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**Workplace Partnership and the
Theory of the Displaced Activist**

JOHN GEARY and WILLIAM ROCHE

BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO (FI)

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European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50016 San Domenico (FI)
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Workplace Partnership and the Theory of the Displaced Activist

John F. Geary and William K. Roche*

Department of Industrial Relations and Human Resources
Graduate School of Business
University College Dublin

* The sequence of authorship of this paper reflects our policy of alternating lead authorship on our joint work

Abstract

Advocates and critics of partnership have advanced a series of theoretical arguments in respect of the potential consequences for unions working under partnership arrangements. These include the dangers of centralisation within unions and the alienation of shop stewards and union activists. Recent empirical research has confirmed the centralisation of decision-making within unions around an 'elite corps' of union officers, with consequences including the displacement of lay activists, intra-union conflict and in some instances the resulting abandonment of partnership. In the case study examined here partnership involved centralised power among an 'elite' group, but this did not result in serious conflicts or lead to the rejection of partnership. The findings, considered in conjunction with those of existing research, point to the need for a theoretical approach focusing on the contingencies that shape relations between union officers and lay activists under partnership.

A burgeoning literature now exists on voluntary workplace partnership.¹ To date, however, the main focus of theoretical debates has been on the *likely* consequences of partnership for trade union organisation and representative capacity. Empirical examinations are as yet few. One important feature of these debates has been whether partnership leads to a recasting in the relationship between trade union officers and lay activists. A central proposition in the literature is that partnership centralises power around an elite core of full-time union officials (FTOs). Both advocates and critics of partnership are aware of this possibility, but perceive its consequences in different terms. For the latter, such tendencies lead directly to the marginalisation and diminution of the role of shop stewards and lay activists. Advocates, on the other hand, tend to see the elevation of FTOs as a necessary precursor to an eventual enhancement of union influence, including the influence of lay activists.

At the outset, we examine how relations between FTOs and lay representatives have been theorised in the literature in the context of programmes for reforming industrial relations. Recent debates concerning the intra-union consequences of partnership are found to share some parallels with earlier examinations of the effects of the reform of workplace industrial relations in the UK arising from the Donovan Report (1968). Attention is drawn in brief to these similarities. The findings from existing empirical research are then presented before turning to explore the dynamics of intra-union relations in the present case study. The paper provides an analysis of a significant partnership initiative at Ireland's state-owned Airports Authority, Aer Rianta, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data.

The dynamic of trade union representation

A key theme in the study of trade union organisation has been the abiding requirement for union officers to balance the needs of exercising control and encouraging activists' and rank-and-file involvement and participation. There are thus inherent tensions. Echoing C. Wright Mills, Richard Hyman (1975: 151) famously remarked:

Trade unionism is the institutionalised form through which workers can exercise control over employment conditions and the work situation; or the means by which control is wielded, not *by* but *for*

¹ See, for example, Ackers and Payne (1998), Guest and Peccei (2001), Roche and Geary (2003), Rubinstein (2001) and Tailby and Winchester (2000).

and *on behalf of* them; or, because of this differentiation, a source of control *over* them in the interests of officials or external parties.

Hyman is quick, however, to caution that it would be wrong to exaggerate the concentration of power vested in FTOs and, by corollary, to understate the autonomous basis of workplace organisation. The roles of lay activists and FTOs are intimately linked, each dependent on the other for support and advice: the relationship is therefore likely to be one of control *and* interdependence.² The actual balance between control and autonomy is likely to reflect a variety of influences: the self-confidence and bargaining awareness of workplace representatives; rank-and-file identification with and loyalty to shop stewards and/or FTOs; lay activists' trust in FTOs' motives and abilities; the regulations regarding each parties' role as detailed in collective agreements and union rule books; and finally and perhaps most crucially, the role management plays in establishing the status of shop stewards and/or FTOs.

In another theoretical formulation of the dynamics of trade union organisation, Offe and Wiesenenthal (1980) argue that alongside the requirement to mobilise and articulate workers' interests, there exist pressures and incentives to suppress workers' protests and to reach an accommodation with employers. The latter promises 'external guarantees of survival' which come to substitute for internal ones, i.e., members' solidarity and 'willingness to act'. But as the union becomes 'incorporated into the formal decision-making processes', so its internal structure is simultaneously 'transformed into one that maximises the independence of the organisation's functionaries from the collective expression of will and activity of members' (Offe and Wiesenenthal, 1980: 107-9). While recognising the rationality of seeking to have its survival underwritten in this manner, Offe and Wiesenenthal warn that it is a transitory and self-defeating solution: as the union becomes independent of its membership, so it risks engendering their disaffection and alienation, thereby reducing the union's capacity to resist attempts by employers to withdraw external supports.

Thus Hyman and Offe and Wiesenenthal draw our attention to the contradictions inherent in the dynamic of trade union representation and to the complex pattern of relationships that

² For empirical illustrations see Batstone *et al.* (1977) and Kelly and Heery (1994).

exist between union leaders, lay activists and the membership. We would not expect trade unions to escape such tensions where there is an attempt to develop workplace partnership. They may, however, be expressed in new ways.

The focus of current theoretical debates

The literature on workplace partnership is strikingly polarised as between those who look upon partnership as a means of extending union influence and those who criticise it as a managerial ploy designed to incorporate and weaken unions (Heery, 2002; Roche and Geary, 2003). Perhaps the most noted advocates of partnership are Kochan, Rubinstein and Heckscher in the US and Ackers and Payne in the UK; its most vocal critic, is John Kelly.

Two aspects to Kochan's argument warrant attention. The first relates to the purpose and representative postures of trade unionism and the second to union organisation and structures. Kochan's (1995) starting point is the failure of adversarial industrial relations to meet employees' expectations and request for a greater say in organisational decision-making. He argues that workers have little patience for adversarialism, and have demonstrated a clear preference for their union leaders to work in co-operation with management. In essence, Kochan's recasting of the purpose of trade unionism envisages union leaders becoming an advocate and conduit for employee participation. Where employees are provided with new opportunities for direct involvement and new avenues for representative participation are created, the bases of union organisation, it is argued, are thereby strengthened.

Second, with respect to union organisation and governance, Kochan hails the case of partnership at GM's Saturn plant as a learning template. Although Saturn is explicitly identified as a 'new American style of enterprise union', Kochan is keenly aware that the workplace union's long-run success – and that of workplace partnership - is dependent on an 'affiliation with a national [union] organisation that can provide the right type of resources and leadership' (Kochan and Osterman, 1994: 151, 163) and support when confronted by pressures to compete by driving down wages and other labour standards (Rubinstein and Kochan, 2001). None the less, it is clear where the emphasis is to lie: 'unions of the future may need to be highly autonomous and decentralised in order to be

close to their members'. Thus an important thrust of Kochan's argument is that for partnership to prosper, national union officers must *loosen* their control over local unions' operations and permit local representatives more discretion in their dealings with employers. Rubinstein and Kochan (2001) are equally awake to the danger nonetheless of the local union organisation becoming centralised and isolated from the membership. To guard against this, Rubinstein and Kochan place considerable emphasis on leadership accountability, the establishment of dense communication networks and the preservation of competitive elections to representative positions. Thus, unions' representative capacity and cohesion under partnership is seen to depend on the promotion and maintenance of internal union democracy.

