



Agreement

A Green Mentality for Collective Bargaining

Summary of the UK report

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Agreement is a comparative project which aims to examine the extent to which workers and unions across Europe are engaging with socio-ecological questions through the institutional and legal mechanisms available to them, what shape this engagement is taking, and to identify antecedents and barriers to such engagement.

The present case study focused on the United Kingdom (UK). Given that UK unions have a demonstrated track record of engaging with environmental issues at the policy level, we set out to assess whether the structure of British industrial relations, which is highly de-centralized and premised on the notion of voluntarism, tends to support and sustain integration of environmental concerns through mechanisms of collective bargaining and workplace labour-management negotiations.

Based on extensive review of policy documents and qualitative interviews with key informants, our research confirms that UK unions have attempted to seize upon the possibilities inherent in a voluntarist system of industrial relations, in so far as broadening the scope of what are deemed to be union issues or issues that could be negotiated or bargained with management. Not only is environmental sustainability acknowledged as a relevant workplace issue by unions, managers and members of the business community we interviewed tend to agree that engaging workers around this agenda is important and that doing so is of mutual benefit for workers and firms.

However, despite the fact that many workplace initiatives have been reported throughout the UK, relatively few comprehensive agreements on environmental sustainability have been concluded, and environmental issues have been integrated into broader collective bargaining in a more limited way. While our research suggests this is in part related to remaining issues of capacity, awareness and communication, the more significant problem remains that of concrete institutional and legal barriers which stand in a way of a more extensive engagement between the industrial partners. Specifically, the exclusion of environmental issues from statutory scope of collective bargaining, lack of rights for environmental reps, and general sidelining of labour and processes of social dialogue under Conservative governments tend to stand in a way of embedding the labour/environment issues in industrial relations and workplace negotiations (e.g. through incorporation into CBAs).

While the voluntarist model of industrial relations leaves the scope of negotiable issues open-ended and potentially limitless, autonomy offered by voluntarism tends to serve unions well only when they are powerful. As the UK case shows, a parallel statutory model which sets narrow scope for negotiation can effectively constrain the scope of possible collective bargaining even in those contexts where unions are recognized voluntarily.

To rectify this spill-over effect, we propose that a more robust set of legislative rights is necessary to facilitate more widespread take up of environmental issues in workplace negotiations. This includes both, (1) the statutory recognition of environmental union representatives together with rights to facility time and pay (rights that unions have advocated for a long time), as well as (2) expansion of the statutory scope of bargaining to include issues of environmental nature.

Finally, for Just Transition processes to be operationalized in practice, UK unions should have more input in policy development. For this to be possible, (3) social dialogue must be institutionalized in a more meaningful way at the regional and national level.

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