

**Employee Participation and Involvement:
Experiences of Aerospace and Automobile Workers
in the UK and Italy**

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Introduction

For most of the past century, assessing the form, significance and outcomes of employee participation and involvement (EPI) schemes has exercised the minds of academics and practitioners alike. A common line of inquiry concerns the question of whether employers adopting such schemes benefit from securing positive outcomes, such as greater employee commitment, enhanced organizational performance and a reduction in industrial conflict (Ramsay, 1977; Cotton *et al.*, 1988; Ackers *et al.*, 1992). Initiatives, analysis and debate concerning the practice and efficacy of EPI continue, as employers strive to achieve competitive advantage in the globalized economy. Insufficient attention, however, has been given to how employees regard and experience EPI, the concern of this paper. We have to look back to the 1960s and 1970s in particular, when calls for greater industrial democracy from workers and unions were prevalent, to find debates that are concerned with workers' aspirations as well as employers. And still pertinent is Poole's (1975) study of workers' participation. He argued that economic and technological factors, together with the values and ideologies of employers and government action, combine to shape the form, extent, scope and range of employee influence at work. These dimensions provide the basis for assessing EPI as they reflect the basic power processes in society, and are strongly affected by shifts in capital's power advantage over labour.

The growing power of capital vis-à-vis labour has advantaged employers in their efforts to squeeze greater commitment and effort from their staff, in order to maintain profitability, as companies increasingly struggle to compete in a global market. However, this advantage, reflected in the decline of union influence since the late

1970s, has raised the problem of legitimacy. Some employers in Europe (and indeed America) are concerned that employees' commitment will weaken if some structured mechanism for engaging employees directly or indirectly in decision-making is not adopted. Hyman (2005, p. 256), makes reference to the problem of legitimacy in his discussion of the meaning of (social) partnership: 'Partnership' – whether 'social' or otherwise – may represent one means of sustaining (or regaining) management control while simultaneously enhancing managerial legitimacy.'

Arguably, it is no accident that interest in EPI schemes has increased in the current workplace environments where the likelihood of employees' ability to seriously challenge management authority and extend their influence to regulate company decision-making has reduced considerably. In this context, we have seen a rise in influence of the leading advocates of lean production (Womack *et al.*, 1990) and high performance work practices (Appelbaum, 2002) who argue that sharing decision-making with employees is a passport to securing employee commitment, releasing workers' creativity and knowledge, and generating greater effort. Workers' empowerment is seen by management gurus as an integral part of this strategy. In promoting lean production, Womack *et al.* (1990) have been highly influential in extolling this view, despite the publication of much literature challenging the validity of their findings.

One of the problems identified in assessing EPI is that there is not a unitary view of what it embodies (Cotton *et al.*, 1988) and what its purpose is. Despite this, in most studies the main concern governs how EPI, as a management tool, can lead to improvements in organizational performance in one guise or another, rather than any

particular concern with addressing workers' aspirations or increasing workers' power to participate in decision-making. Notably, Heller (2003) has highlighted a 'clear distinction between participation, meaning taking part in an activity, and power, which implies a degree of influence over the activity' (Heller, 2003, p. 144). He argues that there is little evidence of a shift in the distribution of power and influence towards employees. And rather than contending that there is a positive link between participation, job satisfaction and higher productivity, he reasons that employee competence is a pre-condition for effective decision-making. Only with a competent workforce can participation begin to unlock employees' potential by utilizing their skills and experience to the full, and it is this rather than job satisfaction that will contribute to improved performance. His interest is in developing models of participation to achieve this end but he does not really take into account the nature of the capitalist firm – management's first responsibility is to shareholders – and the constraints of market pressures on decision-making. Therefore, those employers who would like to build a consensus with their employees are faced with the contradiction that given the nature of neo-liberal capitalism it is difficult to create a consensus model in any meaningful way. This is perhaps why the participation and influence-sharing to which Heller refers is largely confined to work organizational practices, such as self-managed teams, flatter management structures, extensive sharing of information and extensive training, rather than higher level strategic decision-making. At the macro level he argues for a strong legal framework that supports a stakeholder relationship but does not acknowledge the fact that at the time of writing the European social model is under threat, as governments adapt to the neo-liberal agenda. The vacuum left by the decline in union representation and influence, however, has resulted in unions turning to the European Union to provide employee rights and

voice. The introduction of the European Information and Consultation Directive, the EU's commitment to 'the promotion of employee involvement in management's decision-making...an essential part of the Community's mainstreaming strategy in its social policy agenda' (Weiss, 2005), and the claims of Appelbaum (2002) and Womack *et al.*, (1990), suggest that employees themselves are now able to influence decision-making at their place of work. However, more research is required to test whether in fact the rhetoric of workers' empowerment matches reality; and indeed whether under the existing neo-liberal politico-economic conditions employers are able, to any significant degree, to allow the weakening of authority relations given the exacting demands of market forces.