Heckscher (1996: 124-7), too, is mindful of the tendency to centralise decision-making processes within unions in establishing partnership arrangements. This, in turn, he suggests, has made partnership experiments vulnerable to challenges from union opponents who do not trust their representatives' co-operative dealings with employers. With strong echoes of Offe and Wieselth's argument above, he suggests that partnership presents US unions with a 'Catch 22':

Because unions have generally lost power in recent years, there are few opportunities for them to establish co-operation on favourable terms. And – here is the catch – attempts to recoup strength by establishing top-level partnerships only further undermine labor's long-run support, for they make unions appear distant from their members and cut off from outside groups. The more unions pursue *power*, which is the basis for co-operation in the present order, the more they lose legitimacy and *influence* (Heckscher, 1996: 127, emphasis in original).

In sum, advocates of partnership recognize the dangers of centralised control and the attendant risk of union incorporation. The consequences are seen to include rank-and-file alienation leading to resistance and to the eventual abandonment of partnership. To prevent such outcomes, advocates emphasise the need to 'balance' the representation of workers' interests with business decision-making, and effective leadership with internal union democracy (Rubinstein and Kochan, 2001).

The most vocal critic of workplace partnership, at least in the UK, is John Kelly. He argues that partnership fails to promote workers' and unions' interests and that it is ultimately a sinister attempt by employers to co-opt union leaders and thereby render unions impotent. Although Kelly, like critics of partnership more generally, have given less explicit treatment than have advocates to the implications of partnership for trade

union organisation and intra-union relations, the following arguments can be discerned. For Kelly (1999) it would seem that the co-optation of unions is led by FTOs beguiled by management's promise of an increased say in decision-making. In turn, FTOs are seen to assume the 'managerial' task of demobilising rank-and-file resistance. In effect, union organisation becomes hierarchical and decision-making centralised around a small privileged group. Thus, with management sponsorship, FTOs develop separate 'institutional interests' from the membership.

Other critics suggest that agreements commonly providing the basis for partnership are imposed upon passive workforces and place little, if any, emphasis on the construction of effective workplace organisation for the representation of workers' interests (see, for example, Blyton and Turnbull, 1998).³

The parallels between the critics' arguments, and those advanced by the radical school against the reform injunctions of the Donovan Report are striking and bear emphasis. In both cases, the pluralists'/advocates' case for the reform of collective bargaining and the constitutional position of union representatives are criticised for the likely development of a more 'bureaucratic' and centralised form of steward organisation.⁴ In receiving support and 'external guarantees' for their institutional security, these elites are seen to grow distant from the rank-and-file and dependent upon management. They consequently become captives of managerialist logics and work to dismantle worker controls which are seen to inhibit the achievement of new efficiencies. The thrust, of course, of the incorporation/displaced activist thesis – echoing Hyman and Offe and Wiesenthal - is that not only is control centralised, but that senior union representatives are seen to act as a managerial police force, exercising control 'over' rather than control 'for' union

³ Others, who cannot be said to reside comfortably within either the advocates' or critics' camp, also point to the centralisation of decision-making within unions and to the isolation of activists and the rank-and-file. In the case of the UK, Terry (2001; 2003) focuses on two influences. First, the utility of partnership to management is, he argues, dependent upon unions' willingness to provide expertise and to legitimate management's decisions. As a result, unionism becomes increasingly less driven by the day-to-day priorities of members. Strategic engagement through partnership may thus lead, Terry suggests 'to a diminution in the organic nature of union/member relationships, the traditional bedrock of their participative democracy' (2001: 21). Second, the enormous pressures on shop stewards to become close to and co-operate with management, have combined with fewer opportunities for workplace meetings to severely constrain membership participation in union decision-making.

⁴ In as much as Donovan was about clarifying and defining a constitutional position for shop stewards, it was also about delimiting that authority by ensuring the larger union's authority over shop stewards. In other words, Donovan was concerned with the integration of stewards into the larger formal union structure (Batstone, 1988).

members. The outcomes are seen to be a fractious and conflict-ridden union organisation with support for reform/partnership quickly dissipating.

The problem with the arguments of critics of partnership, as with the radical critique of Donovan reforms in the 1970s, is that they are presented largely *a priori* and have been unable to cite substantial bodies of evidence in their support. In the case of partnership, Kelly (1999: 9) has conceded as much, suggesting that his assessment is ‘tentative’ and derived from data whose ‘quantity and quality ... is patchy’. But more pointedly, the main failing of the critics’ case is its assumption that partnership is *necessarily* associated with, or gives rise to, the centralisation of power within unions, the marginalisation of lay activists and, in turn, the preclusion of collective resistance. Such starting points should properly be the subject of empirical investigation. It is very likely indeed that variations in outcomes will exist, but the contingencies associated with particular outcomes, have scarcely been recognised. Thus, the most striking aspect of the literature to date is the paucity of studies which have examined the consequences of partnership for intra-union relations (Taylor and Ramsay, 1998: 118; Rubinstein, 2001).⁵ None the less a small number of in-depth studies of partnership initiatives exist and provide important clues as to the conditions that generate particular patterns of intra-union relations. We consider three such studies in the next section: Saskatoon Chemicals in Canada, United Distillers and Allied Distillers Limited in the UK and General Motors’ (GM) Saturn plant in the US – the latter, perhaps, the most impressive and sustained research study of partnership to date.

Empirical examinations of the displaced activist

The case studies here reviewed point to partnership being associated with significant intra-union tensions, but the implications for activists’ influence and the future viability of partnership varied significantly between the different organisations. Partnership at Saskatoon Chemicals (Clark and Haiven, 1999) and at United Distillers (UD) and Allied Distillers Limited (ADL) (Marks *et al.*, 1998) emerged against similar backgrounds: brownfield locations, significant union strength and adversarial industrial relations. The

⁵ Rubinstein (2001: 167) states ‘there is surprisingly little theoretical or empirical work in the contemporary industrial relations and organisation theory literature devoted to looking in-depth at the impact of these (partnership) arrangements on local union strategy and leadership, local union performance as perceived by the membership, or the internal dynamics of locals engaged in these efforts’.

achievements of partnership at Saskatoon Chemicals were, in the authors' judgement, quite extraordinary, both in respect of the inclusion of union representatives in joint governance arrangements and of the gains won for employees (Clarke and Haiven, 1999: 178, 188). Nevertheless, considerable tensions existed within the union as to the manner in which decision-making influence had become concentrated around a small elite group of representatives and as regards the accountability of officers to the membership. These tensions spilt over into intra-union conflict and factionalism, and the initiative floundered.

In contrast to Saskatoon, 'partnership'⁶ at UD and ADL was imposed upon wary union representatives and a sceptical workforce. Once the unions agreed to come on board, management set about privileging the role and influence of FTOs who, in turn, were given the task of winning over the support and co-operation of shop stewards and the membership. Lay activists and employees came to accept the *principle* of partnership, but remained dubious of management's ability to pursue change in a way that protected employees' interests (Marks *et al.*, 1998: 217).

There were some beneficial and some detrimental consequences for union representation. FTOs were the main beneficiaries as industrial relations considerations came to form an important element in business strategy formulation. At plant and shopfloor level, however, the outcomes were not so benign. In a number of UD plants the number of stewards was reduced and steward-management committees replaced by plant-wide and sectional consultative committees, comprised of union and non-union members. Unions' monopoly of representation was lost. In addition, as FTOs redirected their energies towards company-level decision-making, a representative vacuum was left in their wake. Shop stewards were not only poorly prepared to respond to the decentralisation of decision-making authority within management structures, but they were also poorly equipped to counter line management's newly exhibited assertiveness.⁷

⁶ The use of inverted commas is Marks *et al.*'s (1998).

