

European Works Councils
in the UK:
pessimism of the mind and a
kind of optimism of the will

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1. Background to EWCs in the UK

- Late opt into social dimension of the EU
- Ambivalence in political terms
- The context of weak systems of regulation in terms of worker voice
- The context of ICE and 're-regulation'
- The fascination with EWCS in academic and policy circles (competing research questions)
- The optimism and rush for EWCS in the 1990s

2. UK based EWC Activity

- 100 plus UK Based EWC HQs identified in UK by ETUC in 2002
- EWC agreements do not have to be registered
- Low consultation on strategic issues
- Only a few companies see suggestions from EWC representatives worked on
- Issue of 'fit' between management and EWC structures
- Ford and GM seen as good on joint approaches
- British employers remained opposed to developing EWC directive
- More joint training but many 'consultants' involved
- Ambivalent political support even from Labour Government
- Greater degree of trade union co-ordination on the subject

- SOURCE: EIRO 2004

3. Arguments concerning EWCs in the UK: a) Optimists

- New forms of dialogue and agendas in some instances
- New forms of networking and EWCs (Martinez Lucio and Weston, 2007)
- Trade union international liaisons: ETUC and international sectoral federations and EWCs (TRACE) (Pulignano, 2006) – high profile from UK trade unions and within them related to EWCs
- ICE; and new web of soft regulations generally (Howells, 2006)
- Character of UK Capital – high degree of internationalization and exposure
- Increasing merger activity in trade unions and potential for co-ordination in automobiles?
- Standardization of production and management processes – sectoral effects on transnational worker dialogue (Anner et al, 2006).

b) Pessimists

- 'Talking Shops'? (Wills, 1999) and Investment Politics (Whittal and Tuckman, 2000?)
- Not tied to any effective decision making (Marginson et al 2004; Waddington 2001)
- Context of weak corporate governance (Deakin et al, 2005)
- Context of weak consultation culture at firm and policy level
- ICE as an ambivalent regulatory tool

- Internal hierarchies through full time officers of the trade union and the disconnection between EWCS and trade union action (Hancke, 2000)
- External hierarchical relations between dominant EU unions – the northern *connection*
- Has the 1990s dynamics of TNC worker networking prevailed and been sustained?
- The assembly line dimension

4. EWCs in the Automobile Industry

- Types of EWCs: **differences** between embedded companies and new post 1980s investment but not much research contrasting the two
- Workplace representation and EWCs – the role of dialogue and Internet based systems/networks in a context of declining workplace representation
- Trade union **fragmentation** but changes through union mergers – new organizational dynamics but taking time to work their way through
- Lack of *inter-company* national **co-ordination**
- **Declining organizational status** of trade union input from UK EWC side and declining strategic management direction within UK automotive EWCs
- The **decline of major players in the sector**: Whatever happened to Rover? Who wants to buy Jaguar? The Fall of Peugeot? The weakening of the US presence. The insularity of the Japanese? The Mini is German. (see work of Karel Williams et al)
- The **challenge of private equity**
- The **declining status** of the sector: 'let them work in TESCOs' (Hewitt, Labour Minister)

Dimensions of Co-ordination

- Sectoral Characteristics
- Ideology and Politics
- Networking
- National Regulatory Systems

(Martinez Lucio, 2005 & 7)