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Relocation: Incidence, Threats and Union Responses

Guglielmo Meardi and Paul Marginson

A widespread assumption is that much inward investment in manufacturing into the EU's post-communist new member states involves relocation of production from western Europe. This is challenged by findings from a recent study of the central European operations of automotive component multinationals.

In a sector where investment flows are primarily driven by considerations of unit labour costs, actual incidences of relocation are rather infrequent. More common are threats to relocate, which themselves have important effects on employment and industrial relations. A range of responses from trade unions is evident.

Despite the attention given to the potential employment consequences of relocation, the available evidence suggests that relocation in its strictest sense, when productive activity is directly transferred from one location to another in a different country, is relatively rare. For example, of the job losses arising from company restructurings across Europe documented by the European Monitoring Centre on Change, only around 5 per cent were attributed to relocation over a 3 year period up until the end of 2005. More difficult to quantify are threats to relocate.

'Direct' threats, involving specific plants or production lines and specific alternative locations, can be usefully differentiated from 'indirect' threats. The latter entail the redirection of investment projects, which might previously have been located in western Europe, to one of the new member states. Such threats often have the effect of inducing cost-reduction and/or flexibility-enhancing measures in existing operations in the west.

The research design

The ESRC-funded study involved Guglielmo Meardi and Paul Marginson working with a team of researchers based in Berlin, Budapest, Ljubljana and Warsaw. Twelve plant studies in the operations of automotive component multinationals in Hungary, Poland and Slovenia were undertaken. In each country the research focused on two German- and two-US-owned companies, although in Slovenia >> **continued on page 2**

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(where the number of multinational investors is not large), two cases were of mixed ownership. Interviews were conducted with production and HR managers, workforce representatives (either trade union or works council), trade union officials and local public officials.

Actual and threatened relocations

Actual incidences of relocation were reported at six of the twelve companies. One of these, however, involved a 'reverse' relocation from east to west and a further two were accounted for by product lines that were close to the end of their life

Automotive components

The automotive sector is the most important industrial sector for inward investment in the new member states. In the 2000s, car parts and components rapidly gained importance and overtook car assembly in terms of contribution to economic activity. The component sub-sector is particularly interesting for considering intra-EU relocations for several reasons: it is regionalised rather than globalised (90% of the products sold in the EU are produced in the EU); foreign investment is overwhelmingly efficiency-seeking rather than market-seeking (90% of component production in central Europe is re-exported to western Europe); and both labour skills and labour costs are important, as capital intensity is lower than for car assembly. Whereas labour quality in the new EU member states is comparable to western Europe, labour costs are much cheaper. This makes the sub-sector different from others, where investment is market-seeking (e.g. food, services) or only labour costs matter (e.g. clothing and footwear). Direct competition between western and eastern European sites should be strong; therefore automotive components provides a valuable test-bed for an investigation of relocation.

cycle. The majority of these central European plants were themselves, however, affected by specific and tangible threats of relocation. Such threats are systematically backed up by the deployment of coercive comparisons of performance with locations across Europe, both east and west. Production teams often worked with open displays of their weekly production and quality results compared to those of other plants belonging to the company. In five cases relocation threats were 'direct' in nature, whereas at a further four the threat was primarily 'indirect'. At three plants any relocation threat was 'remote': there were inter-site competitive pressures, but no specific relocation proposals.

Contingent influences

The nature of the relocation threat was shaped by two important contingent factors. These were the nature of the company's European production strategy and the existence of competition from sites outside of the EU:

- direct relocation threats were associated with European production strategies based on either segregation (where plants compete with each other for production mandates within a vertically integrated production chain) or segmentation (where a plant is the only EU-based supplier of a particular product and less operationally integrated with other sites), as distinct from a strategy of standardisation (where the same products are produced at a series of locations which are horizontally integrated). They were also related to the presence of competition from subsidiaries beyond the EU, either in eastern Europe, Turkey or Asia (particularly so in cases with a segmentation strategy);
- indirect relocation threats were more closely related to a production strategy of standardisation, where it is the establishment of new capacity that can have relocation consequences. The existence of competition from sites beyond the EU was associated with this kind of threat also; and
- plants where relocation threats were remote tended not to be exposed to extra-EU competition, and to be pursuing a segregation production strategy.