⁷ Taylor and Ramsay (1998) also note that, while the negotiation of a national partnership agreement at one of Britain's retail stores was informed by FTOs' interest in maintaining the institutional security and influence of the union, it had the effect – intentional it would seem – of distancing FTOs from the detail of workplace industrial relations, but – unwittingly – as a consequence of their naïve understanding of partnership and of management's objectives, led to the erosion of activists' authority on the shopfloor.

The circumstances surrounding the introduction of partnership at Saturn were very different to those witnessed in other case study companies: it was a greenfield facility; partnership was introduced without any undue pressure from management; and, from the outset, GM management and UAW representatives set about jointly developing a form of organisational governance based on stakeholding principles. None the less, similar difficulties emerged in respect of union decision-making and the legitimacy it enjoyed amongst the membership. Management and union officers responded by deepening and extending the partnership process: developing so-called on-line 'individual one-to-one partnerships'. Notwithstanding the union's role in strategic decision-making, it is this aspect of '*on-line co-management by the union*' which sets Saturn apart from other experiments and which, in the event, was a key factor in winning employees' and representatives' endorsement for management union co-operation (Rubinstein, 2001; Rubinstein and Kochan, 2001: Chs.2 and 4). Critically, then, and in contrast to arrangements at UD and ADL, the *conduct* of partnership was decentralised to the level of production modules, where considerable influence was permitted to workplace union activists.

A number of tensions in respect of union organisation and representative capacity nevertheless remained. First, there was disquiet over the manner in which worker representatives were selected jointly by union leaders and management, with allegations that it had created 'a new privileged class' within the union, which had become distant and removed from the membership (Rubinstein, 2001: 182, 188). Many workers called instead for a return to the conventional process (within GM) of selecting representatives through rank-and-file elections. Eventually these tensions gave way to the ousting of the union's leading officers. Significantly, though, the new leadership moved quickly to restore membership confidence in the partnership initiative, and the union's role therein, by increasing shopfloor input to the selection of worker representatives to line positions.

Second, tensions existed between workplace representatives and senior national officers of the UAW. The latter exhibited considerable ambivalence towards the Saturn project: principally as some of its innovations departed from and in time, it was feared, might come to undermine the system of national standards and pattern bargaining which had been established with GM over many years, and unleash a whipsawing dynamic within

the wider car industry. UAW officers sought to re-write unilaterally key elements of Saturn's contract. Having met significant local resistance, the contract was revised with local representatives' participation. The local union's authority, however, to initiate changes to the contract without first having the national union's approval was revoked.

Saturn, then, is a story of the creation and dismantling of a representative elite which had become sandwiched between an alienated rank-and-file and a national leadership feeling that it had lost control over a wayward offspring. It bears emphasis, however, that the membership's suspicions concerning their employee representatives did not spill over into disillusionment with partnership or indeed with trade unionism.

In the case studies examined the centralisation of decision-making gave rise to a series of intra-union tensions, in most cases of a grave nature, but which in turn had different consequences for the role and influence of activists, union cohesion and for the future viability of workplace partnership. As to the mechanisms which link the centralisation of union influence with workplace activist and membership discontent, the following factors warrant particular emphasis. First, there is the manner in which change is introduced and its consequences for the representative capacity of stewards. Consider again the example of UD and ADL. Partnership was imposed on the workplace union (albeit with the participation of FTOs) and the structures of workplace governance and consultation were significantly reshaped. Shop stewards lost their strategic coherence and became strategically disoriented. And while workers and activists acquiesced with partnership, there was considerable disquiet and concern as to management's motivations. Their perceptions of partnership and its benefits were thus cast in ambiguity and doubt. Second, there is the issue – ironic as it might seem – of participation. In the cases examined here employees' and activists' fears were aggravated where there was little attempt by union officers to engage in consultation: we thus revisit the continual conundrum facing union officers – the difficulty of balancing control and participation. Saskatoon and Saturn were found to reveal contrasting tales here. Third, whether such tensions or discontent with partnership and unions' role therein result in intra-union conflict and resistance to partnership would seem to depend on the perceived possibility of maintaining traditional bargaining postures and the perception of a firm's competitive position in the marketplace. The differences between UD and ADL and Saturn and Saskatoon could not

be more marked. In the former two companies there seemed little alternative but to work with management's proposals, whereas in Saskatoon and Saturn, where pro- and anti-partnership factions developed, the option of resistance and a resort to traditional bargaining postures appeared feasible.

From this review, we pose a series of questions that will guide our analysis of the AR case study.

1. Did partnership again in this case involve centralised power and control within participating unions and did this result in a redistribution of power away from shop stewards and activists?
2. What were the consequences for intra-union relations and did conflict and factionalism result?
3. Did partnership result in the emergence of an alienated and disaffected cadre of shop stewards and activists, characterised by negative and distinctive attitudes, especially when compared with the rank-and-file?

The answer to some of these questions will be surprising in the light of the literature to date and lead us in the concluding section of the article to suggest the need for a contingency perspective on intra-union relations under partnership. Before turning to an analysis of intra-union relations in AR, we provide a brief overview of the institutional context of workplace partnership in Ireland.

Workplace Partnership in Irish Industrial Relations

Since 1987, employers, unions and government have agreed a series of successive centralized wage agreements in Ireland. The last two agreements, *Partnership 2000* (P2000) and the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF), included within them a framework agreement for the voluntary adoption of workplace partnership. In both instances, the agreed definition of partnership is broad and general, and allows for both representative participation and direct employee participation. The latter in particular was designed to meet the concerns of the employers' organization, Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC), whose varied membership, which includes unionized and non-unionized firms, had very different perceptions of the merits or otherwise of cultivating closer relations with unions. The Irish Congress of

Trade Unions (ICTU), on the other hand, identified workplace partnership as a means for bolstering unions' influence at the workplace and as a way of animating and maintaining rank-and-file support for trade union representation. Within the union movement there has been considerable concern and disquiet that the voice permitted to union representatives at national level has not been replicated at workplace level. Allegations of union avoidance and marginalization have become commonplace. With this duality in union fortunes, observers have come to talk increasingly of a system of industrial relations, which is represented by a 'truncated partnership'.

While the current administration, a Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrats Coalition, has been ostensibly sympathetic to trade union concerns, it has avoided adopting a directive posture in deference to employers' reservations. Certainly, the option of legislating for union participation in management decision-making was not seen as a feasible option. To pursue such a course would have endangered, government officials and industrial development agencies argued, 'capital flight' amongst foreign-owned enterprises. As a consequence, the Government, while remaining positive in its support for workplace partnership, has adopted a largely exhortative and non-interventionist position. The National Centre for Partnership which was established under P2000 and which was located within the Department of an Taoiseach (the Prime Minister), operated as a voluntary catalyst for partnership and employee involvement. The Centre was subsequently reconstituted under the PPF and retitled the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPP), under the Chairmanship of former General Secretary of the ICTU, Peter Cassells. In its new guise, the NCPP enjoys considerably more financial resources than its predecessor and is run by a larger team of professional staff, governed by a high-level Council and supported by a sub-structure involving partnership networks and policy advisory-groups.