This paper contributes to the research and literature on EPI from the perspective of employees. Employing Poole's (1975) frame of reference we obtained data from different automobile and aerospace plants in Italy and the UK.¹ Management at these plants, to varying degrees, were pursuing high performance work practices and lean production techniques and had in place strategies that, ostensibly, were designed to give employees greater autonomy over how they perform their work and an increased say in organizational matters. The case study approach was adopted to capture a greater in-depth understanding of what is happening in specific lean and high performance workplaces harnessing EPI techniques. Insufficient attention has been given to those who are subject to these techniques. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find that there is often a disparity between managerial claims and the expressed experiences of workers. The value of our study is that we ask workers directly about their experiences of EPI and thereby we are able to offer insights from their

¹ This research is part of the European Socio-Economic Models of a Knowledge-Based Society (ESEMK) project Workpackage 4 (Employment Relations) funded by the European Union (Framework Programme 6).

perspective. By employing a cross-national comparative approach we seek to determine whether national differences in industrial relations, cultural differences between firms or, alternatively, the pressure on firms to sustain competitiveness and profitability outweighs other explanations in respect to EPI adoption and outcomes.

The main objective of the study is to examine employees' perceptions of the extent of direct consultation, and direct and indirect influence, and how these square with their aspirations. By direct consultation we mean dialogue between management and employees, without the mediation of representatives. This involves the sharing of information to enable reasoned discussion to take place not only on operational items, such as changes to work practices and staffing levels, but also company strategy, such as investment and outsourcing, though the right to make all final decisions remains with management (Geary and Sisson, 1994). While a degree of influence can result from consultation it is in those organizations, such as lean and high performance workplaces, claiming to practice representative participation that one would expect employees to have notably more influence. We define influence by the range and importance of issues addressed and the degree of influence on a continuum from low to high involvement in organizational decision-making (Knudsen, 1995) covering, as with consultation, operational items and company strategy. This can be direct influence (without the mediation of representatives), but deepening the intensity of involvement, broadening the multiplicity of issues covered, and strengthening the degree of influence is more likely to occur through indirect means of influence (with the mediation of representatives) (Knudsen, 1995).

Kessler *et al.* (2004) rightly acknowledge that inadequate attention has been allotted to employees' experiences, a matter that they address in their survey. What needs to be added, and what we do in our survey, is to find out what worker aspirations are in respect to consultation and influence. This enables us to make a comparison between what workers value and what they actually get. The aerospace and automobile industries hold a dominant place in world manufacturing and their respective managements regard a skilled and competent workforce as essential to compete in the global economy. The aerospace industry avows to advance high performance work practices (Thompson, 2002), and employs large concentrations of highly skilled workers (Danford *et al.*, 2005). While the presence of skilled workers in the automobile industry is much lower, with the advent of lean production this industry is seeking to equip its workforce with the skills and ability to work more flexibly and productively, and to contribute to continuous improvement. Therefore, Heller's (2003) point that employee competence is a pre-requisite to achieving to what he believes is possible, that is the successful operation of EPI and the benefits that should bring to the organization, is apparent in these industries.

This paper is organized as follows: First, we outline recent findings on EPI in the UK and Italy. Second, we detail the research design and document the context in which EPI experiences developed in the case studies concerned in order to relate what is distinctive about the unit of analysis from the wider environment in which it operates. Next, we compare results across these case studies in response to questions on how much employees are directly consulted; how much direct influence employees feel they have; how much direct influence employees actually desire; how much indirect influence employees have; and how much indirect influence employees desire.

Drawing on these findings we then critically assess EPI practice in the context of workers' aspirations.

EPI in Italy and the UK

In Italy, the predominant form of consulting employees is indirectly via their representatives. Notwithstanding the diminution of the union role, following the introduction of 2003 labour law that legalized the outsourcing of specific jobs (Michelotti and Nyland, 2008), , and the shift from social concertation to social dialogue, Italian unions have continued their intercourse, at the macro level, with their social partners, employers and government, albeit with some reduction in influence. In the UK, EPI initiatives are often embedded in the workplace in association with managerial approaches such as human resource management (HRM) and high commitment management (e.g. Kochan and Osterman, 1994; Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000; Dundon *et al.*, 2004; Harley *et al.*, 2005; Cox *et al.*, 2006). Summers and Hyman's (2005) analysis of the UK literature indicates that firms utilizing combinations of direct and representative participation in particular are more likely to have high trust relations and superior performance, depending on the degree of influence granted to employees. A similar conclusion was reached by Cox *et al.* (2006) in their analysis of data from the 1998 UK Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS98). They deduced that if organizations utilize a combination of EPI practices in greater breadth and depth they would more likely yield benefits such as higher levels of organizational commitment. Yet, notwithstanding new EU legislation in the form of the European Information and Consultation Directive, and the increasing engagement of trade unions with EPI schemes as a way to regain lost influence, there is little

evidence that EPI initiatives, either in the UK or Italy, have given employees greater influence over substantial issues in the workplace (Heller *et al.*, 1998; Poutsma *et al.*, 2003; Hall *et al.*, 2007; Stevens, 2007).