Union responses: five scenarios

Union responses were themselves shaped by the European production strategy and the existence of extra-EU competition. Trade union responses to these relocation threats corresponded to one of five scenarios.

- **proactive:** there is active union engagement in internationalising company industrial relations through the establishment of cross-border information networks and mobilisation of the European Works Council. This is facilitated by management under social partnership arrangements. The scenario was evident in one case only, which is highly integrated around a standardisation strategy and with no exposure to competition from sites outside of the EU.
- **reactive:** cooperation with sites in the west is only established after a local organising effort in the face of management resistance. This scenario was found in two cases, both involving a segmentation strategy and facing little or no extra-EU competition.
- **national defence:** there are two variants to this scenario. The first is where plants are not integrated into cross-border union networks, nor represented on the EWC. Local strategies to protect workforce interests prevail. Common to the two cases concerned is exposure to competition from sites beyond the EU. The second embraces three of the four Slovenian plants, where trade union organisation is strong but cross-border links weak: a degree of 'Euro-scepticism' is evident.
- **competition:** there are clear tensions between trade union representatives from sites in eastern and western Europe, which are exacerbated by inter-site competitive pressures from both within and beyond the EU, and which in turn threaten to disable the EWC. Strikingly, only one case corresponded to this scenario.
- **indifference:** sites are not part of a cross-border union network, although local union organisation may be strong. In the three cases concerned the relocation threat was remote.

Read more: G. Meardi, 'Restructuring in an enlarged Europe: challenges and experiences' Transfer (2007) Vol 13, No. 2

IRRU @ the 2007 European IR Congress

3-6 September 2007

IRRU has a significant role and presence at the 8th European Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association (IIRA) which takes place in Manchester from 3-6 September

IRRU researchers are presenting papers which address a wide range of topics and issues. IRRU has also played a central role in organising the scientific programme for the Congress, whose main theme is 'The dynamics of European employment relations'.

IRRU's contribution to shaping and organising the scientific programme of the Congress has been led by Linda Dickens, who as an outgoing member of the IIRA's executive body has chaired the Congress organising committee. Paul Marginson, also a member of the committee, is coordinator of one of the Congress's four main thematic tracks. IRRU's Research Coordinator, Val Jephcott, has provided valuable administrative support.

The contribution of IRRU's research to the Congress programme is indicated by the abstracts of papers being presented by IRRU researchers in Manchester. Co-authors from other institutions are indicated by the use of square brackets.

The management of variable pay in banking: forms and rationale in four European countries
James Arrowsmith, [Barbara Bechter, Heidi Nicolaisen and Rosa Nonell]

Banking is one of the largest, and most unionised, private service sectors. Retail markets are largely domestic, but employers face common pressures following deregulation and technological change. The paper focuses on variable pay systems in Austria, Norway, Spain and the UK. It finds broad similarities in a management drive for variable pay, facilitated by decentralisation of bargaining arrangements, though some differences in their form. The effect of national industrial relations institutions would seem to be fading.

Representing and mobilising contingent workers: an analysis of two successful cases
Deborah Dean and Melanie Simms

Two sectors – higher education and the creative arts – where contingent

workers have mobilised to improve their terms and conditions of employment through their respective trade unions are examined. The paper compares the two campaigns and examines the power resources available to these groups as they build solidarities. It concludes that there are particular processes of solidarity-building which facilitate mobilisation including: existing structures of job regulation, union support for the interests of contingent workers, overcoming exclusion tactics from within the union, and ensuring that injustices are perceived and attributed.

Organising women
[Ed Heery] and Melanie Simms

This paper presents a longitudinal analysis of survey and interview evidence collected over the past ten years examining British unions' efforts to organise women workers. It identifies the factors that influence unions' propensity to target women workers for unionisation and the characteristics of successful campaigns actually organising women workers. The findings contribute to an understanding of the wider challenges facing unions in their efforts to become more inclusive and representative.

