediately after *Sustaining Progress* had been passed by the ICTU (with SIPTU the majority player) the Government announced proposals to open up the public bus sector to more market competition. This led to significant anger amongst representatives and members in the Bus Company branch. An emerging issue for the union was the increasing number of migrant workers in the company. SIPTU has been one of the most proactive unions in the country in terms of organising migrant employees; managing tensions on the ground between indigenous and migrant workers, however, was increasingly forming part of the local representatives' workload.

Drimeen Local Authority employs approximately twelve hundred staff and looks after the provision of basic services in the region in relation to roads, amenities, environmental services and so on. Around five hundred staff members are 'outdoor' and work in various depots around the county. The remaining 'indoor staff', on whom the research focused, work in the County Hall, are predominantly clerical and administrative workers, and are members of the public service Irish Municipal Public and Civil Trade Union (IMPACT).

The respondents were based in the Transportation and Environment departments (with one exception, a clerical employee in the Human Resources-HR-department). Organisational structures in Drimeen LA are relatively hierarchical and bureaucratic, particularly in terms of staff career progression (seniority remains key), and employees enjoy extremely high levels of employment security. However recent developments reflect attempts to introduce more 'consumerist' principles to local authority work organisation (OECD, 1995). Increasingly, work in the sector is characterised by flexibility and diversity. A particular facet of employment in Drimeen LA (as in local government in Ireland generally) is its 'family friendly' and non-standard nature (e.g. job-sharing, part-time work), and the promotion of equality (and especially gender equality) in the workplace features prominently (Wickham et al., 2005). This explains, to a significant degree, the fact that the Drimeen workforce is mostly populated by females.

IMPACT, formed in 1991 through the amalgamation of three unions, is Ireland's largest public and civil services trade union, with a membership of over fifty thousand. The membership of the 'indoor' local government branch of IMPACT is white-collar, predominantly female and almost exclusively made up of indigenous workers. Industrial action among indoor staff is historically rare; the union generally tends to pursue issues through the State's dispute resolution machinery. As a public service organisation, negotiations around pay and conditions have generally been handled at central, national level (with the Department of Finance a key player; Wallace et al., 2004) and this has continued with the partnership process. At local level, industrial relations

have traditionally been conducted in a rather adversarial manner. However, more recently workplace partnership has been seen as a key initiative for local government to pursue. IMPACT has been an enthusiastic supporter of the national partnership process and the union has endorsed all seven agreements to date. As with SIPTU, the union was seen as having significant influence (both formally and informally) with significant government players.

The ongoing key issue facing unions in local government is the roll out of the Performance Management Development System (PMDS) which is to introduce ongoing employee reviews, and a greater use of competitive, merit-based promotion systems. This explicitly links pay rises with performance, as all pay rises in *Sustaining Progress* were linked to the verification of a detailed modernisation and change agenda, which was agreed as part of the pay deal. Also, as work organisation in the sector has become characterised by a high degree of flexibility, a key role for the union lies in negotiating and implementing various family-friendly policies.

Darbco is one of the world's leading retail operators and entered the Irish market in the 1990s, becoming one of the sector's largest employers. The case study store opened in 1989 (although it was not at the time owned by Darbco). There are roughly one hundred and seventy employees; no breakdown was available for the full-time/part-time split, but given the nature of the retail industry it is safe to say a considerable proportion are part-time. As in most modern, large-scale retail outlets (management aside) there are basically three areas of staff activity; customer advice and service, goods

handling, and checkouts and the respondents were a mix of all three groups. Pay grades in the company are linked to tenure of employment; staff turnover in the retail sector tends to be high (Caprile, 2004) but according to the store manager the annual staff retention target of seventy five per cent was being exceeded. The retail sector in Ireland (as internationally) is faced with increasing economic pressure related to the growing internationalisation of the market and multinational multiple retailers, like Darbco, are playing a leading role in changing working practices and industrial relations in the sector. The industry is very largely feminised and there is an increasing number of younger workers (Jany-Catrice and Lehndorff, 2005).