In as much as we can determine from the available research evidence it is clear that there has been some significant experimentation with partnership-based approaches in Irish workplaces in recent years (O'Dowd 2002). It cannot be claimed, however, that, Ireland can be regarded by international standards as a leader with respect to the diffusion and depth of workplace partnership (Roche and Geary 2000; Gill and Krieger 2000). Where partnership approaches have been adopted they have been more

commonly used to address issues of an operational nature rather than strategic concerns. Alongside ‘partnership companies’ are many more workplaces where employers pursue exclusionary strategies or prefer individual and direct mechanisms for employee participation. None the less, there have been a number of companies in Ireland, both in the public and private sectors, which have adopted sophisticated models of partnership. Aer Rianta is often viewed as one such exemplar company not only within Ireland but also internationally.⁸

Partnership in Irish airports

Aer Rianta (AR) is a state-owned commercial company whose main activity involves the management of the main Irish airports at Dublin, Cork and Shannon. It currently employs 3,300 people, 2,400 in the Irish airports⁹. The company is highly unionised, with an overall union density level of over 90 per cent. The main unions in Aer Rianta during the period covered by the research were MANDATE, which organises workers in airport retail (formerly duty-free) shops, SIPTU, which organises ancillary staff grades, airport police and fire services, operatives and clerical staff, IAESA (now a branch of the public sector union MANDATE) which organises middle management, and a number of craft unions, prominent among them, the TEEU, which organises maintenance craft workers. The unions negotiate together on company-wide issues under the aegis of the AR Group of Unions. Since 1987 pay adjustment has been based on the awards set down in the national programmes discussed in the previous section. AR has a tradition of positive and progressive industrial relations and personnel management and was a pioneer of progressive policies in areas such as work sharing and QWL. The incidence, level of participation and number of working days lost due to strikes in the company, adjusted for workforce size, have been significantly below the profile for the rest of the public sector and also compare very favourably with the strike record of the private sector.¹⁰

In 1988 provisions for the election of worker directors to the boards of State-owned companies were extended to AR and 3 worker directors were elected to the AR Board.

⁸ In 2000 Aer Rianta received an award from the Involvement and Participation Association for excellence in fostering workplace partnership.

⁹ A subsidiary company, AR International, manages duty free outlets in a number of overseas airports. Another subsidiary, Great Southern Hotels, operates a number of Irish-based hotels.

¹⁰ *Strikes Data File*, Department of Industrial Relations and Human Resources, Graduate School of Business, University College Dublin.

During 1994-95, a Joint Union Management Group (JUCG) agreed a series of proposals for partnership in the Irish airports. These were outlined in two key documents, known as

The Compact and *The Requisite Arrangements*. *The Compact* sets out a series of principles aimed at rebuilding employee-management and union-management relations in AR along partnership lines. *The Requisite Arrangements* identified a series of structures and measures to be put in place to facilitate the realisation of partnership. The main proposals in these documents, which provided the framework for what came to be known in AR, as 'Constructive Participation (CP)', are summarised in Table 1. CP envisaged multi-level and multi-stranded partnership arrangements in which employees and unions would be accorded a role in decision-making, spanning task participation, department and business unit strategy and competitive strategy for the company as a whole. To support joint decision-making, the unions received guarantees of institutional security; employees were assured of employment security and financial participation was espoused. The company received assurances from the unions that they would assist in improving the economic performance of each of its constituent units. The parties pledged that AR would seek to compete on the basis of service quality and workforce skill rather than on the basis of cost minimisation and low pay. There was also a pledge to provide training covering all aspects of engagement with CP.

CP envisaged a clear-cut division of roles as between partnership structures and established industrial relations channels. The parties involved in partnership structures were not enjoined to arrive at a single common position with respect to any problem or agenda. Even if they did, it was understood that management and unions retained their established rights under collective agreements, and that either party, or both, could dissent if they chose. Thus, partnership neither incorporated nor displaced established collective bargaining and industrial relations channels. Issues could be handled on a partnership basis, in which case it was ultimately open to unions and employers to accept or reject any proposals put forward. Alternatively, issues could be handled through established industrial relations channels. The main unions in the company, operating under the aegis of the AR Group of Unions, supported CP. The exception was the union representing middle managers, the Irish Airline Executive Staff Association (IAESA),

Table 1: Workplace Partnership In Aer Rianta: Principles And Arrangements

Principles of Constructive Participation

Both parties accept their joint responsibility to work together in order to improve the economic performance of each constituent part of the organisation.

Both parties reject competing on the basis of a low wage policy but will do all possible to improve company performance and living standards for employees through the conscientious application of best systems and practice at all times.

Both parties will share their objectives and strategic plans in regard to Aer Rianta.

Both parties accept their obligation to work together to serve the interests of customers, staff and stakeholders.

Both parties accept the right of employees to share in the financial success of the enterprise.

Both parties accept the principle of employees shareholding as a legitimate objective in certain circumstances.

Both parties will commit to mutual disclosure of information and will respect confidentiality where necessary.

Both parties will share their perception of future developments, will ensure an awareness of market realities and will anticipate the implications for the enterprise and employment.

Aer Rianta management accept that trade unions have a legitimate and central role in strategic decisions and policy making in addition to their role in day-to-day relationships between management and staff.

Aer Rianta will encourage its employees to support and engage actively in trade union affairs and will not discriminate against union members or representatives.

Aer Rianta management accept employment security as a major policy objective that will figure as importantly in the strategic planning process as does finance, marketing, customer service, etc.

Requisite Arrangements

Regular Work Groups

There should be an opportunity for everyone to participate fully at the immediate place of work in their regular work groups. These basic unit groups will deal with items of importance to them in the execution of their own tasks. The basic work groups will be expected to initiate improvements or innovations and will get a hearing at the appropriate levels within the organisation.

Departmental Arrangements

At departmental level the participants will include management, trade union representatives and staff members. Participation at departmental level can be designed around the normal managing process, including departmental subjects and timetable of events.

Business Unit Arrangements

Business unit participation should have a strong input into the annual strategic plans and financial plans of the individual airports. These groups should give full consideration to all aspects of the business unit's objectives with regard to its operational activities, marketing activities, capital investment programmes and business development.

Special Topic Groups

From time to time particular topics will need to be addressed which transcend the activities of the various groups or which require a particular combination of personnel and skills eg loss of duty free, change of status, etc. In such a case a Special Topic Group will be nominated to deal effectively with seeking a joint solution to the difficulty.

Corporate Arrangements

The arrangements for constructive participation at corporate level will involve nominees of the Joint Union/Company Group as well as the most senior executives in the company and membership from the various levels and activities throughout the organisation. This group will review the growth of the company and its financial and investment performance as well as matters such as the creation of employment, the growth of the business and the policies as articulated in the company's strategic planning document.

Board of Directors

Three members of the board are elected by the employees. The executive has no board member. The chief executive attends board meetings in his executive capacity only. It would be appropriate and indicative of real commitment if both worker directors and executive directors had seats on the board of the company.

now a branch of the public sector union, IMPACT. IAESA had not participated in the development of partnership and saw itself as effectively excluded from the process.

The JUCG was established in 1991 and became pivotal in the development of CP, acting as steering group and trouble-shooter for the process. Comprising senior managers and union officials and activists, the JUCG sought to develop proposals on a consensus basis. It was integral to the operation of the JUCG that its members were expected to act in a non-representative capacity, contributing their expertise to the development of partnership and bringing their influence to bear in a general sense to promote partnership in the company. Funding was secured from the parent (Government) Department to resource CP and to provide financial independence from the company. A full-time senior union official was seconded to the project and he and a key senior management champion became the main animators of CP. They also became intimately involved in the day-to-day implementation process. Other AR staff were seconded to the project in the role of full-time ‘facilitators’ and others still acted as ‘mentors’, supporting partnership in various parts of the organisation.