Channels and coverage of employee voice in multinational companies operating in Britain
Paul Marginson, Paul Edwards, [Tony Edwards, Anthony Ferner and Olga Tregaskis]

Multinational companies from different countries of origin are widely held to have distinctive preferences over the presence and form of arrangements for employee representation and voice: union representation or not; indirect or direct forms of consultative voice. Drawing on findings from a large-scale survey of employment practice in multinationals' UK operations, country-of-origin influences are found to be less sharp than anticipated. There is significant intra-model variation amongst companies headquartered in any given country.

What nexus? The TUC and social movement unionism

Jane Parker

Social movement unionism (SMU) has not historically constituted a major strand of British trade unionism. However, recent union decline has driven a general search for effective revival strategies. Drawing on interview research, this paper examines the nature and extent of the TUC's engagement in alliance-building with social movements, a key facet of SMU. Related findings on SMU's significance in union revival inform a discussion of potential union policy and practice.

“ The subject is developing a clearer focus, better appreciation of the role for theory and greater confidence in its multi-method approach ”

Implementing European-level framework agreements through the social partners
Thomas Prosser

This paper examines the implementation in Denmark and the UK of the EU-level social dialogue framework agreements on telework and work-related stress. It is argued that the implementation procedure for the two agreements, the first to utilise the national 'procedures and practices' mechanism available under the EU's social chapter, is problematic on both conceptual and operational grounds. In substantive terms, it is argued that the two agreements are likely to effect only limited change in member states. The implications of this for the likely future development of the EU-level social dialogue are considered.

Share ownership and trade unions: sleeping with the enemy?

Sukanya Sen Gupta

The impact of trade unions on the relationship between employee share ownership and organisational performance is investigated using data from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey. The results indicate that, amongst workplaces with share ownership arrangements, those that recognise a trade union achieve better labour productivity outcomes than those which do not. The voice effects arising from trade union recognition would seem to complement, rather than counteract, the positive impact of share ownership on organisational performance.

What are we organising for?

Melanie Simms

Drawing on an investigation of five successful 'greenfield' trade union organising campaigns, the purpose of union organising activity is reviewed. The paper establishes that this is highly contested amongst British trade unions, and that the results of organising activity can often be unsustainable. Particular approaches to greenfield organising are not only more successful, but more sustainable than others – which is essential if unions are to renew themselves.

Weathering the storm: the maturing of British industrial relations

Keith Sisson

This paper argues that British industrial relations studies are in a ruder state of health than might have been expected given the many challenges the field faces. A robust analytical framework is emerging that underpins record levels of BUIRA membership, a wide range of teaching programmes and considerable research activity. The subject is developing a clearer focus, better appreciation of the role for theory and greater confidence in its multi-method approach.

UK trade unions and the Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations

Michael Terry, Mark Hall, [Susan Hutchinson], Jane Parker and John Purcell

British trade unions' stance towards the EU information and consultation (I&C) Directive and the ensuing UK Regulations is primarily defensive, reflecting concern that workforce-wide I&C arrangements could threaten union-based representation. Longitudinal case study research provides little evidence to date of employers using I&C bodies as a vehicle for de-recognising unions. Some non-union companies' I&C bodies were introduced partly for union avoidance reasons, but in one case have been extensively 'colonised' by union members. The paper assesses the implications for union strategies.

Read more: these papers can be downloaded from IRRU's website www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/irru/publications/recentconf/

Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations

Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations publish the work of members of IRRU and people associated with it. Edited by Trevor Colling, Warwick Papers go through a refereeing process before publication. They include material of topical interest and research papers that do not fit the conventions of journal articles. The most recent titles are:

Keith Sisson *Revitalising industrial relations: making the most of the 'institutional turn'*, No. 85

Bill Callaghan (Chair, Health and Safety Commission) *Employment relations: the heart of health and safety*, No. 84

Sylvia Rohlfer *The different faces of benchmarking: structural limits to benchmarking and the implications for HRM*, No. 83

Warwick Papers are available at: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/irru/publications/wpir

Gender and career development in Europe

Helen Newell

Despite the increasing importance of gender equality in European debate, and the substantial amount of policy initiatives and legal regulation, the evidence shows that gender equality in careers is still some way off. A comparative study, published by the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO) in May 2007, examines the issue of gender and career development and explores the continuing barriers to achieving equality of opportunity in this area.