The main trade union representing workers in the retail sector is MANDATE, which has about thirty six thousand members. MANDATE was formed (following a merger) in 1994. Given the sectors in which it operates, MANDATE has a membership that is predominantly female and a relatively large number of members work part-time (approximately seventy per cent according to union officials). Given the tendency in the retail sector for firms to compete fiercely on cost, and the sector's adversarial industrial relations tradition (Caprile, 2004), the union has also been to the forefront in Ireland in terms of taking industrial action, with some prolonged and bitter recent disputes, including one with Darbco in the early part of the decade. At that stage IR conditions were desperately poor but, soon after, Darbco introduced a new HR team and, more recently, both sides have tried to pursue a more co-operative relationship.

Since its inception in 1994, MANDATE has often been characterised as an 'anti national agreement' union (Caprile, 2004), has consistently argued that percentage increases, such as those granted under the partnership agreements, are of little value to its members and has sought special provisions for low-paid workers. Consequently, the union has consistently voted against partnership agreements, apart from the first agreement, the *Programme for National Recovery.* Darbco, as a member of the employer's body, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), has signed up to the national agreements. MANDATE has, consequently, sought on occasion pay increases in excess of the agreed national rate (successfully in some cases, most notably in the wake of a strike in 2001). MANDATE has also been relatively proactive in terms of organising migrant workers. At the time of the research, a large-scale project to compile a database of the membership, including nationality of members and, crucially, their language needs, was in train.

The People's Bank branch in Suburbia, where the research was carried out, encompasses Lending Services, Securities, Corporate Lending and the Legal Department. The branch is located on a greenfield site on the outskirts of a major city. There are approximately two hundred People's Bank employees based there (the gender split is roughly equal), of whom one hundred and sixty are full-time with a further forty part-time or temporary. The Irish Bank Officials Association (IBOA) is the leading trade union representing staff in Ireland's banking and finance industry, and has a membership of over twenty thousand. It is, thus, the smallest union in the study and the only one that has

not undergone a merger in recent years. Exact figures for membership of the IBOA at the branch are unavailable but union informants estimate that about two thirds of employees are members.

People's Bank is one of the smaller banks in the state, employing just over seven hundred people (approximately five hundred and sixty employees are members of the IBOA). Although the Irish operation is relatively small, the bank's parent company is one of the largest global financial service companies in the world. Takeover and acquisition have been features of IR at the bank in recent years. Having being acquired by a large MNC in the 1990s, the bank was again the subject of takeover rumours at the time of research (and has been taken over by another MNC since the research ended). Industrial relations at the bank have been traditionally adversarial, although industrial action has been limited.

As with the retail sector, Irish financial services providers (traditionally characterised by stable, bureaucratised institutions) currently find themselves under particular pressure from inwardly-investing or acquiring institutions. National financial markets, previously protected by extensive regulation, have been opened up to international competition and banks have been exposed to new forms of price and cost pressure (Regini et al, 1999). As with retail, non-standard work patterns are on the increase in banking organisations (due to the expansion of business hours, for example). Migrant workers in the sector tend to come from other EU, or 'Anglo-Saxon', countries and tend to be high-skilled workers.

The IBOA has not been noted as a particularly 'militant' union and, at least until recently, has been an enthusiastic supporter of social partnership (the IBOA joined ICTU in 1993). *Sustaining Progress,* however, was overwhelmingly rejected by the union's membership. A watershed moment for many in the union (and, indeed, at People's Bank) was a major national strike in 1992 (during which thousands of members were expelled for breaking IBOA directives). It seems until that point, most middle and many senior managers were also members of the union, but many left at that point, and the position subsequently is less clear-cut in relation to managers' union affiliation.

