

# **Militant partnership: a radical pluralist analysis of workforce dialectics**

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## **Abstract**

The sociological understandings of both cooperation and resistance at work are complex. This article contributes to knowledge about dialectic tensions concerning both collaborative and conflictual workforce orientations in the context of a ‘pre-arranged’ union-management partnership agreement. It reports unofficial workforce militancy in opposition to both management and union policy regarding a socially constructed cooperative work regime. The article advances a ‘radical pluralist’ analysis to understand the formation of worker interests and attendant workforce orientations within capitalism.

**Keywords:** conflict and cooperation, militancy, partnership, radical pluralism, worker orientations

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## **1. Introduction**

Sociology has a long interest in the shifting axis of conflict and cooperation at work, with studies examining dialectic forces affecting indeterminacy of the reward-effort exchange. This article contributes to related debates affecting the interplay of conflictual and cooperative relationships within a specific model of union management partnership. The data advances both a '*commentary*' on and '*challenge*' to neo-pluralist and Marxist perspectives explaining workplace dialectics (Edwards, 1986, 2014; Ackers, 2002, 2012; Danford et al., 2005, 2013; McGovern, 2014). Two research themes are examined empirically: i) how workplace actors interpret and shape the 'coexistence' of workplace processes of accommodation (cooperation) and resistance (conflict), and ii), the implications of this dialectic interplay for attendant workforce orientations.

The evidence comes from a single case study organization in the Republic of Ireland that espoused a cooperative partnership model. For anonymity and confidentiality, the case has a pseudonym of *Omega* and the trade union is called *Industrial Union* (IU). The analysis has implications for '*radical*' and '*pluralist*' theoretical explanations of workforce orientations within capitalist economies.

## **2. Frames of reference on moderation, militancy, and workforce orientations**

### *Definitions*

Both moderate and militant orientations relate to the formation of interests. *Moderation* is the accommodation between employees and managers based on understandings that respective interests are best fulfilled through cooperation.

Management engage employees, both directly as individuals and indirectly through representatives, in cooperative and integrated relationships to pursue mutual gains. In contrast, *militancy* is frequently portrayed as eschewing accommodation and instead worker interests are deemed to be ‘irreconcilable’ with those of managements’ (Danford et al., 2005:227). However, resistance should be understood in terms of foci and level. For example worker concerns may differ from management goals, yet that does not imply conflict will be clearly manifest (e.g. strikes). Edwards and Scullion (1982) suggest that conflict is evident in some work situations but not elsewhere. Moreover, the formation of interests may be examined beyond and separate to specific forms of conflictual action that occur in practice (Edwards, 2014:3). Finally, *workforce orientations* are the meanings people attach to their work context and the social processes that influence how they act and think with regard to that work (Watson, 2012:239).

Contention between rival frames of reference stem from earlier debates on unitary and plural perspectives by Fox (1973), Clegg (1975) and Hyman (1975) (see Cullinane, 2014). The concept of frames of reference has been enduring in employment relations theory and relates to what Heery (2014) defines as ‘zones of contention’ in explaining workplace tensions. By connecting with these zones of contention we engage with both neo-pluralist and radical interpretations and assess how these inform workforce orientations. To aid analysis, three rival frames of reference are outlined in Table 1: neo-pluralism, political Marxism, and radical (material) pluralism<sup>1</sup>.

### *Neo-Pluralist Perspectives*

Unlike unitarism, pluralist perspectives recognize different interests between capital

and labour, and emphasize that conflict can be regulated through rules and institutions (Clegg, 1975; Budd and Bhawe, 2008). Contemporary neo-pluralism assumes conflict-based interests are not only counterproductive but self-defeating within capitalist markets (Ackers, 2014:16). For pluralist perspectives the key issue is not moderate behaviours per se, but resolving disagreement as an accommodative process towards mutual gains outcomes (Boxall, 2013). Faced with variation in market and institutional contexts, neo-pluralism suggests that collaborative mutuality engenders higher quality employment outcomes for employers, unions and workers than conflict or class interest formation.

Ackers (2002, 2014) is vocal in advocating a neo-pluralist paradigm, criticizing ‘an obsession of the British sectarian left with economic workplace militancy’ and Marxist expectations that major societal change can germinate from workplace grievances. This neo-pluralist strain revives Durkheim’s concern about how moral communities and social institutions bond work and society together, and thereby rejuvenates classical pluralist analysis. It claims to offer a normative vision for employee voice by promoting an ethical rationale for processes such as social partnership as an alternative to the (Marxist) goal of challenging capitalism.