Notwithstanding the wealth of surveys directed at examining employee participation in routine decision-making (often limited to task participation on work organizational issues) some research in the UK and Italy has been conducted concerning broader and higher level decision-making matters. For example, Cox *et al.* 's (2006) analysis of WERS98 considers matters such as information disclosure on investment plans and the financial situation of the establishment and the company. However, they do not directly address the question of employee influence. Poutsma *et al.* 's (2003) secondary analysis of survey data from the 1996 European research project, Employee Participation in Organizational Change (EPOC), while largely concerned with work organizational issues does take into account how often the views of employees in the largest occupational group were sought in respect to changes in investment and training and development. But they too have little to say on the extent of employee influence. Moreover, in collecting data solely from managers the authors make the problematic assumption that managers can act as proxies for assessing employee influence. This notwithstanding, the survey reveals that the level of diffusion of direct consultation practices in Italy is relatively low compared to the UK. The findings of Kessler *et al.* 's (2004) survey, carried out in 1999 in the UK, France, Italy and Germany, are more significant. First, because this survey collated the views of employees directly and second since it included questions on influence, as well as consultation. Corporate level and work and employment related issues were

addressed. Higher level issues included financial performance, strategy and plans for the future and major changes to the company.

In respect to direct consultation in comparing the UK and Italy Kessler *et al.*'s conclusions are similar to Poutsma *et al.* (2003). One explanation put forward for the relatively low level take up of direct consultation in Italy is the impact of the resurgence of social concertation in the 1990s, which utilized a new system of workplace representation called *Rappresentanza sindacale unitaria* (RSU). In Italy workers have a legal right to establish workers' representatives (RSU), two thirds of whom are elected by workers and one third nominated by the relevant union organizations. Hence, unions are assured of representation even in workplaces with low union densities. This focus on indirect rather direct consultation provided a platform 'for the expression of 'voice' within, rather than outside, the trade unions', which, initially at least, attracted considerable support from Italian workers (Regini, 1997, p. 226).

There are some important differences between the industrial relations systems in the UK and Italy two of which we have already highlighted, the resurgence of social concertation and the emergence of RSUs. A third is collective bargaining. Since the 1980s, following the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the UK and significant industrial restructuring, union density and influence have fallen sharply and there has been a shift from centralized to decentralized collective bargaining. In Italy, the neo-liberalism agenda was not adopted in earnest until 2001, under the second Berlusconi government, when labour standards came under attack (Michelotti and Nyland, 2008). However, its impact has not been as great as that experienced by UK workers;

decentralization of collective bargaining, for instance, is much less developed. Moreover, the coverage of collective bargaining is much greater in Italy (estimated to be 80 per cent) compared to the UK where coverage has fallen to around a third of employees. Collective bargaining agreements negotiated at industry level in Italy are legally binding (Fulton, 2007). This is not the case in the UK. Support for the continuation of national tripartism in Italy, however, has resulted from active union co-operation at company level in obtaining worker consent in reorganizing production and introducing changes in working practices (Thelen, 2001). Thus high collective bargaining coverage in Italy masks the decline in the unions' ability to protect its members from the potentially damaging impact of workplace restructuring on jobs and working conditions. Moreover, pressure is now being applied by the Italian employers association on its government to give greater importance to company-level bargaining (Frege and Kelly, 2003; Fulton, 2007).

Research design and the development of management-employee relations in the case study firms

A questionnaire survey of a random sample of employees of all four companies was conducted between 2005 and 2006. The survey sought to explore the extent to which employees were consulted and how much influence they felt they had over operational tasks and wider aspects of decision-making and strategy. Moreover, in three of the four case-companies semi-structured interviews involving common interview schedules were conducted with shop stewards and employees. At Alenia Spazio it was only possible to interview union representatives.

GM, Ellesmere Port UK.

This General Motors plant employed around 4000 staff, principally assembly line workers, at its one remaining plant in the UK. In 2005, taped interviews were conducted with ten shop stewards, the deputy convenor of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), and thirteen manual employees. In addition survey questionnaires were distributed to a sample of staff on the shop floor. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed and 83 usable responses received; a response rate of almost 42 per cent.

Since the introduction of lean production at Ellesmere Port in the 1980s and the subsequent attempts to marginalize trade unions, shop stewards with support of their members, which on the shopfloor comprised almost 100 per cent of the workforce, have still been able to assert historic pull over issues such as company strategy, staffing levels, outsourcing and pay. Convenors and shop stewards continue to have influential bargaining relationships with the company at plant level. Direct consultation techniques such as attitude surveys; an open forum and team briefings were employed by the company but according to the deputy convenor only the union has any real power to challenge managerial prerogatives and influence or change managerial decisions. The development of lean production did weaken union power but indirect influence was maintained not through unions embracing change but by them engaging with change (Stewart & Wass, 1998). Since 1998, notwithstanding the presence of a European Works Council, company policy of promoting internal competition between plants, dangling future investment as a carrot, has had the affect of squeezing more and more concessions from the unions which has resulted in the deterioration of working conditions and a further erosion of their power.