As can be seen from the above, then, the workplaces chosen for this research, while all unionised, reflect different types of organisation with different organisational goals and interests, and different types of employees with quite different work based concerns. Together, however, the workplaces are characterised by features that are crucial to understanding the contemporary trade union-member relationship. The overarching characteristic of these (as indeed, arguably, of all) workplaces is that they are, and have been, facing rapid *change*. The private sector workplaces are owned by parent MNCs (so unions must take cognisance of the dangers of such capital 'taking flight') and operate in fiercely competitive international markets. In the public sector, issues of deregulation, performance bench-marking, and 'value for money' in the provision of public services are key. All the organisations are increasingly focused on the need for 'flexibility' in employment relations (for example, through greater use of part-time work, and

differentiated working hours) which results in concerns about work intensification and 'family friendly' work organisation. The changing nature of work and work patterns is reflected in the growing heterogeneity of the workforce, with greater participation by female, young, and migrant workers.

RESEARCH METHOD

As is common in case study research, a multi-method approach was adopted. A series of semi-structured interviews were carried out and a questionnaire was devised and distributed to respondents. Non-participant observation was possible in Bus Company and Darbco and for all four workplaces documentary materials on the companies, unions and workplaces were collated, and key informants (drawn from both union and management) were identified. In addition to the perspective of the union members themselves, information was sought from the 'official union' (elected workplace representatives, paid union officials), and the company (managers, HR representatives).[5] Assurances of confidentiality were given to all participants.[6]

The main qualitative research (the semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis and direct observation) was carried out during day-long visits (ranging from three to five occasions) to the workplaces. At each workplace the initial visit consisted of interviews with the local union representative and a management and/or human resource representative. At the end of these, the

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[5] Attempts to gain access to People's Bank central management or HR proved fruitless; a key informant at the case study location (a senior line manager) authorised the researcher's presence at that workplace.
[6] All the names of respondents, organisations and places used are pseudonyms. Permission to identify the trade unions was granted.

respondents were asked to each suggest employees to be interviewed (the intention, obviously, being to attempt to avoid bias in the sample). Each interviewee, in turn, was asked to similarly nominate another possible candidate ('snowballing').[7] All employees were interviewed at their place of work (the staff canteen, social area, or in vacant offices). Union officials and company central management were interviewed at the union or company head office.

In all, fifty nine qualitative interviews were conducted, tape recorded and transcribed. These ranged in duration from around forty minutes (the bulk of the interviews with ordinary union members) to two hours (some of the key informant interviews with union officials and HR representatives). These consisted of forty one interviews with ordinary union members (nine bus drivers, twelve retail workers, ten bank workers, and ten local authority workers), five with workplace union representatives (two from Bus Company, one from each of the other workplaces), five with union officials (two each from SIPTU and MANDATE and one from the IBOA), two with workplace mangers (Bus Company and Darbco), four with HR representatives (two from Bus Company, one from Darbco and Drimeen LA), one with a member of LANPAG and one Local Authority Partnership Facilitator.

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[7] In order to make the sample as representative of the workplace population as possible, several respondents were simply approached randomly, based on their age, gender, or, when discovered, employment status (e.g. part-time). So, for example, in Bus Company only one of the respondents was female (approximately three per cent of Bus Company's workforce is female); in Darbco, by contrast, three-quarters (nine) of the respondents were female, better reflecting the composition of the retail workforce.

The questionnaire was administered at the end of the research period. For practical reasons (time and cost) and due to the fact the workplaces varied in the numbers of those employed, the aim was to distribute one hundred questionnaires in each workplace.[8] Darbco, having initially agreed to cooperate with the research, expressed misgivings about the survey questionnaire, and the level of detail contained therein. Eventually, the company agreed to allow fifty copies be distributed.[9] In all, three hundred and sixty surveys were distributed (one hundred in each workplace bar Darbco). One hundred and twenty nine responses were received, giving a response rate of thirty six per cent[10]. The study, therefore, is relatively small-scale and any generalisation is not primarily about the typicality of the organisations, but the existence of particular processes, which may influence behaviours and actions in the organisations.