However, neo-pluralism and the quest for mutuality have attracted critique. Thompson (2013) points to instability in the on-going financialisation of capitalism, such that new employment regimes have not produced widespread collaboration. Danford et al. (2013) find that when it comes to trade union resilience and mutual collaboration, partnership is about as useful as a ‘chocolate tea pot’. Neo-pluralist analysis has a tendency to advance cooperation over conflict and trust-building over

power imbalances (Ackers, 2002:17). Arguably, neo-pluralist analysis has failed to capture how power resources are mobilised and used to regulate employment and favour employer interests over worker concerns (Dobbins, 2010; Dundon et al, 2014; Wilkinson et al, 2014).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### *Radical Perspectives*

Pluralism can be contrasted with various radical perspectives. A core differentiator is, rather than functional-institutional rules to maintain order and stability, radical schools emphasize both economic and political capitalist roots that exploit labour. Radical frames of reference are not homogeneous or singular and variation relates to multiple interpretations about dominant sources of interest formation and contestation (Frege et al, 2011; Heery, 2014). For some it is class relations (Hyman, 1975; Gall, 2003b; Danford et al., 2005). Others see post-structural constructs such as culture, subjectivity or identity as sources of exploitation (Willmott, 1993; Fleming, 2005). We focus on the ‘zone of contention’ between political Marxism and radical pluralism in explaining the tensions between and within cooperative and conflictual workforce orientations.

#### *i) Political Marxism*

Radical-inclined theories question classic pluralist analysis focusing on maintaining order through institutions of job regulation (Cullinane, 2014). One radical strand, political Marxism, shares a general ideological discourse relating to debates around partnership and interplay of militant-moderate orientations. There is considerable

intellectual variation in Marxist scholarship, such that a single article concerned with other competing ideas cannot do it full justice (see Frege et al, 2011). Among others, contemporary contributions include Darlington (1994, 2014), Gall (2003a,b), Kelly (1998) and Danford et al. (2005, 2013), who all reject the notion that workers (unions) can gain from collaborative accommodation with employers. It is posited that workers would be better defining their interests around class-based struggles endemic of capitalist exchange and in so doing, political Marxists advance a prognosis about ‘what needs to be’ (Gall, 2003b:317). Marxian interpretations assume that inherent tensions at work can be the root of system change through militant actions that foment class consciousness and/or union challenges to capitalism (Hyman, 1975).

Militant unions are typically regarded as those willing to invoke strike action and articulate an ideology of opposing interests. A notable critic of moderation, Kelly (1998:126) outlines Marxist mobilization theory, the fulcrum of which is interests and the way subordinate groups define them: ‘Workers in capitalist societies find themselves in relations of exploitation and domination in which many of their significant interests conflict with those of the employer’. Similarly, Darlington (2014:9) charts historical strike waves as a key dynamic in the ability of unions not only to advance workers interests but also to challenge capitalism. In this analysis shop floor agitation often preceded periods of union strength, with rank-and-file activists mobilising conflict against the accommodative stance of bureaucratic union leaders as well as to improve work conditions. Darlington (2014:15) draws attention to the importance of left-wing political forces as one element in extending workplace struggle beyond the narrow sectional interests advanced by (some) union leaders. Such analysis is not confined to historical events and contemporary evidence is

reported from organizations in the UK like Ford, the Fire Service and London Underground, where cadres of workplace activists are identified as important conduits in mobilising conflict (Darlington, 1994, 2001). Danford et al (2005, 2013) argue that high performance work systems, including union-management partnerships, may appear to benefit workers (unions) but actually weaken worker interests by protecting the power of capital over labour. Consequently, prospects for moderation are rejected in favour of more militant opposition to a system protecting employer interests.

Notwithstanding oversimplification, political Marxism shares certain assumptions about the logic of capitalist accumulation and evolutionary stages: (1) analysis of capitalist social relations of production leads to (2); a political strategy to challenge capitalism via mobilizing class struggle, or a tendency for capitalism to self-destruct, subsequently leading to (3); capitalism being superseded by an alternative (non-exploitative) system (Edwards, 1986; Ackers, 2012). Marxist analysis is sometimes cautious in assuming capitalist employment relations will inevitably generate class struggle. Marxists variously point out why class consciousness is stymied; including false consciousness, the hidden nature of surplus value appropriation, worker sectionalism, or employer victimisation (Gall, 2013). Nonetheless, the scale of the systemic shift requiring class mobilization has left Marxist prescription wanting, especially among historical and contemporary employment policy analysis regarding the role of the state and possible abuses of power (Fox, 1985; Ackers, 2014).

## ii) *Radical pluralism*

Radical variations of pluralism originate from an auto-critique of pluralism by Fox (1973, 1979), arguing that the basis of conflict and consent are deeper and more

socially embedded in structures of power and authority than pluralism can explain (Watson, 2012:290). Endorsement of pluralism as a set of *values* (something that ought to be) is very different to believing that enduring cooperation is adequately *realizable* through existing policies or structures to leverage institutional reform (actual practice) (Fox, 1985; Cullinane, 2014). In other words pluralist ‘values’ and adequacy of ‘actions’ to realize such values are distinguishable across time and context.

Radical pluralism identifies with political Marxism in so far as agreeing that power inequalities and tensions are embedded within an exploitative (in a technical sense) wage-effort bargain. However radical pluralism diverts from political Marxism with regards to the second (inevitable class conflict) and third (emergence of an alternative non-exploitative system) stages of evolution. Important here is the analytical work of Edwards (1986, 2003, 2014) in delineating the concept of ‘structured antagonism’: an antagonist relationship where workers sell their labour power to work under the authority of employers, who in turn extract a surplus using a variable cocktail of controlling and cooperative strategies. Crucially, drawing a dividing line from Marxism and pluralism, Edwards (1986:55) suggests that ‘structured antagonism between capital and labour need not imply that capitalists and workers will meet as opposing classes with clearly opposed interests. But neither should analysis go to the other extreme of denying that structurally based antagonisms exist’.