The practical implementation of participative principles and structures began in 1997. This was overseen by the JUCG, which was increasingly drawn into the handling of operational problems. These included the reluctance of some managers to engage; attempts by others to use CP to push through changes on a unilateral basis; allegations that unions sometimes sought to use partnership to stall management proposals, and more generalised uncertainty and ambiguity concerning the relationship between partnership and established industrial relations processes.

Amongst the most significant partnership structures to be developed in AR were the so-called Strategy Groups (SGs) and Significant Issue Groups (SIGs). All were expected to address issues jointly, based on the collection, examination and validation of relevant data. SGs focused on single issues, such as the future viability of maintenance operations at Shannon Airport, problems with the provision of the cleaning service at Dublin Airport, and the future of Dublin duty-free shops. During 1997-98 some 7 SGs were established at Dublin and Shannon. All SGs addressed issues of service cost, efficiency, viability and development in the context of the strategic commercial priorities outlined in

the *Compact*, including employment security. SIGs developed to address two distinct types of issues. First, a number addressed key issues linked with the progress of CP, such as the revision of personnel and industrial relations policies, the redesign of reward systems and the future of training. Second, a number examined cross-company commercial issues and challenges. Two SIGs in particular came to occupy a pivotal role in the partnership process during 1998-2000. The Duty Free Group produced a paper on how the imminent disappearance of duty-free sales on the instigation of the EU, might be handled, and this became the basis on which management and unions subsequently addressed post duty-free retailing at the airports. The Corporate Strategy Group arrived at a joint vision of the future of AR, which accepted that the partial privatisation of the company represented the most realistic means of meeting its burgeoning capital requirements and pursuing its competitive strategy. The Corporate Strategy Group's report became the basis for a common front between the AR board and management and the Group of Unions. On this issue, more than any other, partnership effectively subsumed or displaced collective bargaining and traditional industrial relations channels within the company. The AR worker directors, however, disagreed with privatisation and openly opposed the position adopted by the unions and management under partnership, leading to a struggle between them and the Group of Unions.

Despite having been adopted as official policy by the company and group of unions, partnership encountered significant obstacles. Senior management was divided on the merits of the approach. A minority supported partnership - most of these occupied staff rather than line management roles. Most senior managers were sceptics, and the rest were overtly opposed. The chief executive in office up to 1998 was a supporter, but supported the process in a largely passive sense. A new CEO appointed at the implementation stage provided more active support and altered the balance in favour of partnership at a time when the process began to engage major commercial issues. Many middle managers were apprehensive and insecure, a posture that hardened into formal opposition when their union instructed them at the implementation stage not to co-operate with CP. The postures of middle managers were also influenced by their perception of senior management division and ambivalence. Prevailing formal organisational structures and control systems remained substantially unaltered – partnership was expected, in effect, to colonise prevailing modes of decision-making and change them from within. Human

resource and industrial relations policies were expected to change, but progress in these areas in joint bodies remained slow. In consequence, prevailing reward systems provided little incentive for either management or staff to engage with partnership. Relations between the worker directors and CP had always been uneasy, and they were among its most ardent opponents.

The largely benign commercial conditions faced by the company during the 1980s and much of the 1990s favoured deliberation and planning in the development of CP. The same conditions also encouraged inertia in prevailing structures and modes of decision-making. From about 1998 commercial conditions provided more fertile ground for change. The acute challenge represented by the imminent loss of duty-free sales and the fundamental challenge posed by the review of the company, provided opportunities for supporters of CP to demonstrate the potential of partnership – while in the process tackling management scepticism and opposition. The dramatic growth in traffic volumes and a tightening in labour markets from the mid 1990s, as the Irish economy grew by about 9 per cent annually, allowed scope for absorbing the loss of duty-free sales while observing the employment security injunction set down in the Compact.

Research case and methods

With regard to the suitability of AR for examining the effects of partnership on intra-union relations the following points are emphasised. First, AR offers an important example of a genuine attempt to establish a sophisticated partnership initiative, at various levels in the organisation, from the shop floor, to business unit and company levels. Second, many of the conditions, as specified by advocates, which might act to guard against the marginalisation of lay activists and the alienation of the rank-and-file were present in AR. Not only were the unions strong, but management had undertaken to support their representational status and institutional security, and had agreed jointly to establish dense social networks to involve workers. Third, the development of partnership was associated with a privileged position being accorded to a small group of FTOs. In the light of our comments on Kelly's work, this provides an important starting point for investigating whether centralisation led to a diminution in lay activists' role. Fourth, although the company is publicly owned and enjoys a monopoly status at Ireland's main airports, it experienced substantial financial pressures, disjunctive commercial change

and threats to its monopoly status in the late 1990s. AR is also a strongly commercial and entrepreneurial company, as indicated by its success in internationalising its duty-free business and its acquisition of stakes in several airports outside Ireland. Hence the case company cannot reasonably be viewed as a ‘sleepy monopoly’. Partnership occurred, rather, in the context of commercial postures and pressures of a kind that favour the generalisability of the findings beyond the public sector. In these ways, the profile of AR and its commercial context appear well suited to testing the competing theoretical claims of advocates and critics with respect to the effects of partnership on intra-union relations.

The authors were commissioned by AR’s parent department, the Department of Public Enterprise to examine CP in AR and began research in 1997. The fieldwork reported here spanned the period from 1997 to 2000. Complete access was permitted to all partnership activities and to all those involved. An invitation to join the JUCG as ordinary members was accepted, and thus, in this limited sense, the research involved participant observation. The authors and research team also joined a number of other groups, including SIGs dealing with personnel and industrial relations policies and corporate strategy. All files and documentation relating to CP were also accessible.

Intensive interviews were conducted with senior managers, middle managers, FTOs and ‘involved activists’ across the three airports. The union representatives interviewed were selected from all the main unions represented at AR, including SIPTU, TEEU and MANDATE, as well as the middle management staff association, IAESA. The FTOs interviewed included those who were centrally involved in the design and implementation of CP and a small number who had an arms-length relationship with the initiative. The ‘involved activists’ occupied a variety of lay representative positions ranging from shop steward to Chair of Section Committee, to Chair of Group of Unions. In each case they had assumed a formal role, either through their membership of the JUCG or as ‘facilitators’ or ‘mentors’, in the development of CP. These FTOs and ‘involved activists’ were identified as key informants. In all sixteen union representatives were interviewed in depth. The results to be reported below draw heavily on these interviews, but our interpretation of the implications of partnership for unions also draws on the other data sources outlined.

A survey of a sample of the AR workforce was conducted between October 1998 and July 1999. Survey fieldwork was undertaken at a time when CP initiatives were in operation at a number of levels and had become integral to company and union responses to the imminent loss of duty-free sales and the future status of AR. It was also a time of considerable, perhaps unprecedented, change and uncertainty for the workforce.

The survey sample was drawn from the register of employees working for AR in 1998. The target sample was 1,184 employees. As the numbers in different categories of the workforce (senior management, middle management, supervisors and other workers) differed substantially, a disproportionate stratified probability sampling procedure was employed. The achieved sample was re-weighted to restore the numbers of respondents in these categories to their proper respective proportions in the workforce. Table 2 contains details of the sample, response rates and weighting. The data to be reported below and used as a basis for multivariate analysis comprise the re-weighted data.