Covering 27 European countries, the study explores the extent to which career patterns are changing in response to the restructuring of work and organisations and how this impacts on women's career experiences. It also examines the attitudes of the social partners regarding gender and career development. The study was co-ordinated and written by IRRU associate Helen Newell and based on a questionnaire survey of the national centres that make up the EIRO network conducted in autumn 2006. This article highlights its key findings.

Changing career models

Although recent changes in work organisation, labour market flexibility and organisational restructuring have had some impact on careers, most EIRO national centres reported that for men the dominant career model still featured the two key elements of continuous service and regular promotion progress. Many women face difficulties in fitting their work patterns into this type of model and suffer disadvantage as a result. In many countries these changes have led to a gradual erosion of this traditional model with men and women increasingly exposed to a more precarious and uncertain working future. One exception to this general trend is the implementation of 'flexicurity' policies in Denmark.

The 'glass ceiling' effect

Women's increased participation in the labour market has not automatically allowed them access to positions of responsibility within organisations and to pay levels that reflect such positions. Women are often under-represented in higher paid jobs, a feature commonly

known as the 'glass ceiling' effect. This survey confirmed that a significant gender gap still persists at senior levels in organisations, even within those sectors predominantly occupied by women, notably education, health and social services. While Norway and Finland have higher levels of female representation amongst managers and senior manager positions than other countries, target quota levels for women in senior management positions have not yet been achieved, despite legislation.

“ a significant gender gap still persists at senior levels in organisations, even within those sectors predominantly occupied by women ”

Part-time employment and training

An important factor in understanding why women's careers differ from those of men is the disproportionate extent to which women are employed in part-time jobs. Part-time employment has been shown to be associated with less training and therefore with fewer opportunities for upward occupational mobility. It has also been shown to be associated with lower pay and downward occupational mobility. Two particularly striking findings emerged from this study.

- First, in most countries there is no systematic collection of data relating to the impact of employment status on

training provision (Finland, France and Norway were the exceptions).

- Second, only in Norway did women in part-time employment receive equal access to training.

Unless existing practices are monitored and evaluated, there is often insufficient evidence to provide the impetus for change. Given the sheer number of women in part time employment in the EU, and thus the proportion of women whose career opportunities are likely to be adversely affected, the collection of accurate data is particularly important.

Action by the social partners

Many trade unions across the EU have been proactive in campaigning on the topic of equality in careers and in increasing their members' awareness of, and ability to raise, such issues with employers. However, in most countries employers generally appear to remain unconvinced about the need to prioritise the issue of gender and careers. While there are examples of some innovative attempts to tackle the problem, these often occur in isolation. There are also problems in ensuring that legislation, aimed at protecting women against discrimination, is translated into practice at company level. For example, EIRO national centres in two countries – Austria and the UK – both noted the problem of downward mobility among women returning to work after maternity leave despite legislation aimed at preventing this.

The full comparative study is available to download at: www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn0612019s/index.html

Impact of consultation legislation examined

Mark Hall, Susan Hutchinson (University of the West of England) Jane Parker, John Purcell and Michael Terry

Initial findings from ongoing case study research provide an early assessment of employee consultation bodies introduced or modified in the light of the UK's new regulatory framework. The evidence on their operation and impact to date is mixed, but suggests that management is engaging with them as part of wider efforts to develop employee involvement and that consultation practice is evolving.

Reflecting a 2002 EU Directive (see box), the Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations give employees the right to be informed and consulted by their employers on key business, employment and restructuring issues.