Fiat, Melfi, Italy.

A workforce of around 6,000, primarily manual workers, assembled Fiat cars at this plant, which was opened on a Greenfield site in 1993. This was an integrated factory where Fiat workers and employees of supply firms were located on the same site. In 2005, a total of 20 taped interviews were conducted with Fiat employees, mainly Fiom-CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* or Italia General Confederation of Labour) trade union delegates. In addition two hundred survey questionnaires were distributed and 103 usable responses were returned; a response rate of nearly 52 per cent.

Union influence at Fiat differs substantially from that at GM. Before opening its Melfi plant, in 1993, Fiat assigned the property to a wholly-owned subsidiary, Sata, Fiat SpA, in order to extricate itself from collective agreements in force at its other Italian plants (Oliveri, 2000). The new Greenfield site was subject to the principles of the lean production model (Camuffo and Volpato, 1998). Fiat promoted a participatory approach with the workforce and the unions in order to work ‘towards a general strategy of co-opting of the structure of trade union representation in the management of worker resistance and conflict’ (Oliveri, 2000, p.2). Union officialdom representing Fiat workers employed the authority it enjoyed, derived from its national tripartite role in negotiating industry-wide collective bargaining agreements, to cement a partnership agreement that in exchange for job creation in southern Italy accepted responsibility for the role of ‘becoming the “guardian and guarantors” of the company’s productivity’ (Patriotta and Lanzara, 2006, p. 993).

At Melfi, workplace representation on the RSU was shared between the union bureaucracy, who had the right to nominate a third of the candidates, and worker representatives who were subject to election by a ballot of all employees. In turn these RSU representatives sat on joint consultative committees which were established by the company to promote positive social dialogue (Pulignano, 2002) with the aim of fostering cooperative relationships in resolving workplace problems.

AircraftCo UK. (in this case our access agreement stipulated the use of an acronym).

As part of a European conglomerate, this plant is a design site among multiple production sites spread across Europe. The parent company established a territorial division of labour by creating highly specialized centres of excellence (CoE) that capitalized on the particular expertise of long-established and highly skilled workforces at each site. Of the 4,500 workers based at the site, 2000 were employed in different design and design support functions. The fieldwork took place during the latter half of 2005 and during 2006. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 700 engineers, including first line supervisors and contract engineers. A total of 320 questionnaires were returned – a response rate of 46 per cent. Interviews were completed with four managers, two union representatives and 22 engineers located in design and project management departments.

In 1998 the AMICUS-MSF white-collar union at AircraftCo developed a partnership relationship with the company (referred to by the TUC and its associated Partnership Institute as an exemplar of partnership) but weaker union density and organization meant that the shop stewards lacked the wherewithal and power to influence management to any great extent. This has resulted in a serious weakening of union

organization among white collar staff. In 2006 union density was between 25 and 30 per cent. However, the union has regular meetings with management and is represented on a joint management-union consultation forum, the AircraftCo Industrial Committee, which meets four times a year. A delegate from the union also sits on a European Works Council (EWC). Direct consultation mechanisms deployed at the AircraftCo plant included regular team briefings; monthly departmental briefings; and director-level presentations.

Alenia Spazio², Rome and Turin.

The company employed 2,400 workers in five separate Italian plants. The fieldwork was based in two plants (with around 750 employees in each) that specialized in satellite systems, Turin and Rome. The Turin plant was responsible for complete systems, subsystems and equipment for manned spacecraft and associated payloads, scientific satellites and payloads, launch and space transportation systems. It had complete responsibility for design, manufacturing, integration and verification, logistics and post-delivery support, as well as sustaining engineering and commissioning. The Rome plant covered the management and system design of two important product lines: telecommunication satellites and earth observation satellites, with responsibility for the design of on-board antenna systems and equipment. The fieldwork took place in the autumn of 2005 and the spring of 2006. Questionnaires were distributed to samples of 100 engineers and manufacturing support staff at each plant. A total of 86 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 43 per cent. Our access agreement precluded interviews with workers. However, interviews were completed with union representatives from each of the major unions.

² On 3 May 2007 the French company Thales SPA acquired Alcatel Alenia Space. Thus, currently the company name is Thales Alenia Space Italy.