PAY AND INDUSTRIAL PEACE

Across the four workplaces there was agreement amongst virtually all Full-Time Officers (FTOs) and workplace representatives that the partnership process had benefited members in terms of pay. The only equivocal voices were the two MANDATE officials, who felt that the agreements were of little

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[8] The surveys were distributed randomly; the vast majority were handed directly to employees (as above, with the objective of representing the workplace population). A small number were given to interview respondents to be passed on to colleagues or left on desks/lockers of employees with a note explaining the context. Although randomly distributed, the survey responses reflected well the profiles of the workplaces; for example, Bus Company respondents were mostly male and in their forties; retail respondents were mostly female, with a third aged under thirty.

[9] A further ten were distributed discreetly by interview respondents.

[10] The response rate for Darbco (at just over fifty per cent) was significantly higher than the other workplaces (which ranged from thirty one to thirty four per cent). As a result of fewer surveys being distributed there, ultimately between thirty one and thirty four surveys per workplace were received.

benefit to members in low-paid industries, like retail. Interestingly the workplace representative had a different view:

> 'I think partnership is probably better than the free collective bargaining because everybody just goes off looking for more and more then…I'm not saying we shouldn't get paid, we want a pay rise but we don't want to push the company so far…You could just cut your nose off to spite your face and put yourself out of work' (Liam, MANDATE workplace representative).

At the core of Liam's view is the desirability of industrial stability. This was stressed by most of the workplace representatives. For the latter, the removal of the wages issue from local negotiations also meant the removal of the most contentious local agenda item:

> 'A lot of contentious issues, like your wages, are taken out of your hands now. One of the main reasons for going on strike would be your wages, you know? So, that's not an issue when it's done on a national level' (Donal, SIPTU workplace representative)

Union members across the four workplaces were asked a number of survey questions about the impact of social partnership. As can be seen from Table 1, survey respondents were strongly of the view that pay and conditions for workers had improved as a result of the partnership agreements.

Table 1. Pay and conditions have improved for Irish workers as a result of social partnership

	Strongly agree/agree	Undecided	Disagree/Strongly disagree	Total
Financial Services	74	3	24	100
Retail	69	14	17	100
Bus	77	3	19	100
Local Authority	84	13	3	100
Total	76	8	16	100

N=126 (figures may not add to 100 due to rounding)

The interview data also, interestingly, revealed significant appreciation by ordinary members of the desirability of industrial stability:

'When the unions in this company and in other companies were doing their own thing, breaking away and having ballots and having stoppages, they held to country to actual ransom. That doesn't happen anymore because everybody is part of one big club' (Dominic, SIPTU member).

An interesting observation by some of the higher-paid financial services employees was that the national pay deals promoted *equity*:

'I'm all in favour of protecting the weak…ok, it (centralised pay bargaining) penalises the strong but, say you're going to get fifteen per cent of an increase through partnership. If you're good it's quite easy to

get twenty per cent, but if you're bad it's very hard to get fifteen' (Eoghan, IBOA member).

Across the workplaces, then, there was broad agreement among members, workplace representatives and (most) officials on the success of the partnership process in terms of pay outcomes. This seems to question the criticism of partnership/corporatism that focuses on wage moderation at 'top' level being resisted on the ground (D'Art and Turner, 2002). This might well reflect the view that members have a more sophisticated understanding of the arguments for wage moderation, and the links with other claims, than is often thought, and appreciate the benefits of a broader, coordinated bargaining strategy (Goetschy, 2000). The references to the desirability of industrial stability and the role of partnership in promoting that seem to support this view. As noted above, the organisational context for these workers was one of rapid change (possible deregulation, takeover, organisational restructuring etc). In such circumstances, it may be that partnership is seen as a 'safety net' of sorts.

INFLUENCE, UNION POWER, AND THE 'BROADER AGENDA'

As noted above, one of the potential benefits of a partnership strategy is the opportunity for the union movement to better institutionalise its position in social, economic and political life and to gain influence over a broader range of issues affecting members' working lives. This was alluded to by most of the respondent FTOs, particularly those representing members in the two public sector workplaces. One advantage of the process was mentioned in relation

to union influence over the decisions of key state agencies. An example given was the granting of contracts for road building by the National Roads Authority:

> 'We'd know who's in to tender for those, we would have made contact and met them, and made sure that we had an agreement with them that they would be unionised and sub-contractors would be unionised' (Alan, SIPTU official).