A series of scales were developed to measure union activists' and members' involvement in different aspects of CP. Details of these scales are outlined in Appendix Table A1. The first scale measures variations in the level of *membership of formal CP groups and committees*, as well as occupancy of CP support roles. A second scale measures variations in more general *engagement with CP*. This scale is heavily focused around the exchange of information, feedback and discussion concerning CP issues and concerns. A third scale focuses on *communicative involvement* through the receipt of information regarding the deliberations of formal decision-making structures in the company.

Two survey questions measured attitudes towards the situation of unions in AR: 'how good have unions and staff associations been in representing your interests in the last three years?'¹¹ and 'do you think that unions' or staff associations' bargaining influence over management has increased over the last three years?'¹² Attitudes to partnership were measured by combining a series of 5 questions covering perceptions of the effects of CP. Details of scale items and scale reliability statistics are outlined in panel 4 of Table A1.

¹¹ Replies are measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1, where unions are seen to be 'very bad' at representing members' interests, to 5, where they are seen to be 'very good'.

¹² Replies are again measured on an 5-point scale ranging from 1, where union bargaining power is seen to have 'decreased greatly' to 5, where it is seen to have 'increased greatly'.

Table 2 Workforce Survey: Population and Sample Distributions by Job Category and Airport

	Population		Contact Sample		Effective Sample		Response Sample		Response Rate		Weighted Sample	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	%	N	%	
<i>Job Category:</i>												
Manager/Supervisor	601	29	601	45	562	47	364	60	61	197	31	
All other employees	1,460	71	730	55	622	53	248	40	40	446	69	
Total	2,061		1,331		1,184		612		52	643		
<i>Airport:</i>												
Dublin	1,410	68	877	66	756	64	390	64	52	398	62	
Shannon	536	26	361	27	350	30	164	27	47	186	29	
Cork	115	6	93	7	78	7	55	9	71	55	9	
No Airport specified							3	1		4	1	
Total	2,061		1,331		1,184		612		52	643		

The number of invalid questionnaires returned was 5.

Results: partnership and centralised decision-making and its effects in AR

As with the empirical studies of partnership reviewed above, CP in AR was associated at the outset with centralised decision-making and influence, focused around a small group of FTOs, and subsequently around a small group comprised of union and management representatives. There were two main reasons why this came to pass. First, increased influence was *conceded* to this small group of FTOs at the behest of lay activists and other FTOs when discussions within AR reached an impasse with respect to how the legislative provisions of the 1988 Worker Participation Act might be transposed into practice. The legislation was not prescriptive but allowed employers, unions and employees to devise their own preferred form of participation. Opinions within AR did not divide neatly along union management lines; views differed within both groupings. In an attempt to overcome this stalemate a joint management union body was established to consider how participation might be defined and operationalised. Critically, union activists within AR reasoned that as a number of FTOs had prior experience of translating the legislation into practice in other State-owned companies, and as they were better informed of debates with respect to different models of participation, it would be more appropriate to hand responsibility for the discussions over to them. The nominated FTOs had acquired a jaundiced view of experiments in other companies, believing they lacked any great ambition and allowed limited scope for employee voice. Subsequently, a close affinity developed between these FTOs and one senior manager and (although there were some changes in personnel on the union side) they were to become the key drivers in shaping the CP process. Second, as CP took shape, decision-making remained centralised around this key group within the JUCG, principally to ensure, as they reasoned, that the initiative would be protected from those opposed to its development. CP's key animators thus saw themselves performing an important protective and nurturing function.

We review here the views of FTOs and 'involved activists' as they relate to the centralised nature of decision-making within the JUCG. The other important issue of whether, as commonly reported in the literature, partnership resulted in a redistribution of power in favour of FTOs and away from activists within participating unions is also assessed. For evidence we rely on in-depth interviews and a variety of other measures and

institutional indicators. To the degree that partnership involved centralised decision-making around a closed circle within the JUCG and a redistribution of power within unions more generally, the analytical task in this and the next results section is to understand its consequences for shop stewards' and activists' support for and attitudes towards partnership and trade unionism.

The interviews revealed three groups with distinctive attitudes towards CP: 'proponents', 'sceptics' and 'opponents'. *Proponents* comprised in the main the small group of FTOs and activists closely connected with the development and implementation of CP. *Sceptics* were active supporters of CP, but feared it faced significant obstacles and might not succeed. This sceptical orientation was seen by those interviewed as being predominant among stewards and activists, and among FTOs who were not privy to the deliberations of the 'elite' management union group within the JUCG. Finally *opponents* objected to the establishment of a union-management partnership and some at least were determined to undermine the initiative. As we will show, opposition to CP bore no relationship to disaffection from partnership on the part of shop stewards or activists.

The proponents reported little concern with centralised decision-making and saw few problems arising with respect to relations between those actively involved in central partnership arrangements and union representatives and activists in general. We review here, therefore, the views of the sceptics and the opponents as they relate to centralised decision-making within the JUCG and the unions and the consequences for intra-union relations and for partnership.

A principal concern of the sceptics - notwithstanding their acknowledgement of the hard work and ambition of CP's key animators and their recognition that the future development of CP was critically dependent on their continued efforts - was that CP had become too closely associated with, and controlled by, a 'cosy club'. Significantly, this view was shared both by activists and by those FTOs who were not part of the 'elite' union management group. As one such FTO described the situation:

The concept of partnership is exactly what we [unions] need. But I have some reservations about how it functions. The fundamental difficulty I have is that so much of it resides with the [key management and union animators]. I have to use the word 'control' rather than 'guiding'.

Activists were particularly aware of the centralised power of key union and management figures.

At every corner, we are forced down routes we do not want to go down. We are well capable of designing a participative process under the general guidelines that would suit us. But we find ourselves totally frustrated. Everything must resolve around the [key management and union animators]

Critics also complained that the JUCG as an institution had been relegated to a ‘talking shop’. As such it had assumed a largely ineffective role as an initiator and developer of policies but provided a basis for the exercise of influence by a small cadre of FTOs and managers. Otherwise, the JUCG acted largely as a secretariat for the CP initiative.

Everything revolves around the [key management and union animators] or it doesn’t happen. They release no influence to other people. You can go to the JUCG meetings, and you’re simply there to rubber-stamp other peoples’ opinions. You are not there to influence or guide the process.

Frustration with centralised decision-making showed itself in a number of ways. One was the difficulty of establishing departmental autonomy over the development of work groups or departmental groups, as indicated in one of the quotations above. Another was the practice of dissuading SIGs and SGs from making firm recommendations in discussion documents. In respect, for example, of the report on the Company’s Change of Status, which had been prepared for the Government Minister responsible for AR, a compilation of differing views was presented, without any preferred position being identified and articulated.

I believe the outcome of the Change of Status Group was very much a wasted exercise. It was a collection of opinions which neither had any focus nor any thrust to it. Every point that was ever raised was listed and left. Once again they [the group’s participants] were told what exactly they were about and they were not allowed to develop it [the report] beyond that. If an agreed position had been put to the Minister by the unions and the company, think of how much influence that would have had. It would certainly have been greater than a [expletive deleted] list of points.