In the immediate period preceding our survey, trade unions, representing Alenia workers, were preoccupied with lobbying against the loss of ownership control from the Italian company Finmeccanica (which had a cooperative relationship with the trade unions) to the French company Alcatel Espace. This situation, and the time and energy involved in petitioning (National secretariats Fim, Fiom, Uilm, 2005), not only detracted and weakened unions' ability to deal with bread and butter issues but contributed to sustaining their strategy in respect to co-operating with the company in restructuring the business between 2001-2004: 'in last the 3 years, it [Alenia Spazio] has crossed a heavy process of restructure, managed unitarily from the labour organizations', including agreement on compensation for those workers (around 800) made redundant (National secretariats fim fiom uilm, 2004). Union density in both plants was almost 50 per cent. In particular the Rome plant was well-organized with 15 employee representatives or RSUs distributed as follows: 8 Fiom-CGIL; 5 Fim-CISL and 2 Uilm-UIL. Representation at local level was limited to operational issues. Collective bargaining was conducted centrally at industry level. Information and consultation was regulated at this level and realized from representation on the EWC. However, on most matters management eschewed trade union channels of communication favouring direct contact with employees; team briefings, face-to-face or via the intranet and annual state of the business presentations.

Findings

Our questionnaire survey probed employees' experience of the extent of direct consultation and their evaluation of the amount of influence they were able to exert.

The issues (outlined below) covered applied to all levels of managerial decision-making. The survey asked respondents how much direct, and indirect, influence they exerted over workplace-level decisions concerning these issues and how much direct influence they felt they should have.

Direct Consultation

Respondents were asked how much they were directly consulted by management on a range of items covering company strategy and policy. The items were:

1. Company's strategy for the future
2. The company's investment strategy
3. Changes in staffing levels
4. Redeployment of staff within the firm
5. Outsourcing strategies
6. Pay and conditions
7. Changes to work practices

The results are presented in table one below.

Table one. Proportion of employees indicating no direct consultation (excluding managers)

	AIRCRAFTCO Employees indicating ‘None’ (%)	ALENIA Employees indicating ‘None’ (%)	GM Employees indicating ‘None’ (%)	FIAT Employees indicating ‘None’ (%)
<i>How much are you directly consulted by management on the following issues:</i>				
Company’s strategy for the future	53.9	88.3	24.4	74.2
The company’s investment strategy	75.2	78.9	55.8	78.0
Changes in staffing levels	49.4	82.9	41.6	75.8
Redeployment of staff within the firm	61.5	75.3	55.3	71.3
Outsourcing strategies	66.0	84.4	53.3	73.3
Pay and conditions	58.9	80.0	24.7	67.4
Changes to work practices	38.7	55.8	23.4	60.2

Despite the array of techniques present for information sharing and consultation significant numbers of respondents at AircraftCo, Alenia and Fiat felt that they received no direct consultation on most of these items. At GM the situation is slightly better. Yet even here over half of GM respondents indicated that they were accorded no consultation on matters concerning company’s investment strategy, redeployment of staff and outsourcing strategies. Also notable is that respondents at the two Italian plants recorded an even more negative picture of the extent of direct consultation than their counterparts at the UK plants on all seven workplace issues. At Alenia in six out of the seven issues well over three-quarters of respondents indicated that they had no

direct consultation; and similarly at Fiat, covering the same issues, on average, the figure falls just short of three-quarters. This finding is in keeping with both Kessler *et al.*'s (2004) and Poutsma *et al.*'s (2003) studies. The law-established RSU system of workplace representation, as mentioned previously, compared to the voluntary status of UK shop stewards,³ provides one compelling reason for the higher levels of Italian employees recording the absence of direct consultation in their workplaces.

Direct influence

Presented with the same set of issues listed above, respondents were asked how much direct influence they felt they had and how much influence that they should have. From this data we have calculated the difference between what workers want and what they get. We constructed direct influence scales based on a summation of results. Respondents were asked to rank both their overall direct influence (actual) and whether they would welcome more direct influence (aspirations) on scales from 'none' (coded 0) to 'a little' (coded 1) to 'some' (coded 2) to 'a lot' (3). Summative scales were then computed to generate mean scores for Direct Influence (Actual) and Direct Influence (Aspirations) (where 0 = no influence and 21 = a lot of influence)⁴. Table two presents the results for these mean scores. We also calculated the difference between what workers want and what they get by subtracting the means for Direct Influence (Aspirations) from Direct Influence (Actual).

³ We are grateful to an anonymous referee for providing us with this point.

⁴ Cronbach's Alpha = 0.849 for the Direct Influence (Actual) scale and 0.901 for the Direct Influence (Aspirations) Scale.

