



Facilitators and Inhibitors of Collective Action: A case study of a US-owned Manufacturing Plant

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Authors: Eggers, F., O'Dwyer, M., Kraus, S., Vallaster, C. and Guldenberg, S.

Synopsis

What leads workers to enter into a joint commitment with each other and undertake collective action? This study analyses this question by developing a theoretical model of the emergence of workers' collective action. Our model incorporates concepts from mobilisation theory and the concepts of facilitating and inhibiting factors i.e conditions that act to support or deter the individual from engaging in collective action. We then examine why collective action did not emerge amongst a low-skill blue collar workforce in a US multinational facility until the announcement of large scale redundancies. Drawing primarily on the accounts of a sample of workers, we identify management practices which succeeded in forestalling a collective response to grievances from workers.

Introduction and Background

Traditionally trade unions have provided a formal structure that channels and supports worker collectives in the workplace. However since the 1980s there has been a considerable decline in union density in many European countries, reflecting in part the prevailing economic and ideological currents that have been antithetical to trade unionism and collective bargaining. Critics of neo-liberalism often refer to it as the 'American Model' and, not surprisingly, US multinationals (MNCs) tend to be associated with such an agenda preferring to exclude unions and deal with workers as individuals. The vast bulk of MNCs operating in Ireland are US-owned.

Mobilisation theory provides some insight into why and in what way individuals and groups mobilise collectively and join social movements such as trade unions. Three interrelated social psychological processes are proposed that trigger collective commitment and action. Firstly, workers must acquire a sense of injustice or grievance. Secondly, workers must attribute blame for their dissatisfaction to some identifiable significant other - normally an employer or manager. Thirdly, workers must have a sense of efficacy, that is, a belief that acting in concert will provide an

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effective remedy for their grievances. The individual or group must progress through all the above stages before a joint commitment to take action is likely to take place.

Issues and Questions

We develop a model of collective action at work. Our model, linking the social psychological triggers to collective action in the workplace, draws on McClendon et al.'s (1998) use of facilitating and inhibiting conditions. These are conditions that act to support or deter the individual from becoming actively involved through some form of collective action as part of a workers' collective or group. Facilitating conditions include the degree of collective group solidarity, a belief in the efficacy of collective action, the occurrence of a dramatic event and particularly the emergence of leaders. Inhibiting conditions are those obstacles that act to weaken the triggers of mobilisation to joint commitment and action. Factors inhibiting collectivism include punitive employer actions against any collective efforts by workers, the removal of the triggers to collective action and the cultivation of employee consent to existing conditions. Central to a collective response are conditions that foster frequent interactions that allow workers to share information and develop common goals. The building of collective solidarities depends on 'communicative spaces' - where discussion and debate can take place amongst workers. A subtle measure used to inhibit the emergence of a workers' collective involves controlling social interaction and closing down communicative spaces for workers. Where communicative spaces are eroded through work overload or management control, this can undermine the processes of

collectivizing in the workplace.

Inhibitors and facilitators create the conditions likely to influence or discourage individuals to jointly commit to some form of action. Using this theoretical framework we examine, through accounts of employees, how a US-owned manufacturing facility ('Nuco'), managed to prevent the emergence of collectivism for many years until collective action eventually materialized after the announcement of large scale redundancies. Key conceptual areas of interest are the degree to which employees had grievances prior to the redundancies for which management were blamed and why these grievances did not trigger mobilisation. Thus, we assess the extent and the form of facilitating and inhibiting conditions on worker behaviour.

Methodology

Four data collection methods were used. First, we held five focus group meetings, over a 14 month period, with four leaders of the collective action that emerged over redundancies in Nuco. Second, we observed three large scale 'town hall' meetings of Nuco workers after the company announced redundancies. Third, we analysed documentation of employment law cases taken by employees against the company. Fourth, we conducted two interviews with the full-time regional union official which had previously attempted to organise the workers. The accounts of the four leaders and of the employees at the town hall meetings may not reflect the views of all Nuco workers, however in combination with the other sources, they are useful for illustrating the concepts in our model.

Outcomes and Findings

We find that employees had a number of grievances with working practices in Nuco which were potential triggering factors to mobilisation but these did not lead to collective action. The major areas of grievances were (i) long working hours (ii) low pay (iii) the temporary nature of employment contracts. Four factors appear to account for the absence of a collective response. Firstly, inhibiting obstacles such as the individualised employment relationship, high work intensity and close supervisor monitoring appear to have prevented the formation of solidarity among groups of workers. Secondly, employer communication practices closed down the possible communicative spaces available to workers where grievances could be aired and solidarities constructed. Thirdly, the weak attempts by a trade union to organise workers as members failed to harness employees' sense of injustice and mobilise workers to engage in collective action. Consequently, when the redundancy crisis arose, there was no visible union presence to organise the employees. Fourthly, there was workers' complicit consent to the 'rules of the game' as constructed by management through their acceptance of adverse work practices such as long working hours. Overall the case study indicates the importance of the social context where management control is pervasive in stifling the possibility of collective action. Collective action and an active leadership only emerged because of large scale redundancies rather than a challenge to the management of the workplace. Our findings resonate with Klandermans's (2002) observation that 'collective action is not a very common response to injustice - when confronted with injustice, at best, a minority of the people affected will engage in protest'.

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