Perhaps surprisingly (in light of the 'displaced activist' and 'incorporation/sell-out' theses) most of the workplaces representatives also made reference to the benefits of their union leadership having access to, and an influence on, senior employer and State representatives:

> 'Partnership (involves) horse-trading and that's what senior union officials are for…There is a big element of trust in that. At the level where (the General Secretary of IMPACT) talks to (the Minister for Finance) and his mandarins it works very well. I can picture them all having a grand chat about pensions and all that stuff; important stuff really. People don't realise how important this stuff is, but if you look at England, you see the mess that's been made of pensions over there' (Brendan, IMPACT workplace representative).

Opinion on this issue was more divided among the private sector FTOs. One MANDATE official stressed the advantages of being 'at the table' in relation to

strategic issues relevant to the retail trade. One example given was in relation to the issue of immigrant workers in the sector:

> 'I think we've convinced the Minister *during the national pay talks* that the permit system has been widely abused by a lot of employers' (emphasis added).

However, other officials were not so convinced and expressed reservations about the motives of both employers and, intriguingly, the State for entering the partnership process:

> 'The employers and the IBEC don't enter into it in the true spirit of what was meant and I think that's probably been one of the problems with all the programmes' (David, IBOA official).

This was categorically endorsed in the context of the retail sector by the other MANDATE official:

> 'What the unions want is a civilised relationship, decent working conditions and not war, war, war everyday. What employers want is peace, industrial peace, and "let us do what we like" at the same time. And what government wants is industrial peace and they don't give a damn much after that what happens to anybody. So we don't all want the same things…If we all wanted (partnership) on a "what kind of a society do we want to build?" approach, rather than the system that

says "well, give them another three per cent if it shuts them up", it might work a little bit better' (Eric, MANDATE official).

In both case, the officials doubted the *bona fides* of the other social partners, and felt that the process was being used by employers and the State primarily to manage levels of industrial conflict rather than to genuinely address, through partnership, broader concerns about macro socio-economic policy. It is interesting to note that such views were not expressed to the same degree by the public sector union representatives.

The union officials were also asked for their view of members' perceptions of the partnership process. The responses were generally quite negative. The officials from SIPTU and MANDATE felt that the process had not been beneficial for the union-member relationship:

> 'I do think that centralised bargaining has damaged involvement to a great extent. I mean, every three years you get a bit of paper and you stick "yes" or you stick "no" on it, as most of our members do, and you hop it in the box. And to a great extent that's the height of your involvement with social partnership' (Eric, MANDATE official).

A related issue was that of the non-pay elements of the social partnership agreements (the extremely extensive 'social provisions', for example). Again, officials felt that the value of these was not appreciated by the membership, although the officials did themselves recognise some failure on *their* part to

effectively 'sell' the broader social elements of the partnership process to members. This aspect seems one of the key complexities at the heart of how partnership has impacted on the union member relationship. As Table 2 shows, a clear majority of employees across the four workplaces felt that the union movement *did have* a greater role in influencing state social and economic policy as a result of the process (although there is a high number of 'undecided' respondents). This is a key question as part of the rationale for unions entering a partnership process is to enhance their institutional security and expand the bargaining agenda.

Table 2. Trade unions have more influence on Irish social and economic policy as a result of social partnership

	Strongly agree/agree	Undecided	Disagree/Strongly disagree	Total
Financial Services	56	24	21	100
Retail	45	28	28	100
Bus	45	26	26	100
Local Authority	41	56	3	100
Total	47	34	19	100

N=126 (figures may not add to 100 due to rounding)

