



The BUIRA Conference 2016 Industrial Relations towards 2020 and beyond: Reflection, prospects and opportunities

by Cristina Inversi

One week after the Referendum that has shaken the British institutional framework, and is deeply affecting European stability and internal political coherence, the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) gathered in Leeds (29th June- 1st July) for the 66th Annual Conference. The event had been organised by the University of Leeds, in collaboration with the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation & Change (CERIC). For three intensive days, discussions took place in small thematic paper sessions, papers' streams sessions and plenaries, with evening events for socialising, discussing and networking.¹

It is indeed a very interesting moment for reflecting on the future of Industrial Relations. Although the high level of institutional and political uncertainty does not allow premature speculations about the future of the UK in Europe, the debate over the Industrial Relations prospects is wide and open, ready for the challenge of analysing new opportunities of reconfiguration for work and employment relations.

In line with the BUIRA traditions, the Conference was opened with a Doctoral event, on the 28th and 29th June, which had the aim to bring together younger scholars of Industrial and Employment Relations, to discuss the PhD journey and collaborate together.

The attention to the involvement of PhD students and young scholars, with the goal of enhancing discussions and participation, gives particular added value to the BUIRA Conference. It represents indeed an invaluable opportunity for early researchers to learn from the elder, as well as a chance for affirmed scholars to engage with the new generations.

The PhD workshop was focused on "critical friendship" and offered the opportunity to students to circulate their work, providing and receiving constructive feedback at the same time. During the second day, an open discussion which gave space to questions, suggestions and comments over the PhD journey, the central role of supervision, research impact and strategies for making good quality and innovative research.

¹ For a complete collection of the abstracts presented, see the Conference Programme at: <http://www.buira.net/assets/images/conferences/2016/programme.pdf>.

The conference themes offered many interesting questions of reflection about current issues and trends, as for instance, the prospects for collective bargaining and organising; the response to the growing fragmentation of work; regulatory challenges and processes of restructuring; the relationship between labour, employers and the state and its effects on employment law and regulation; the reconfiguration of work and its impacts on different races, classes, genders and ages; debates about a ‘living wage’; the experience of work in the marginalised economy, such workers in low paid jobs, migrants, or working in the informal economy.

The plenary sessions outlined three main themes of discussion. In the opening of the Conference, Prof. Tony Royle, Dr. Jane McAlevey and Martin Smith from GMB presented their work on ‘*Organisation vs Mobilization, and the Fight for 15\$*’. The session outlined the fundamental differences between organizing and mobilizing workers, bringing examples from the ‘*Fight for 15\$*’ campaign for fast-food workers in the US; in relation to the American campaign, insights on the organizing approaches of GMB Union in the UK were presented.

A central feature of the BUIRA Conference is its openness to the international, with a look beyond the boundaries of the UK. In line with this international aim, the second plenary of the Conference offered interesting insights on the current issues on Chinese Industrial Relations: Dr. Jenny Chan, Prof. Sarosh Kuruvilla and Prof. William Brown discussed the realities of the institutional pattern of Industrial Relations in China, the changing role of trade unions and the state of collective bargaining, the hierarchies and the stratification of the workforce, the recent strike waves and the state responses to Industrial Relations’ issues. In particular, Dr. Jenny Chan gave interesting insights from a case study conducted at Foxconn, at the centre of its forthcoming book ‘*Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and a New Generation of Chinese Workers*’.

The last plenary, in conclusion of the three-day Conference, discussed recent developments on the voluntary wage standard of the so-called *Living Wage*, propounded by the Living Wage Foundation. Prof Edmund Heery and Prof. David Nash focused their attention on ‘who pays the living wage’, discussing the geographical positioning of employers that had formally or informally adopted it, and the correlation between the choice of paying the Living Wage and Trade Unions presence at the workplace. Furthermore, Prof. Jane Parker presented the corporate and employee rationales for choosing the Living Wage, with insights from three case studies from New Zealand. In conclusion, Prof. Damian Grimshaw and Dr. Jo Swaffield presented the preliminary findings of a study on the main drivers for employers for voluntarily implementing the Living Wage, in an institutional environment characterised by a light-touch regulatory approach.

Challenging times ahead, the hope is that the Industrial Relations research in the UK will continue to stimulate the debate and brighter perspectives on the future of work. The lesson learnt from this event is not just made of theoretical or practical academic contributions, but it consists of a research agenda to foster inclusion, cooperation, global learning and shared knowledge.

Cristina Inversi
 @CristinaInversi
PhD Candidate in Employment Regulation,
The University of Manchester