Table two. Mean Scores of Direct Influence Scales

Location of respondent	<i>Direct Influence (Actual) Scale (0-21) Means</i>	<i>Direct Influence (Aspirations) Scale (0-21) Means</i>	Mean difference
AircraftCo	2.07	11.14	-9.07
Alenia	1.33	11.47	-10.14
GM	2.40	14.97	-12.57
Fiat	1.07	14.12	-13.05
All	1.90	12.19	-10.29

Two clear patterns emerge from the results. First, workers' actual influence was very low, indeed in the best case no better than 2.40 on a scale of 0-21. Second, workers' aspiration for more direct influence was much greater than what they actually experienced. Notably, larger numbers of respondents employed in the automobile plants indicated that they would welcome more direct influence (GM 14.97 on a scale of 0-21 and Fiat 14.12) than their counterparts employed in the aerospace plants. Intriguingly, the most significant differences between the Italian and UK plants in direct influence concern changes to work practices. Nearly two-thirds of Italian respondents indicated that they had no direct influence over this issue whilst the corresponding figure was less than a half at the UK plants. This could be simply that UK managers have more leeway to allow workers to have more direct influence in how they perform their work since the delegation of organizational decision-making to subunit level has been greater in the UK than in Italy. However, overall what these results plainly demonstrate is that there is a significant democratic deficit at all of our case study sites. It is to indirect influence to which we now turn.

Indirect influence

Replicating our approach with direct influence, we constructed indirect influence scales based on a summation of results governing the same seven issues used for the direct influence scales⁵. In this case, respondents were asked, '*how much indirect influence, that is, through works council or union representatives, do you feel you have on the following workplace issues?*' and '*how much indirect influence do you feel you should have over the following workplace issues?*' The results are presented in Table three.

Table three. Mean Scores of Indirect Influence Scales

Location of respondent	<i>Indirect Influence (Actual) Scale (0-21) Means</i>	<i>Indirect Influence (Aspirations) Scale (0-21) Means</i>	Mean difference
AircraftCo	2.25	11.34	-9.09
Alenia	5.34	16.09	-10.75
GM	7.19	17.81	-10.62
Fiat	4.34	12.72	-8.38
All	3.87	13.41	-9.54

The data in table three provide clear evidence that in all of our survey cases indirect influence (actual) is either low or very low. GM came out best returning a score of 7.19 on a scale of 0-21. A more proactive trade union and the legacy of resistance at GM is the most likely explanation for this result. The lowest rating was recorded by AircraftCo at 2.25 where trade union organization was weak. At GM and Alenia

⁵ Cronbach's Alpha = 0.956 for the Indirect Influence (Actual) scale and 0.947 for the Indirect Influence (Aspirations) scale.

aspirations for indirect influence were especially high, 17.81 in respect to the former and 16.09 the latter on a scale of 0-21. One possible explanation is that the history of combative trade unionism at GM combined with decentralized collective bargaining, a feature of UK employee relations, has led to higher expectations from union members, hence the relatively greater gap between actual influence and what workers desire. At Alenia, despite intense lobbying, the fight against the loss of ownership control from the Italian company Finmeccanica to the French company Alcatel Espace was lost. This experience may have contributed to Alenia's employees expressing a desire for greater influence. This notwithstanding, in all four plants the mean difference between indirect influence (actual) and indirect influence (aspirations) clearly shows that there is a significant democratic deficit suggesting that whether companies adopt high commitment management or lean production or indeed partnership agreements these regimes have little to do with democratizing the workplace. However well intentioned organizational objectives primarily comprise the interests of the employers and rarely allow room for workers to advance their interests through greater and meaningful influence in the workplace.

Evidence and analysis from the interview data:

Our interviews shed more light on workers' experience of direct and indirect influence procedures and practices across our four case studies.

Direct Influence

Notwithstanding the raft of communication channels available at our case study sites, the perception of direct influence, as our survey revealed, was very weak. A view

articulated by our interviewees. At AircraftCo, mechanisms were in place to effectively channel employee voice. Employees had regular team briefings, monthly departmental briefings and director-level presentations. However, as an engineering manager observed while there was a strategy in place to cascade information downwards, as a two-way process below senior management level ‘you’re very much reliant on your formal national structure to work and in this organization we have to be reporting transnationally. That’s where it starts to fail.’ The general view of the efficacy of communicative involvement below management level was succinctly expressed by this engineer:

There isn’t a good chain of communication from employees to managers and not really much the other way either. We don’t know what’s going on. Sometimes you find out what’s going on in the news; more so than you’ll ever find out from the company.

Some AircraftCo interviewees attributed the lack of direct influence to the consequences of stress and the lack of sufficient time to participate. For example, one engineer felt that:

I’m not sure that we’re any good at communicating our problems up the chain. In theory the group would complain to the group leader and he’d take that complaint on the management meeting for the department. But because we’re all so busy you know and we all know our boss is very busy. It’s difficult to whine that you’re overloaded because you know he’s overloaded and if he’s overloaded then all the other group leaders are overloaded.,

Stress and work intensification were also apparent at Sata, Fiat SpA plant in Melfi. The consequence of management failing to take heed of workers’ complaints was one

of the contributory factors of Fiat workers taking strike action in 2004. One of the striking workers recounted his experience of stress:

In FIAT there is a huge suppression, and there are also many threats made by the head of UTE [Unitd Tecnologica Elementare, manufacturing cell], and by the manager; moreover, everyone suffers from the psychological consequences... Well, each day I cover 340 km, going and return; I wake up at 3 a.m. to do the first shift and be at the workplace at 6. I had a very stressful time when for two weeks I did do the morning shift...you know, stress...I had a car crash because I fell asleep while I was driving...