Radical pluralism draws on analysis of materialist antagonism. Marxian analysis has recognised the self-contained nature of workforce sectionalism and union protections (Beynon, 1973, Hyman, 1975). For example, Beynon’s (1973) informative analysis of



an emergent ‘factory’ class consciousness within Ford, points to powerful vested interest formation and attendant workforce orientations. Yet both labour and capital have a deeper and more enduring dependency on each other while possessing divergent (materialist) concerns. Employers need to control workers while also extracting productive creativity. Workers have an objective interest in resisting exploitation but also have to co-operate with employers to earn a living (Edwards, 1986). A key distinction between radical materialist and political Marxist frames is that the former does not problematize how workplace conflict will spill-over to politicise societal struggle. That is to say, wider class struggle is not necessarily read-off from relations of structured antagonism and divergent concerns at workplace level (Edwards, 2003; Thompson and Smith, 2010). To this end political Marxism is constrained because it does not theorise sufficiently the implications of vested-interest sectionalism for wider class mobilisation. In contrast, a radical materialist perspective views the capital-labour relation in the workplace as relatively self-contained. Edwards (1990) conceptualises the distinction as the ‘relative autonomy’ of the labour process within capitalism.

In sum, radical variants of pluralist values can be evident in materialist-structural tensions that observe processes of constant adaptation at different levels, and the idea that interests are irreconcilable or will transcend into class struggle as a vehicle for challenging capitalism remains debatable and contestable (Watson, 2012:290).

### *Contextualising workforce orientations*

The above review of competing frames of reference, although unavoidably brief, identifies both a theoretical and applied connection to understanding the interplay of

both conflict and cooperation at work. Attendant workforce orientations cannot be simplistically categorized as either supportive or opposed to management interests because worker priorities vary. Clegg (1975) identified flaws in Marxian inclinations that workers have some general interest in class struggle and a desire to overthrow capitalism, and called for empirical examination in specific work settings. Daniel (1973:61) argued that employees have different priorities in different contexts, so work orientations are potentially multi-pronged: ‘as far as the understanding of such workers’ behaviour is concerned the variations in their priorities and attitudes according to context are more important than any overall or general orientation or set of priorities’. For instance, in a ‘bargaining context’ workers focus on extrinsic economic rewards around the wage-effort bargain and management tend to be seen in oppositional terms. However, in the work context employees can focus on the intrinsic nature of the job and inter-personal relations, emphasizing a more cooperative orientation. On a spectrum, orientations can be characterized by conflict in some contexts and cooperation in others; thereby creating two ‘logically contradictory images’ of work relations (Daniel, 1973:39-62).

Contemporary writers also illustrate how context affects worker orientations. Importantly, the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) and Disconnected Capitalism Thesis (DCT) illustrate the power of external institutions in affecting formulation of worker interests (Thompson, 2013; Heyes et al., 2014). Indeed, managers themselves may be powerless to change the structural conditions of labour exploitation or make long-term adjustment plans owing to short-term financial pressures (Thompson, 2011). The contingent nature of employees’ experience is contextually moulded over time by the interplay of external structural forces and internal social relations within capitalism.

Belanger and Edwards (2007:715) observe that employees define concerns (not always interests) through respective internalized actions at work and their interpretations of the interplay with external forces (see also Burawoy, 2013). Therefore it can be unhelpful to attach static labels like moderate or militant to complex interest-formation and fluid orientations about workplace concerns.

Given these issues and debates, this article is concerned with how workplace actors interpret the coexistence of moderate and conflictual tensions, and what implications such a dynamic has for workforce orientations. Next the data and case study context is explained, and how workforce experiences were coded and analysed in relation to the tensions of conflict (militant) and cooperative (moderate) orientations.

### **3. Research methods and context**

The research method utilised a form of Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) at a single case study company. The case has a pseudonym *Omega* and the trade union is named *Industrial Union (IU)* to preserve anonymity. Following Yin (2009) this detailed single case method facilitated a rich and unique approach to test the two research themes. In order to assess the interplay of conflict and cooperation, Kelly's (1998) schematic dimensions of militant and moderate union postures were used to code and assess evidence from the case study, summarised in Table 2.

TABLE 2 HERE

The context of *Omega* and *IU* is important. Research access agreement prevents us from identifying the company. And because product market information or sector

location would risk company identification, we restrict descriptive background information about *Omega* and *IU*. *Omega* operates in the Republic of Ireland (RoI), which offers a unique context for assessing militancy alongside collaborative partnership. The RoI experienced over twenty years of uninterrupted centralized partnership until the financial crisis brought this to an abrupt end in 2009 (see Teague and Donaghey, 2009; McDonough and Dundon, 2010).