The UK legislation has applied since April 2005 to undertakings with at least 150 employees, since April 2007 to those with at least 100 employees and from April 2008 will apply to undertakings with 50 or more employees. The Regulations provide considerable flexibility of response, and enable the adoption of organisation-specific information and consultation (I&C) arrangements.

An IRRU-based research team is undertaking research investigating organisational responses to the Regulations. The study is co-sponsored by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development. Based on longitudinal case studies, the research is exploring:

- how the strategic choices of management, employees and trade unions (where present) determine organisations' approaches to I&C;
- the design and practical operation of organisations' I&C arrangements; and
- the impacts of I&C practices on management decision-making, employee commitment, the employment relations climate and organisational effectiveness.

A report based on the first phase of the research, i.e. initial interviews with key players and employee surveys carried out

in 13 organisations with 150+ employees, is due to be published in BERR's employment relations research paper series in autumn 2007. This article briefly highlights the main findings.

Company strategy on I&C

The research suggests that the legislative context was only one of a number of factors shaping company strategy on I&C. Others include:

- ownership and corporate values;
- the experience of major change;
- the impact of newly-appointed managers;
- a wider emphasis on employee involvement; and
- the existence or prospect of union recognition.

Types of I&C arrangement

Most of the case study organisations had recently established an I&C body, though some had revamped existing arrangements. Eight of the 13 organisations' I&C bodies, including the five which do not recognise unions, are elected by all employees. Six, all of which recognised unions, had 'hybrid' I&C bodies involving union representatives and elected representatives of non-union employees. In two of the multi-site organisations there were site-based variations in approach.

Eight organisations' I&C arrangements were based on voluntary agreements with employee representatives, including some regarded by management as 'pre-existing agreements' under the terms of the Regulations. In addition, one organisation's (draft) agreement was intended to have the status of a 'negotiated agreement' which is

enforceable via the Regulations' statutory procedures. In four cases, management had not sought employee representatives' agreement to the I&C arrangements.

I&C in practice

In many cases, the role of the I&C bodies was largely confined to the discussion of management-provided business information along with the resolution of employee-raised 'housekeeping' issues. Typically, senior management sought to use the I&C body to highlight the 'bigger picture' in terms of business or organisational performance to contextualise and reinforce the case for new initiatives. Employee representatives often saw the agendas of I&C bodies as predominantly management-led, whereas some management respondents wanted representatives to be more proactive and less concerned with 'tea and toilets' issues.

A widespread perception among employee representatives was that the balance of activity was weighted towards information rather than consultation, and often concerned decisions that management had already taken. However, four I&C bodies were reported to have had specific impacts on management decisions by securing modifications to the implementation of major restructuring initiatives and/or changes affecting terms and conditions of employment.

Notwithstanding the widespread management emphasis on 'strategic' issues, over half the case study organisations cited examples of agreed solutions to housekeeping issues raised by employee representatives, or reported general satisfaction with management responsiveness to issues raised.

Only three organisations' agreements/ constitutions excluded pay from the remit of the I&C bodies and in practice some aspect of pay systems or the reward package had been discussed by the I&C bodies at all but two of the case study organisations (and at all of them if pensions issues are included).

Despite some initial union concerns, little tension arising from any overlap between the roles of I&C bodies and established collective bargaining arrangements was reported. In two cases where management had sought to integrate union-based and I&C bodies, the provision that I&C representatives could be asked to leave the meeting when 'negotiating' issues were dealt with was reportedly little used in practice and union representatives did not feel that their role had been adversely affected.

The surveys suggested that employee awareness of the existence of the I&C bodies and recognition of the role played by employee representatives was relatively low but this might be a reflection of the newness of some of the I&C bodies.

Initial assessment

Most of the I&C bodies examined were still at an early stage of development and any assessment can only be provisional. However, the research to date suggests that in every case management's approach to I&C was strategic in the sense that it was part of a wider concern with developing employee involvement. Employee representatives were subject to formal election processes and were afforded time off, training and office facilities, though newly elected representatives inevitably need time to grow into their role and in most cases independent networking by employee representatives was limited. The evidence suggests that the I&C bodies were treated seriously by management, who in many cases had put significant issues on the agenda. Reported instances of the consultation process influencing management decisions or their implementation were sparse, but there were indications that consultation practice was evolving. The longitudinal dimension of the research will enable us to monitor future developments.