At GM we established that team briefings were scheduled to take place fortnightly but our interviewees indicated that this did not always happen. Moreover, according to a worker in the body shop

[The company] don't utilize the chances, the information and the opportunities that they've got to get over the right information and to involve the people and get them involved, because most people would get involved wouldn't they?

The absence of meaningful consultation at Alenia, in Rome was confirmed by the interviews with trade union delegates. One Fim-CISL delegate indicated:

Due to the Italian law we have the possibility to be informed on all series of facts and figures that the company wants us to know and this works perfectly. But this information is 'easy' information, which we can get also from the media. Strategic information, information which goes a bit beyond just telling a story... is not provided by the company. Moreover, there is no possibility for us to examine this information, no possibility for us to say what we think.

And another:

“Is the company going well or not?” this is what represents the content of this information, the company informs us by giving an annual power point presentation on this issue but they do not open any opportunity to discuss this with the trade unions neither do they give us all the information we need.

Indirect influence

As we saw with direct influence, our qualitative data showed a significant gulf between workers’ indirect influence and what influence they desired. Significant numbers of respondents felt that their employee representatives should have greater influence over these different strategic and policy issues than was the case. At GM, however, some shop stewards indicated that employees were more interested in what was happening in their section and were not so interested in the wider picture, although our survey suggests that many employees were concerned with broad-based issues. Issues such as company strategy, staffing levels, outsourcing and pay are channelled through the unions, on their insistence, first. One shop steward commented: ‘To be honest with you most of the people on the shop floor don’t think we communicate enough. It should be more open to what’s going on.’ This reflects the unions’ efforts to engage with the politics of production but notably it falls way short of the aspirations of employees who indicated that they wanted to exert much greater influence through their union representatives.

The feeling at Fiat was the union exerted little influence and frustration that management did not listen. Recalling factors that contributed to the 2004 strike one trade union delegate explained:

It is not like “we woke up one morning, we went to work and we said: we do not like this UTE [manufacturing cell], so we are going to strike”. No, we wait, we keep waiting, but we are not able to give to the workers an answer...well, then it is when we had to strike. Moreover, in here it does not make sense, because these workers don’t think about striking, these workers are people who want to understand, who want – before fighting – find other ways because they do not want to fight...however, when you realize that, never mind all your efforts, if all the doors are closed, then you do not have any other chance. And I always show to the workers what I have done before, I show to them the letter that I have sent about the request of a possible change, etc, I show them everything, and once I have shown them that there is nothing else to do, then...I will never bring flowers with me, I will never ever give flowers to the company.

Notably, however, at AircraftCo some of our interviewees seemed indifferent to extensive employee influence particularly over such core strategic issues as financial performance and investment strategy, which was reflected in our survey results. One reason for the relatively lower demand at AircraftCo compared to our other case studies surfaced in our interviews and that was the insularity prevalent among some skilled workers. These workers were highly committed to their work but less interested in wider organizational issues. For example one manager remarked

To be honest I’m not interested. Ok it’s nice to know the product is selling. It’s nice to know the product is going well but I don’t want to know whom we delivered to in that week. It doesn’t focus on any real local issues

And an engineer expressed deep misgivings about his organization’s priorities. He was more concerned about the organization’s apparent inability to attend to resource matters raised by staff rather than listening to state of the business issues.

Well we get a lot of things about sales and all the stats and all the rest of it, you know, they're investing this, that and the other but they won't tell you why you can't have a forty quid scanner which is the most useful piece of kit that we could have. They won't let us have one and they will justify it and I say I'm an engineer I need one, that's my justification. I ain't gonna sit down and write four pages of foolscap to justify a forty pound scanner. If you ain't prepared to give me one – sod you. You suffer the consequences and have all the admin and all the rest of it that goes with it cause I ain't gonna do it. I'm not gonna waste my time to some person in finance that don't know a rivet from a nut and bolt to say I need a scanner and they're gonna argue with me about it – no way.

Leading up to our field work at Alenia was a period in which Finmeccanica (the Italian public financial institution that controlled Alenia Spazio) was struggling against its eventual take over by the French company Thales SPA. As trade union delegates observed, concern about this issue dominated the agenda of the Italian unions in the two year period preceding this change in ownership control, reflecting its members' alarm about the consequences, restructuring and redundancies. Thus, there was a constant demand for more information and more influence from Alenia's trade unions and workforce. According to one trade union delegate, during the time that Finmeccanica was fighting to resist acquisition by Thales consultation between the company and the unions was fairly poor:

The company should inform the trade unions by law. But this also does not happen frequently. If I should evaluate on a scale of one to ten how much we were informed I would say about five-and-a-half. However, due to the change in management structure we do hope that things will change in the near future.