*Omega* employs 210 workers in various occupations, mostly in manual operator roles. About twenty per cent of the workforce included migrant employees, many of whom entered the Irish labour market during boom times and EU enlargement. *Omega* provides a rich data source for several reasons. It is a new greenfield location and management decided to design the employment system from scratch. Workforce demographics include a range of nationalities, occupations and workers with varied employment and unionisation experiences. Even before these diverse employee groups entered the organisation, a ‘pre-employment’ partnership agreement was signed between *Omega* and external *IU* officials. Comparable to single union deals elsewhere (Bassett, 1986), management sought to socially engineer workforce cooperation using a binding no-strike clause and partnership process. However, cooperative behaviours were soon fractured by post-employment issues almost immediately after *Omega* began trading in 2001. In particular, two unofficial worker-led groups sought to challenge the formal *Omega-IU* partnership agreement from below. The first worker group advocating a distinct militant posture we call the ‘*Opponents*’, who are the more active and larger of the two unofficial worker-led movements. Respondents from the *Opponent* group estimated that about 25 per cent of all staff were active supporters or affiliates, or slightly higher when considering

these were drawn from the main operator grade: “circa 50 workers and we operate on feedback from the majority”<sup>ii</sup>. The smaller second rival militant group we call the ‘*Masked Resisters*’, after workers from this group picketed company premises wearing masks to protect their identity. We could not verify precise membership numbers for this group and employees interviewed indicated that around “half-a-dozen or so picketed company premises a while back”. Adding another layer of complexity, as well as resisting both the official union (*IU*) and *Omega* management, the two unofficial militant groups opposed one another, for reasons explained below.

Data was collected from multiple respondents and incorporated a longitudinal element over a two-year period. Over 50 separate data sources were used, involving a total of 71 repeat interviews and various communiqués: summarised in Table 3. First, 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 18 respondents including managers, employees, and union stewards. Access to militant workplace agitators was gained using Respondent-Driven Sampling (Heckathorn, 2002). RDS is a research technique that helps researchers gain access and collect data about ‘hidden’ social processes or ‘difficult-to-reach’ respondents. It is a similar method to snowball sampling with access gained from local knowledge and/or information from other respondents and documentary sources. While no respondent interviewed face-to-face reported being a member of either unofficial militant group, follow-up access was achieved through anonymous email addresses publicised in unofficial militant newsletters and media releases. Extensive email correspondence then occurred with two informants (one from each militant group). Email correspondence led to follow-up telephone interviews with the same informants.

TABLE 3 HERE

‘Analytic research memo’ protocols (Bryman, 2012) were coded and written-up using the militant-moderate schematic in Table 2. Additional secondary data sources were important for validating primary research and involved scrutinizing documentary material including: two collective agreements, company personnel handbooks, and 25 newsletters and press statements issued by unofficial worker groups.

#### **4. The empirical dialectical interplay of moderation and militancy**

Under theme one, the *Omega* case data offers a rare analytical lens on complex real life actor interpretations of both moderate and militant processes.

##### *Moderation: a ‘pre-arranged’ marriage*

Prior to commencement of *Omega* operations, management and IU Full-Time Officers (FTO) negotiated a five-year pre-employment agreement designed to engineer a ‘new’ cooperative workplace regime. By their nature pre-arranged collective agreements exclude employees from ‘ownership’ of the bargain. The *IU* negotiated a single agreement for staff prior to any employees commencing work. The agreement stipulated that as ‘a condition of employment each employee becomes a member of [*IU*] for the duration of his/her employment’. In short, a pre-arranged single union closed shop agreement was signed. It provided recognition for four shop stewards, who functioned through a partnership forum, attended by the *IU* FTO.

The partnership agreement contained a continuity of service, or no-strike clause. If local talks failed, issues could be referred to third party dispute resolution or an

independent three-person panel for binding arbitration. The prohibition on industrial action banned both strike action and action short of a strike. IU was the only union prepared to concede a no-strike clause and the FTO explained this was a strategic decision to secure recognition. But the no-strike clause generated almost immediate dissent among workers; some of whom brought external adversarial union legacies with them and felt alienated by enforced cooperation. A senior manager admitted the clause was controversial but defended it on grounds of commercial reality:

We would have huge penalties if we had a strike. It is fair to say it caused tension in the workforce. They say they wouldn't go on strike but would like the right.

Meanwhile, the IU official remarked:

To this day we come in for an awful lot of criticism for signing the industrial peace/continuity of service clause. But negotiators were right to do the deal.

Signatories widely heralded an innovative partnership agreement. There seemed considerable scope for collaboration through the partnership forum, with potential coverage of almost all 'non-pay' issues: business re-structuring, employment trends, commercial financial information, health and safety and training (among others). However, in practice the partnership forum rarely met and when it did had little effect on employer policy. Management were preoccupied with the operational demands of running a new greenfield facility and responding to commercial pressures. Senior management (mistakenly) assumed the pre-employment agreement provided a *de jure* platform for cooperation. One Director explained:

The partnership forum did not always meet. If it was quiet people thought we don't really need to meet, which is wrong.