EU-wide implementation of the Directive

The EU adopted a Directive establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees in March 2002. National implementation of the Directive was due three years later in the EU 25 (and the three other countries in the European Economic Area) and in Bulgaria and Romania by their EU accession in January 2007. The impact of the Directive has varied considerably between member states, reflecting the differing nature and extent of their existing I&C provisions and the varying industrial relations systems within which they are embedded. The Directive has had few if any implications for some countries (e.g. Austria and Germany) and has prompted only limited amendments to legislation in some others. But it has driven extensive legislative reform in the UK and Ireland, with their 'voluntarist' industrial relations traditions, and in many of the new member states. The European Commission has pursued infringement proceedings at the European Court of Justice against a number of member states for failing to comply with the Directive.

Against this background, Mark Hall and IRRU Associate Fellow Mark Carley are coordinating a comparative study for the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO) examining national implementation of the Directive and related issues. Based on the responses of EIRO national centres to a questionnaire, the study will look at the extent to which the Directive has required legislative change within the member states, the views of national employer and trade union bodies on the implementation measures adopted, their impacts on industrial relations practice and their relationship with other national information and consultation provisions. The study is due to be published on the EIRO website (www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro) in December 2007.

About IRRU

IRRU embraces the research activities of the industrial relations community in Warwick Business School (WBS). There are currently 18 academic staff. Our work combines long-term fundamental research and short-term commissioned projects. In both instances, we maintain the independence and integrity of the work, which have been the hallmark of IRRU since its establishment in 1970. We aim thereby to improve the quality of data and analysis available to industrial relations policy-making by government, employers and trade unions. Funded research projects include: employment practice in multinational companies in organisational context; the impact of inward investment on employment practice in central eastern Europe; stakeholder involvement in managing diversity; evolving practice in the employment of disabled people; employee information and consultation practice in the UK; variable payments systems and collective bargaining; and the organisational roots of productivity in medium-sized enterprises.

IRRU publishes textbooks on industrial relations and human resource management. The most recent are Gill Kirton and Anne-marie Greene, eds. *The Dynamics of Managing Diversity: a Critical Approach* 2nd Edn (London, Butterworth Heinemann), published in 2004, and Paul Edwards, ed., *Industrial Relations: Theory and Practice* 2nd Edn (Oxford, Blackwell), published in 2003. *Industrial Relations* provides a comprehensive treatment of the subject which blends description and analysis.

IRRU is the UK national centre for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions' Observatory Network. Information about IRRU's role in the Observatory Network and links to the three on-line observatories can be found in the box on this page.

IRRU Briefing is published periodically by the Industrial Relations Research Unit. It contains summaries of key findings from recent and current research projects, and analysis of significant industrial relations developments.

IRRU's role in the EU observatory network

In 2006 IRRU became the single UK national centre providing input to the network of EU-wide observatories operated by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. This embraces:

- the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), for which IRRU has been the UK national centre since its inception in 1996;
- the European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO), for which IRRU became the UK national centre in 2005; and
- the European Restructuring Monitor (ERM), to which IRRU began to contribute in 2006.

In addition, a consortium made up of IRRU and the Institute of Employment Studies in Brighton is one of only four European centres of expertise awarded contracts for co-ordinating and writing up a series of EU-wide comparative analytical reports on key topical issues for the three observatories.

The observatories involve the on-line publication of up-to-date information, research findings and policy analysis in the areas of industrial relations, employment and restructuring, aimed primarily at an audience of practitioners and policy makers at national and EU level. National centres in each of the EU member states, plus Norway, provide articles on national developments and debates, fact sheets on significant restructuring cases and national contributions to a series EU-wide comparative analytical reports.

Web links:

www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro
www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco
www.eurofound.europa.eu/emcc/erm

Information on our current research programme and projects, and on recent papers and publications, is available from IRRU's website: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/irru

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