Since Thales acquired the company trade unions have been working to establish good relations. A meeting with the company under the umbrella of European Trade Union Committee (ETUC) was planned to discuss the future strategic direction of the company and the possibility of drawing up a structure and procedures for engaging in a participative arrangement between the company and the ETUC (National secretariats Fim, Fiom, Uilm, 2007).

In summary, this section provides a qualitative insight into the employee experiences of involvement and influence in high commitment workplaces and lean environments. The findings are stark, particularly the gap between desired and actual influence. Our findings also seriously question whether there is any significant difference in relation to positive employee experiences of EPI between the lean and high commitment management regimes. Moreover, it highlights the need to question those studies that claim to have found organizations employing a raft of EPI practices which have produced positive outcomes for employees as well as employers. Only at the GM plant, where trade unions at the workplace level are still an independent and influential force, are there signs that indirect employee voice makes a difference, and even here it is confined to traditional union bargaining areas, especially pay and conditions and changes to working practices. This legacy of influence also goes some way to explaining why worker expectations are greater at GM than other plants.

Conclusion

Our examination of direct and indirect influence in the four case studies reveals that there are some differences in our findings both between countries and between

industries. Differences between countries revolved around the different regimes of employment relations and decentralized management. In Italy, the more centralized trajectory of management decision-making and collective bargaining signifies that a greater reliance is placed on indirect means, usually through the union hierarchy, to acquire any influence over management decision-making. Direct influence in both Italian plants was lower than in the UK plants, a result which is in line with Kessler *et al.*'s (2004) survey and Poutsma *et al.*'s (2003) secondary analysis of the 1996 EPOC survey data. The results for indirect influence, however, present a more diverse picture suggesting, as well as country differences, company culture and practices, the locus of collective bargaining and the strength of workplace unions are equally if not more important. The relative strength of workplace unions at GM contributed to its returning a better result in actual indirect influence compared with AircraftCo, Alenia and Fiat. Whereas, for instance, at Fiat the management strategy of cementing a partnership agreement with the trade unions on the basis of securing complete union support for the implementation of lean production in return for new jobs in southern Italy was an important factor in restraining resistance from workplace unions and their members.

However, the key matter of importance to emerge is that lean and high commitment work regimes in both the Italian and the UK cases have failed to deliver effective voice mechanisms despite the continued desire, expressed by employees, for greater direct and indirect influence over workplace issues. This supports the view that while some employers may want to promote EPI the reality is that they are unable to do so in any meaningful way because maintaining profitability involves strengthening powers to control employees rather than sharing power.

Interestingly, our results suggest that if EPI is not present in high commitment management and lean workplaces, then increases in organizational performance, where evident, must be attributed to other factors, namely heightened level of management control. And attendant with this control is work intensification, dilution of workers autonomy, and the marginalization of trade union representation. That this has been possible can be explained, in part, by greater collaboration of trade unions through partnership agreements at the institutional level in that they facilitate and legitimize change along lean production lines (for debates on workplace partnership in the UK see Stuart, M. and Martínez Lucio, M. (eds.) (2005)). And as the strike at Fiat in 2004 revealed suppression of employee voice can end up in open revolt. That this has not happened elsewhere can, as our analysis shows, be accounted for in part by the particularly onerous character of the lean production regime at Fiat, which is not yet so evident at our other case study sites.

There are also a number of other factors. At AircraftCo highly skilled engineers were more concerned with individual career development, than in organizing collectively to pursue their desire for more direct and indirect influence, a pattern also noted by Kinnie *et al.* (2005) However, at GM it is becoming evident that the ability of trade unions to intervene and influence management decisions, through an engage and change policy, is becoming more difficult, as the company continue to threaten relocation and closure to exert concessions. At Alenia, the introduction of lean production methods to satellite production, and the recent change in ownership, portends a demise of working conditions. Direct and indirect influence at Alenia is, as we have shown, already very weak and unless the trade unions respond to the clear

demand for more influence from its members then it is likely that a further degradation of work will occur.

Results from this study suggest that despite a significant demand for more influence at work, coupled with the availability of theoretical models, and the mechanisms already in place aimed, ostensibly, at realizing this demand, the gap between what workers want and what they get is considerable. Our findings support Heller's (2003) contention that there is little indication of the redistribution of power in the workplace towards giving employees more say over work-related issues. Moreover, given the plethora of studies 'encouraging' participative management, and EU employment legislation promoting greater employee consultation and influence in management decision-making, one is prompted to ask the question why is it, when seemingly the foundation of a participative structure exists, that workers' power to influence is so negatively asymmetrical with their aspirations? The answer is not new. Negative outcomes for workers are inevitable given the lack of trust arising from unequal power relationships in the workplace (Godard, 2004) which is not nation-specific. Until this fundamental problem is addressed the likelihood that workers can turn their aspirations, in respect to securing greater influence over key decisions taken within the organization they work, into reality are likely to be illusory.

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