### *The emergence of militancy*

The no-strike deal, coupled with an inactive partnership forum, acted as a conduit to mobilise worker interests in opposition to those of management. For some workers the no-strike clause and excessive IU collaboration with management ignited adversarial them and us traditions. For others, experience and conditions of the labour process were context factors that sparked militancy, but also conditioned cooperation from other groups such as some migrant workers and white-collar staff. On the militant side, managements' application of discipline, work rosters, fatigue, and health and safety concerns galvanized momentum for militant posturing and surfacing of *structured antagonism*. For some employee respondents, attribution was directed towards the *IU* as much as *Omega* management. As withdrawal of labour or action short of a strike was prohibited, one manifestation of conflict was increased absenteeism. One shop steward explained:

I was representing people who were going off sick because they felt they were being pushed by the company. They felt they were being harshly dealt with in disciplinaries. Your last alternative is not to come to work.

Another manifestation of oppositional interests was unofficial militant workforce dissent. Emergence of conflictual postures stemmed from a combination of external sector traditions and growing disillusionment with internal labour process issues. An early indication was when a small group of *Masked Resisters* picketed the site in protest, all wearing balaclavas to protect their identity. However, there was sectionalist rivalry between the *Masked Resisters* and the distinct larger *Opponents* militant group. The smaller *Masked Resisters* group was anti-IU since its inception and campaigned for transfer to another union, owing primarily to *IU's* no-strike agreement with *Omega*. In contrast the larger dissident *Opponents* group has been



very critical of management, although its union allegiance shifted over time: it was formerly pro-IU but eventually switched to an anti-IU stance due to dissatisfaction with the extent of moderation. The '*Masked Resisters*' further disagreed with some of the '*Opponents*' methods for mobilisation, such as circulating newsletters instead of direct agitation.

The *Opponents* claimed to have galvanised support because they advanced an agenda around workplace concerns that resonated with workers: lack of effective voice and health and safety worries:

We had no voice and very unhealthy safety practices. Any opinion was threatened by the company and they 'managed out people'. They refused to address safety concerns.

How these oppositional and conflict-based interests impact workforce responses is important. It seems that neither the *Opponents* or *Masked Resisters* are led by current shop stewards, although former union stewards and activists are members or associates. The main modus operandi through which the *Opponents* group object to accommodative relations with management is through its own regular newsletter. This is sent to management, the union, employees, and selected external outlets are lobbied. Multiple editions have been published over a five year period with a consistent articulation of alleged industrial grievances not addressed through partnership. The *Opponents* group argue:

We do not agree with the partnership model. A rigid no-strike clause was imposed. There is no positive communication from any managers.

Due to highly derogatory personalized insults made by some militant factions, management instigated an investigation of their activities. Given the actions and language used by militant workgroups amounts to potential gross misconduct and possibly summary dismissal, their activities remained underground and highly secretive. Whilst this makes analysis difficult, one way of considering the impact of oppositional interest formation is to assess attendant mobilising action.

### *Mobilizing agitation*

Although rivals, the two groups share similar collective grievances concerning wage-effort issues. Both groups have (separately) sought to mobilize workers around several perceived injustices: inability to strike, disciplinary procedures, work rosters, pay and union moderation, among others. In one communiqué, the *Opponents* group campaigned against the no-strike clause:

Nobody wants to go on strike and all employees have a vested interest in service continuity ... (but) employees should have the right to choose how they resolve their disputes.

The shift towards militant agitation related to perceptions that the union had been incorporated by management through partnership. The *Masked Resisters* argued:

Their inaction undermines the basic principles of trade unionism. [IU] has lost all respect to any trade unionists within the organisation.

With regard to ideology, militancy does not appear to be fuelled by notions of wider political allegiance or class struggle. The *Opponents* remarked: “we are not politically

affiliated and have a mix of views”. The same applied to the *Masked Resisters*, with one respondent suggesting he had “never been in a union before” and was motivated by a desire to address work grievances. In this case at least, militant interests were formed within a context of weak union power and specific workplace concerns. If any political ideology could be ascertained it was unequivocal opposition to a workplace regime predicated on moderation which did not rectify a series of wage-effort bargain concerns.

To illustrate the interplay of militant and moderate interests, and attendant mobilising actions, Kelly’s (1998) framework presented earlier is used to summarize the evidence in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4 HERE

## **5. A patchwork effect on workforce orientations**

On the second research theme, we identify implications of militant-moderate interest formation for workforce orientations.

### *Recasting moderation: a new collective agreement*

Partly as a counter-mobilization against the militant challenge, management and IU sought to further embed cooperative behaviours through a recast partnership agreement. Negotiations were protracted and it took eighteen months before a new partnership proposal was presented to workers. Unlike the initial partnership agreement, negotiation occurred against a difficult external backdrop of economic recession. The revised partnership arrangement includes several new features: a novel

employee voice process where workers can have regular access to shop stewards through a walk-in clinic on-site. The no-strike clause was replaced with extended disputes resolution procedures. A review of shift patterns was promised. On pay, the proposed agreement maintained a single (all-inclusive) salary which incorporated shift and other premia along with a pay freeze following a one-off 2.5% increase. Bonus payments were also conditional on industrial peace and organizational performance. The new agreement was presented by both management and IU as a major opportunity to enhance cooperation and reduce conflict.