However, what the interview data revealed is that, outside of the pay element, the majority of respondents had very little knowledge of the role of partnership in addressing key issues of concern to their working lives. As noted above these workplaces all face both common, and certain distinctive, challenges. Under Part Two of *Sustaining Progress* (the agreement on which respondents were being, or just had been, balloted at the time of the research) section 6 deals with housing, section 10 with workplace legislation and codes (including

atypical work), sections 11 and 12 deal with the gender pay gap and work/life balance, section 18 deals with migrant workers and sections 20-26 deal with public sector reform. These were all issues of importance for these workplaces and respondents, yet virtually none of the latter was aware that such issues were being addressed through the partnership process at all (much less in the agreement on which they were voting).[11]

To take one example, most of the respondents made reference to the high cost of housing as something that impacted on their working lives (because they were forced into long commutes, for example). Many of the female (and some of the male) respondents referred to the high cost of childcare. The respondents' confusion as to the role of partnership is neatly illustrated by this female IMPACT member:

> 'There's a big housing crisis. There are loads of other issues like childcare, which to me, don't really have anything to do with, well maybe they do, I don't know, with the actual percentage increases. As well, there's the Performance Related Pay. I don't know how that's going to be implemented'.

The whole area of performance related pay and PMDS in the public sector had been negotiated as part of the overall pay package, yet none of the local authority respondents was aware of this fact.

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[11] The issue of how *adequately* partnership addresses such issues is, of course, a different matter.

One area where ordinary SIPTU members, however, were quite conscious of the, as they saw it, failings of the process was in relation to transport policy. Despite the establishment of a public transport forum between the various social partners under the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF)*, the Irish government was determined to press ahead with deregulation (what most bus drivers saw as privatisation) of the city's bus service. There was deep frustration amongst the workplace representatives and ordinary members at Bus Company that the union had drawn back from threatened industrial action, on the basis, as they saw it, of their responsibilities as a social partner. There was considerable anger amongst the drivers, who felt that the government had been disingenuous in its negotiations over *Sustaining Progress*. In fact, above all this was the main reason behind the overwhelming rejection by Bus Company employees of *Sustaining Progress*; respondents commented on the feeling they had been sold a 'pig-in-a-poke'. A feeling existed amongst most Bus Company respondents that SIPTU, as the country's largest general union and one of the main advocates of social partnership, had become compromised in terms of pursuing industrial action by virtue of its status as a key social partner and that social partnership was being used merely as a fig leaf for the government to pursue its goals while avoiding industrial strife. Respondents were frustrated that, despite the fact that the union had an overwhelming mandate for strike action, this was not being pursued:

> 'We're not happy with the union, because they've delayed the strike, which I think is stupid. They have the backing of the whole garage.

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Unfortunately, there are certain guidelines (on taking strike action) that

you have to take from the PPF agreements' (Harry, SIPTU member).

Finally, a related feature of the lack of knowledge of the non-pay elements of

the partnership agreements was the association by a minority of respondents

of the union movement with a (somewhat discredited) 'establishment'. The

potential problem of the 'official' union (and in particular its full-time officers)

becoming incorporated into, and associated with, the social networks of

employers, state agencies and the middle classes (lawyers, bankers etc) is by

no means new (Kelly and Heery, 1994) but is probably heightened under a

corporatist framework. Thus, a minority of respondents responded to

questions about partnership by quickly segueing into complaints about the

government, the State, and others:

'I would also strongly criticise the government for their

waste…the builders, the property developers, the banks and the

government. Stamp duty. VAT. The cost of the tribunals. There's

21% VAT on the lawyers fees. …So, social partnership me arse'

(Carla, MANDATE member).

CONCLUSION

The data here reveal quite a complex interaction between the social

partnership process and the union-member relationship. Broadly speaking,

union members in this research (across all four workplaces) were favourably

disposed towards partnership as a union strategy. This was particularly true in

terms of pay outcomes, the role of partnership in promoting more stable, peaceable employment relations and the benefits of a co-ordinated approach to macro socio-economic policy, that links wage moderation with job creation and retention. Members also felt the process had resulted in more trade union influence over socio-economic policy. However, the data also show that the vast majority of members had very little knowledge of what I have termed the 'broader agenda' aspect of partnership; outside of pay and industrial conflict, members had little understanding of other policy aspects of the process, even where (in areas like childcare, housing, public sector reform, etc) these were issues of concern that had a significant impact on their working lives. Union workplace representatives, too, were by and large positive about the process and welcomed the removal of contentious items (most obviously, pay) from the local bargaining agenda.