The central figures did not dismiss the charge that they ‘controlled’ SIGs’ and SGs’ activities, but in their defence argued that this was necessary to guarantee managerial *and* union rights to dissent if they sought fit. Their argument centred on protecting CP: if groups were permitted a free hand, there was the danger that they and CP would be seen to challenge management and union powers, and to displace established industrial relations procedures. One key animator of CP explained it thus:

We have never asked the unions or management to give over any of their prerogatives to us. And that does a number of things. It leaves the group free to explore things in a non-threatening way because the unions and management can deny anything that comes out of it.

It is also clear from our observations of JUCG meetings that decision-making had indeed become centralised within the JUCG in the manner portrayed by our interviewees. The following examples, which are listed in brief, illustrate the degree to which the JUCG and CP's key animators exercised centralised control over the development of partnership. First, they acted as a 'clearing house' for all CP documents, materials and proposals; second, they closely scrutinised and sought to determine the pace of development of partnership activities in the various departments; third, they appointed CP facilitators and mentors across the three airports; fourth, they devised training programmes for activists and facilitators which were deliberately conceived as integrative devices, and finally, as indicated above, they prohibited discussion groups from prescribing preferred courses of action in their reports.

Thus the concerns expressed by interviewees with the manner in which decision-making had become centralised within the JUCG parallel those identified in other investigations of workplace partnership. There are important points of contrast, however. In AR, decision-making in respect of the development of CP resided within a small management union caucus, but only a small number of FTOs formed part of this coterie. Most FTOs remained outside this group. As a consequence, both FTOs and activists were unhappy with the manner in which an 'elite' circle had acquired control over CP's activities. In other studies of partnership decision-making was also centralised but it was the preserve of FTOs and excluded shopfloor activists. This is a small but important difference. There are two others which are of more significance especially in respect of understanding the contingencies which have a bearing on explaining whether or not partnership gives rise to factionalism and intra-union conflict. First, while arrangements for the development and implementation of partnership in AR were indeed centralised around an elite group, as documented above, partnership did not result in the 'centralisation' of power within participating unions per se. Centralised decision-making within the JUCG did not lead to power being wrested away from shop stewards and activists. There was no indication from our interviews or from other sources that prior to partnership shop stewards and activists had exercised more influence within unions and that CP had somehow resulted in power being redistributed in favour of FTOs to the detriment of shopfloor representatives. The decision as to whether to operate 'under the Compact' or to continue with traditional approaches was taken at sectional level by employees and their

representatives, although such decisions were then notified as a matter of form to unions' branch secretaries. Where they opted to work under partnership principles, local activists were central to CP's development, albeit the JUCG 'elite' continued to scrutinise and control these processes from a distance. But more importantly, CP did not result in any major dislocation in activists' role, such that work practices or existing agreements were altered 'above their heads' in exclusive dealings between FTOs and management, as was the situation in the some of the other partnership cases reported in the literature.

The third point of contrast with other studies of partnership was that while activists and FTOs in AR had concerns in respect of the centralised nature of decision-making within the JUCG, this did not culminate in active resistance to CP. Possible indicators of activists' displacement and resistance such as meetings to campaign against partnership, intra-union conflict, and factions opposed to partnership contesting union elections – as witnessed in other studies of partnership - were not observed in AR.

Resistance in AR came from two other quarters and these represent the opponents to CP. The resistance from the middle management union, IAESA, did in part reflect an objection to centralised decision-making within the JUCG and to the 'summit politics' which were seen to be exclusive to other unions' representatives and senior management. But IAESA's decision to stand apart from and oppose partnership was rooted also in their defence of middle management's vested interests in the status quo, as well as in anxieties regarding the implications of participative management. Moreover, the posture adopted by the middle management union failed to muster much support in the eyes of its members (see Roche and Geary, 2003).

The closest thing to an organised challenge to partnership within AR's unions came not from shop stewards or activists, but from a second group of opponents: worker directors concerned to preserve their power and protect their power base. The worker directors were themselves party to centralised structures of representation focused around the AR board. Partnership accorded them little formal role or status, but instead challenged their representational monopoly by establishing alternative channels of participation. From the outset union and management figures spearheading CP had been critical of the limitations of representative participation based on worker directors. Supporters of CP were also

seen to have supported a pro-partnership candidate (in the event unsuccessful) in a worker director election, further damaging relations with worker directors. At the time our fieldwork was completed, July 2000, the resistance from worker directors was ongoing. However the worker directors were isolated in the union community within AR and had been reprimanded by the AR Group of Unions. Rather than seek to stoke up dissent among shop stewards or activists, or among the rank-and file, their focus was to seek national-level union support for their opposition to the privatisation of the company.

Thus in response to research questions one and two posed earlier, the following conclusions seem warranted. First, partnership in AR did involve centralised structures and arrangements. In this sense, the development and implementation of partnership was controlled by a closed circle in which a number of FTOs were prominent. This was a source of concern and annoyance to both other FTOs and activists alike and gave rise to some criticism and friction. Second, although CP involved centralised decision-making within the JUCG, this did not result in a fundamental shift in the balance of power within unions where, as witnessed in other studies of partnership, power and influence was re-distributed in favour of FTOs at the expense of stewards and activists. Nor was any change in activists' role or influence plotted or attempted *de haut en bas*. Finally, whatever objection FTOs and activists had towards the manner in which CP's key animators sought to control decision-making in respect of the design and implementation of partnership, this did not result in intra-union factionalism or in overt resistance to partnership.

Are shop stewards and activists disaffected from partnership?

In this section we examine levels of involvement of shop stewards and activists in CP and consider, as posed in research question 3 above, whether they display more negative attitudes to partnership than the rank-and-file, or any otherwise distinctive set of attitudes that might point towards disaffection.

The first approach we have adopted involves examining whether the behaviour and attitudes of shop stewards and activists reveal lower levels of involvement in partnership and more negative attitudes towards its effects than union rank-and-file members. This analysis proceeds by examining the signs and significance levels of coefficients on

dummy variables for shop stewards and activists in a series of multiple regressions. The regressions incorporate a series of controls for variables that might affect involvement in partnership and attitudes towards its effects. Possible differences by staff category are controlled by dummy variables for senior managers, middle managers and supervisors (with other employees as the reference category). Possible differences by gender and age-group are also controlled (under 35s versus older age-groups). As the climate towards partnership varied across the airports, with Dublin appearing the most receptive and Cork the least receptive, airport dummy variables were also entered as controls (Cork and Shannon, with Dublin as the reference category). Finally in examining attitudes to partnership, a *work participation* scale was entered as a control variable. This measures variations in participation and autonomy at work, as represented by sets of items describing how work tasks are structured and the character of management and supervisory styles (for details see panel 4 of Table A1). Shop stewards and activists are of course employees and variations in their levels of work autonomy might be correlated with attitudes to CP and to unions. As such, controlling for this variable allows for an assessment of the attitudes of shop stewards and activists *net* of the level of work autonomy they may enjoy as employees.

Of those sampled in the survey, 8.3 per cent said that they were currently shop stewards and a further 13.5 per cent said that they were ‘actively involved in union affairs and business’. The involvement of shop stewards in formal CP groups and committees varied from 55.6 per cent who participated in regular work groups, to 29.5 per cent who were members of significant issues groups. Activists had lower levels of participation varying from 36.5 per cent (regular work groups) to 20.9 per cent (significant issues groups). Levels of engagement with CP were very high in the case of both groups. For example, 69.4 per cent of shop stewards and 70.5 per cent of activists attended CP seminars or training sessions. Table 3 shows that that shop stewards and activists were also highly involved in CP relative to the rank-and-file. This is the case with respect to participation in formal groups and committees (equation 3.1), as well as with respect to wider engagement in training, information exchange, discussion and debate (equation 3.2). Overall, there is scant evidence here that shop stewards or activists had seceded from or abandoned CP as a consequence of disaffection arising from centralised decision-making.