Yet, militant groups opposed the revised agreement. While the no-strike clause would ostensibly go, militant factions felt that actual ability to strike was constrained. The initial proposal was rejected by a two-thirds majority of the workforce, despite *Omega* and IU recommendations to accept. The scale of employee rejection would suggest the impact of interests formatted in opposition remained significant. Following rejection, union members were again balloted by IU on whether to conduct a final reassessment in local (rather than centralised) union-management talks. From these local negotiations some modifications were made, specifically an enhanced bonus payment and management endorsing a stronger commitment to review roster patterns. On a second ballot the deal was accepted by a very narrow margin.

#### *Balancing alternative workforce orientations*

Amidst militant workgroup agitation, the evidence shows an uneven dynamic in which cooperative behaviours fused with awareness of divergent concerns. For example, the scale of rejection of the proposed collective agreement in the first ballot and narrow acceptance in a second is indicative of alternative and shifting

orientations. The *Masked Resisters* did not oppose cooperation in principle, yet they felt that accommodation with *Omega* management was “social partnership gone too far”. An *Opponent* member argued that management failed to “respect the benefits of good industrial relations”. Interest formation and attendant workforce orientations were mostly rooted in ‘bread and butter’ wage-effort concerns. Many workers viewed management-union integrative bargaining as a legitimate way to further their interests, yet they objected to the ‘form’ of partnership as enforced cooperation. One consequence was detachment among workers towards their union and company. Trust in and commitment to the institutions of job regulation were not high among many employees; reflecting Fox’s (1974) assessment of the unfolding dynamics of low trust worker orientations.

Divergent worker orientations ranged from disgruntled militant agitation; mainly moderate but also at times combative shop stewards; calculative employees who exchanged simple compliance in exchange for pay; and apparently content employees, many of whom were migrant workers with perceptions of favourable employment conditions compared to their homeland (e.g. Nigeria, Poland etc), as well as white collar clerical staff. One migrant employee commented:

“I consider myself to be very lucky. I am very happy here”.

Therefore, co-existence of moderate and militant worker interests also fused with a culturally diverse workforce, adding another layer of complexity. Evidently, wide-ranging behaviours overlapped and co-existed, producing a complex patchwork of uneven orientations. The militant insurgency orchestrated conflict but also fragmented

collectivism. Several employee respondents were critical of the *Opponents*' tactics of agitation. One worker caricatured their publicity material as the "loony news". Another felt that because it often lambasted co-workers as co-conspirators with management, some employees were "drawn closer to management than they otherwise might have been". Accordingly, the workforce did not have one fixed set of interests that could be easily delineated as moderate or militant. This fluidity points to the limitations of polarizing tendencies towards either consensus (neo-pluralist) or class-based systemic conflict (political Marxist) extremities regarding workforce orientations.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

This research adds knowledge to existing sociology of work literature by exploring organizational paradoxes and dialectics. It provides two distinct contributions. First, patterns of interest formation are interpreted by actors alongside contradictory posturing, and second, how attendant workforce orientations are shaped by various historically evolving internal and external contextual factors. At *Omega*, the complex interplay of external and internal influences shaped the dialectic of conflictual and cooperative tensions. Contemporary developments in this regard justify a shift from orthodox pluralist theory to a distinctive '*radical*' flavour of pluralist values that locate actions and social structures within capitalist accumulation regimes. It is important to distinguish between espousing pluralist *values* that favour voice and power-sharing, and the extent to which such values are actually *realizable* under contemporary neo-liberalism. One major implication in this regard is that neither neo-pluralist or political Marxist frames of reference can adequately explain workplace tensions and the dialectics surrounding interest formation. A second implication is

that neo-pluralism has moved closer to a unitary ideology in advocating ‘new realist’ business arguments for performance gains based on voice and partnership (Heery, 2014). We now expand on these contributions.

*Balancing dialectical patterns of moderation and militancy*

Regarding the contribution of the first research theme, the data illustrates that the dialectic of moderation and militancy at *Omega* evokes a pattern of work tension that neither political Marxist (Danford et al., 2005, 2013; Kelly, 1998, 2004) nor cooperative neo-pluralist perspectives fully capture (Ackers, 2002, 2012). The original no-strike deal at *Omega* reflected what has been termed shallow worker participation rather than inherent failure of partnership per se (Dundon et al, 2006; Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009). *Omega-IU* cooperation was akin to what Bacon and Blyton (1999:638-640) call an ‘alliance of insiders’, comprised of a formal inner-circle of senior union representatives and managers as executive decision-makers. Under the ‘alliance of insiders’ model, trade unionists often succumb to economic coercion, accommodating a new realism and altered balance of power. At *Omega*, the union became increasingly distant from workers because the new partnership regime proved incapable of addressing worker concerns.