Given this it is interesting to reflect on the fact that in three of these workplaces (the exception being the local authority) members voted, around the time of the research, to reject *Sustaining Progress.*[12] The key explanation for this in the private sector workplaces would, it is submitted, seem to be found in the stance of the official union. In both Darbco and People's Bank the respective unions recommended a 'no' vote.[13] In both cases, union officials (and in the latter case, the workplace representative) indicated a significant reason for the recommendation related to the 'binding arbitration' aspect of

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[12] Information on the precise voting outcomes in the four workplaces was unavailable; however, MANDATE, the IBOA and the Bus Company branch of SIPTU (in the latter case, the information comes from the FTOs) all overwhelmingly rejected the agreement, with 'no' votes of between ninety and ninety five per cent. It is reasonable to infer (see note 13) that voting patterns in these workplaces did not deviate significantly from the overall pattern.
[13] More than half of interview respondents in each workplace indicated they would usually follow the union recommendation when voting.

the agreement. Two binding arbitration procedures were introduced as part of *Sustaining Progress*; pay compliance clauses and the provisions of the *Industrial Relations (Amendment) Acts 2001-2004* relating to disputes over union representation. Thus, although the parties are ostensibly free to reject the conciliation stage of these procedures, they both ultimately contain binding mechanisms to bring finality to disputes. However, the binding arbitration question was not an issue that exercised ordinary members at all.[14] Binding arbitration was also an issue for the Bus Company workplace representatives, but there, as illustrated above, the most compelling explanation for the 'no' vote related to the burning issue of deregulation.[15] The IMPACT leadership recommended a 'yes' vote, which was comfortably endorsed by the membership.

Thus, it would seem that the stance taken by the official union is highly significant in terms of voting outcomes, a point that D'Art and Turner (2002), in their research on the attitudes of members of the anti-partnership Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) to the process, also make. This is, perhaps, understandable in light of the confusion, or lack of knowledge, of most members in relation to much of what is contained within the non-pay provisions of the agreements. It does beg the question, however, as to why the official unions here seem unable (or unwilling?) to better explain the workings and outcomes of the process to their

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[14] Indeed, it is worth pointing out that the union movement in general, and SIPTU in particular, has been quite happy to utilise binding arbitration in the context of representation disputes under the 2001-2004 Acts; see Doherty (2007).
[15] Note that at the end of 2007, deregulation (while still being avowed state policy) has not occurred to any real extent.

membership? In the case of Bus Company, a significant union campaign against deregulation seems to have resulted in members being extremely cognisant of the role of the social partnership process in relation to transport policy. In the case of the local authority, however, the link between public sector reform (especially PRP and PMDS) and partnership was not apparent to members at all. One (rather cynical) explanation, adapted from Oxenbridge and Brown (2004), might be that the IMPACT leadership had little interest in explaining to members their role in negotiating what may be seen as painful concessions for public sector workers (performance appraisals, pay rises linked to delivery of an agreed reform agenda and so on).

However, this does not explain why union leaders have not been able to outline to members the potential benefits, or indeed weaknesses, of many of the non-pay partnership provisions outlined above. The interviews with union officials, even those relatively supportive of the process, seemed to indicate unease with how they felt the process was viewed by members. It seems odd, though, for union officials to bemoan the members' lack of engagement with the partnership process, while making little attempt to explain it more fully. The officials' unease seems misplaced in relation to these workplaces, as the data indicate that members (and to a lesser, but still significant extent, workplace representatives) are relatively comfortable with a partnership strategy. This may suggest an interesting inversion of the classic corporatist critique, and raises questions as to the extent to which, on the partnership issue, the leaders of these unions are responding to the preferences of their membership.

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