The evidence supports subtler conceptualizations of militancy and moderate interest formation embedded in radical analysis of pluralist values and realization (Edwards, 1986; 2003, 2014; Fox 1973; 1979; Watson, 2012). A limitation with both political Marxist and neo-pluralist perspectives is that they can focus too much on either conflict or cooperation, at the expense of the dialectic interplay. Furthermore, they fail to fully capture the contextual conditions sustaining or constraining cooperative

outcomes. In this regard, radical pluralism informed by materialist analysis offers deeper insight than neo-pluralism to explain why even progressive managers breach cooperative workplace bargains given the constraints of neo-liberal accumulation (Thompson, 2013; Edwards, 2014). Radical pluralism can be seen to view dialectics, including differences between contradiction and tension in a broader way, as a process of emergent adjustment to a range of competing materialist-institutional (internal and external) forces. Arguably, divergent workplace tension is a normal feature of neo-liberal modes of accumulation (van de Broek and Dundon, 2012). But there is no deterministic corollary that dialectic processes will generate the type of systemic change advocated by political Marxism against capitalist work regimes or, alternatively, in neo-pluralist terms, for functionally imposing a moderate social order. Radical pluralism, on the other hand, better captures adjustments and tensions within capitalism. It also illustrates that patterns of conflict and consent are ‘part of’ real life work experiences, yet at the same time workplace relations have a degree of *relative autonomy* ‘apart from’ wider societal structures.

#### *The context of workforce orientations*

Turning to the second research theme, Fox’s (1974) argument that managers who treat workers in a low-trust manner often engender low-trust behaviours, is resonant in the case. Faced with a militant grass-roots challenge to the pre-arranged cooperative regime, management and IU officials subsequently sought to smooth-out tensions by creating a ‘partnership mark two’. Importantly, the findings indicate that the mobilisation of worker (militant) interests that directly oppose those of management goals (cooperation) can spur attempts to construct stronger employment agreements. However, meaningful union-management consensus often requires robust institutional



conditions that are not widely realized in liberal market economies (Edwards and Sengupta, 2010). Given the narrow margin by which employees endorsed the recast partnership arrangement in the case, caution is required in predicting a shift to a more stable cooperative regime. The point lends weight to Roche's (1991) argument, in critique of Fox's initial micro-pluralist sociology of trust dynamics, that workplace 'social' assimilation can be more important than organisation-wide 'system integration' in shaping orientations.

Importantly, the data contributes to knowledge about the unevenness and variability of workforce orientations, even within a single case. At *Omega* the workforce could not easily be labelled as predominantly militant or moderate. Workers did not have one static set of concerns and insurgent factions and official union channels were all advocating competing interests that shaped a multitude of orientations: militants clashed with each other, with moderate co-workers, with the union and company management. Meanwhile, moderate employees and shop stewards both supported and opposed partnership. Making judgment calls on the merits or de-merits of moderation versus militant interests is not the main point of learning here. It is not that one approach served worker interests better or more fully than the other. Rather than the either/or consequence of adversarial versus consensual workforce orientations, agitation and accommodation created a fluid fusion of context-specific structured antagonisms across a variegated workforce.

The evidence lends weight to a radical frame of reference over the overly accommodative analytical inclinations of recent neo-pluralism. Yet to dismiss pluralist values about how work (and society) ought to be arranged is somewhat self-

defeating. While political Marxism has analytical utility exposing partnership as a veil to conceal employer control and domination over workers and unions, this is not the end of the story. One issue is how far radical contributions have to or even should be labelled Marxist, and whether such perspectives can permit adjustments or improvements in the world that people live in now rather than espouse an alternative 'non exploitative' society. Other than drawing on Marxism as a heuristic tool, Edwards (1986:94) states that 'there must be some claim that the working class identify and struggle for specific class interests, in particular the overthrow of capitalism'. As it seems unlikely that the prevailing capitalist order will be replaced by an alternative (non-exploitative) system anytime soon, it is arguably even more important to evaluate how workers develop strategies and responses within the confines of the system in which they labour, rather than wait for its complete transcendence or self-combustion. In this regard, radical application of pluralist values can deliver materialist improvements for those who are subject to work degradation. Interests are not irreconcilable in their totality and progress along a radical spectrum can offer hope and adjustment. This we advocate as 'radical pluralism' within the constraints (and opportunities) of materialist relationships predicated on evolving tensions embedded within capitalist accumulation regimes.

In conclusion, radical pluralism offers a robust analytical prism to unpick the formation of multi-faceted worker interests that both challenge and accommodate management. Workers respond to real-life contexts they find themselves in, and to conditions perceived to advance or thwart their concerns. The implications of the dialectic of accommodation and resistance should be viewed in this light and subject to further empirical investigation in a variety of contexts. Ackers (2012:14) raises

fundamental issues that extend the debate beyond a polarised impasse. Saying work relations are ‘mostly’ asymmetrical and indeterminate, that ‘many but not all’ actors interpret policy in different ways, implies there is complexity that requires further scrutiny across contexts to embed greater theoretical generalizability. Future studies can advance knowledge by pursuing context-sensitive comparative analysis to reveal the dialectic interplay of conflict and consent shaping patchwork patterns of workforce orientations within an increasingly globalised system of financial capitalism.

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**Table 1: Three competing frameworks on militancy and moderation**

Frame of Reference	Nature of Work Relations	The Conflict-Cooperation Interplay	Worker Orientations & Expected Behavioural Outcomes
<p><b>1. Neo Pluralism</b></p>	<p>Draws on Durkheim to emphasize functionalist role of institutions to maintain order and equalize balance of power to regulate competing and common interests between workers and management.</p>	<p>Emphasizes cooperation and trust over conflict and power. Conflict regulated through institutions (unions, employee voice). Neglects deeper structural and societal sources of conflict formation and power imbalances.</p>	<p>‘New realism; Moderate attitudes; Partnership Agreements; Mutual gains expectations.</p>
<p><b>2. Radicalism</b></p> <p><i>a) Political Marxism</i></p> <p><i>b) Radical Pluralism</i></p>	<p>Economic and social system produces multiple contested interests between workers and management. Power imbalance and inequality undermines labour interests.</p> <p>Marxist economic determinism. Capitalism generates inevitable class conflict between capital and labour, which will lead to wider class challenge toward an alternative non-exploitative society.</p> <p>Draws on materialist sociology of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. Capitalism creates structured antagonism between workers and management. No assumption this will directly determine wider class struggle. ‘Relative autonomy’ of labour process from accumulation system.</p>	<p>Variable sub-perspectives that distinguish between differing sources of conflict (e.g. context, occupation, class, race, gender, culture, identity) and accommodation.</p> <p>Emphasis on conflict and politicised system to change mode of accumulation. Neglects basis and extent of workforce compromise/cooperation.</p> <p>Both workers and management co-joined in dynamic of conflict and cooperation. Shifting interplay between external factors and internal social relations.</p>	<p>Variable sub-perspectives that differ about work orientations and expected behavioural outcomes.</p> <p>Resistance; Mobilizing opposition; Worker (Union) militancy; Disorder; Anti-capitalist.</p> <p>Structural, contextual and social tensions sustain ongoing ‘adaptation’ to materialist conditions between militant and consenting behaviours.</p>

**Table 2: Components of militant and moderate posturing**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Militancy</b>	<b>Moderation</b>
Goals	Ambitious demands with few concessions	Moderate demands with some or many concessions
Membership resources	Strong reliance on mobilization of union membership	Strong reliance on employers, third parties, law
Institutional resources	Exclusive reliance on collective bargaining	Willingness to experiment with/support non-bargaining institutions
Methods	Frequent threat or use of industrial action	Infrequent threat or use of industrial action
Ideology	Ideology of conflicting interests	Ideology of partnership

Source: Kelly (1998:60)



<b>Table 3: Data Sources and Respondents</b>				
<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Respondent Type</b>	<b>Number of separate sources / respondents</b>	<b>Number of repeat interviews / Communiqué</b>	
Semi-structured interviews face-to-face	<i>Omega</i> management	7	1xonce =	1
			4xtwice =	8
			2xthreetimes =	6
	<i>Industrial Union</i> full-time (external) official	1	1xthreetimes =	3
	<i>Industrial Union</i> workplace shop stewards	3	2xtwice =	4
			1xthreetimes =	3
	Employees	7	7xonce =	7
		<b>18</b>	<b>32</b>	
Follow-up telephone interviews	Unofficial militant workgroup members	2	1xtwice =	2
			1xonce =	1
Email communications	Unofficial militant workgroup members	2	1xsixtimes =	6
			1xtwice =	2
		<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	
Documentary sources	Militant workgroup newsletters and press statements	25	25	
	Collective <i>Omega</i> -IU partnership agreements	2	2	
	<i>Omega</i> Personnel Handbook	1	1	
		<b>28</b>	<b>28</b>	
<b>Totals</b>		<b>50</b>	<b>71</b>	

<b>Table 4: Co-existing components of militancy and moderation at <i>Omega</i></b>		
<b>Component</b>	<b>Militancy</b>	<b>Moderation</b>
Goals	Ambitious demands with few concessions: -Safer work practices -Fairer work duties -Better health & safety -Right to strike -Better pay -New union representation -Right to join union of choice	Moderate demands with some or many concessions: -Fairer work duties - Strengthen partnership - Mutual gains
Membership constituency	Masked Resisters Group Opponents Group Other traditional unionists (some anti-IU)	External IU Most IU shop stewards Moderate workers Migrant workers
Membership resources	Strong reliance on mobilization of union membership	Strong reliance on external union, employer, third parties.
Institutional resources	Adversarial collective bargaining to pursue goals	Willingness to experiment with/support non-bargaining consensus institutions to pursue goals
Methods	Frequent threat or use of conflict: -Newsletter - Mobilize members -Strike threat -No vote on new agreement -Demands for shop steward committee to resign -Publicity campaign over injustice issues -Threaten non-cooperation	Infrequent threat or use of conflict: -Cooperate with management - Revamp partnership model - Use procedures
Ideology	Ideology of conflicting interests: -Anti-partnership -Non-political affiliation, - Diversity of views -Improve wage-effort bargain	Ideology of partnership: -Pro moderation - See adversarial IR as 'old school' - 'Realism'/accept commercial pressures

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<sup>i</sup> Unitarism and Egoism could be added as two other dominant managerial frameworks (see Budd and Bhava, 2008). However, as the main focus for this article is the interplay of militant and moderate workforce orientations, attention is directed to pluralist and radical frameworks.

<sup>ii</sup> Management did not confirm any specific number for either of the militant groups but did acknowledge their numbers and activities to be highly disruptive.