Table 3 Shop Stewards, Activists and Constructive Participation: OLS Regression Results

	1 <i>Membership of CP Groups etc.</i>	2 <i>Engagement in CP</i>	3 <i>Communicative Involvement</i>	4 <i>Union Effectiveness</i>	5 <i>Change in Union Influence</i>	6 <i>Attitudes to Effects of CP</i>	7 <i>Interests Better Served by CP</i>
	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Shop stewards	0.16***	0.23***	0.05	0.15**	0.06	0.08*	0.01
Activists	0.25***	0.28***	-0.02	0.05	-0.07	0.14**	0.09*
Shannon airport	-0.03	-0.19***	-0.26***	-0.05	-0.01	-0.11*	-0.11**
Cork airport	-0.06	-0.18***	-0.01	0.01	0.05	-0.02	-0.04
Senior managers	0.07	0.09*	0.16***	-0.05	0.05	0.06	0.08*
Middle managers	-0.02	0.02	0.34***	0.08*	0.09*	-0.09*	-0.01
Supervisors	-0.02	-0.03	0.19***	0.01	0.04	-0.02	0.02
Male employees	0.05	0.11**	0.11**	-0.01	0.05	-0.00	-0.02
Under 35s	-0.03	-0.12**	0.12**	-0.07	0.08*	-0.12*	-0.08*
R ² (adj)	0.09***	0.16***	0.22***	0.02**	0.01	0.04***	0.02*
N (weighted)	461	483	543	556	528	549	554

*** Significant at the 0.001 level.

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

Turning to attitudes to unions a considerable spread of opinion is evident among union members as a whole. Just over 38 per cent of union members believed that unions were very good or fairly good in representing members' interests over the three years preceding the survey, compared with 37.5 per cent who believed them to be very or fairly bad; the rest were undecided. In contrast, only 15.3 per cent believed that union influence over management had increased over the same period, compared with 39.2 per cent who believed that it had decreased; 45.4 per cent saw no change. Union members were generally unimpressed as to the effects of CP: no more than between one quarter and one third agreed that CP had increased levels of information, the legitimacy of decision-making, the quality of decisions and levels of trust. Just less than half agreed that employees' interests were better represented by CP.

The key issue here is whether shop stewards and activists were even harsher critics of union performance under CP and less convinced of the effects of CP than members in general – pointing towards acute disaffection and alienation. This is examined in the regressions Table 3. Shop stewards emerge as more likely to believe that unions had been effective in representing their members than the body of trade union opinion (equation 3.4). Neither shop stewards nor activists were more positive regarding changes in union influence. Both groups were more likely, however, to believe that CP had beneficial effects (equation 3.5). The issue of whether interests were better represented by CP represents a component of the scale used to measure attitudes to CP in equation 3.5. As this, however, is a key issue we examine it separately in equation 3.6, where it emerges that activists but not shop stewards were more likely to be of this view.

In summary, the data on attitudes to unions under the CP regime and to CP specifically suggest that neither shop stewards nor activists were more critical of partnership than the rank-and-file and, on balance, emerge as more positive. Again there is little evidence here of disaffection or alienation.

A limitation of the regression analysis is that it fails to allow for the possibility that groups of union members may exist with distinctive attitudes to union performance and the effects of CP. If this is the case, it will be of interest to examine whether shop stewards and activists might be concentrated among some such groups. For example, it

might be hypothesised that groups equivalent to enthusiasts for partnership, sceptics of partnership and critics of partnership can be found among the body of union members and that shop stewards and activists might be concentrated among the second such group: less critical and disaffected than some members but still less positive and convinced than others.¹³ To test this hypothesis we fitted a series of latent class models to the three variables measuring attitudes to union effectiveness and influence and attitudes to CP.¹⁴ The results are detailed in Table A2. They suggest that 4 clusters or latent classes are identifiable. In Cluster 1, 87 per cent (categories 2 and 3 combined) were either of the view that union influence over management had stayed the same or had decreased somewhat. Cluster 2 is characterised by the view that unions are fairly good in representing members' interests and that their bargaining influence had either not changed or had increased somewhat. Cluster 3 is characterised by the view that unions are very bad at representing their members' interests and that their bargaining influence has decreased greatly. Cluster 4, which represents only 7 per cent of the sample, is characterised by the view that unions are fairly good in representing their members interests; that it is either unclear that their bargaining influence had changed or that it had increased somewhat and that CP had beneficial consequences.

The important issue for the displaced activist thesis is how shop stewards and activists are distributed across these clusters. The evidence (provided by the beta coefficients for the covariates in Table A2) suggests that they are more likely to be in cluster 4 – the most *positive* overall cluster with respect to partnership and its effects – but that the result is not statistically robust. Overall, therefore, the cluster analysis discounts the view that shop stewards and activists can be viewed in any meaningful sense as critics or sceptics; they are more likely to be found in the sample, if not the survey population, among those with the more positive attitudes towards the effects of partnership, with positive attitudes towards union effectiveness and with neutral to mildly positive views as to changes in union influence.

¹³ We owe this suggestion to the comments of a referee on an earlier draft of the paper.

¹⁴ The software used to estimate latent class models is the Latent Gold package, developed by Vermunt and Magidson. For details, see <http://www.latentgold.com>. For discussions of latent class analysis, see Hagenaars and McCutcheon (2002).

Conclusion

Both advocates and critics of union involvement in workplace partnership present a series of theoretical arguments regarding the potential effects of centralisation under partnership arrangements. The most serious effect identified concerns the likely displacement of shop stewards and activists resulting in factionalism and conflict within unions. A number of case studies of partnership have confirmed the existence of a series of tensions or conflicts, of varying degrees of seriousness for union cohesion. These arise from the negotiation of 'peak level' agreements on the shape and import of partnership between FTOs and senior management, and from a centralisation of union power under partnership around 'elite' groups.

The issue of centralisation and its effects was rehearsed in in-depth interviews with FTOs and involved activists in AR. In particular, union representatives expressed concerns over the manner in which partnership was associated with centralised decision-making around a small group of union and management representatives. But these reservations apart, union representatives remained active participants in, and supporters of, CP activities. In no way did the attitudes of shop stewards and activists reveal a hostile or alienated grouping within the ranks of union membership. If anything, workplace representatives appeared more positive in their views than the rank-and-file. The sternest challenge to partnership in AR came not from union members, or from displaced, disaffected and disempowered shop stewards and activists, but from another 'elite' group of worker representatives operating at the apex of decision-making structures in the organisation, the worker directors. Critically, then, while FTOs, shop stewards and activists might have had reservations and concerns over the manner in which a coterie of management and union representatives sought to steer and control decision-making in regard to the implementation of CP, they were not sufficiently critical or opposed to move to obstruct the development of partnership, or to damage the standing of unions.

We would argue that the AR case points to the need for an understanding of intra-union relations under partnership that is focused more on the contingencies that shape relations between FTOs, partnership elites and shop stewards and activists. Among the factors that distinguish AR from other cases reported in the literature and that may also cast light on differences between the reported cases, the following appear to merit emphasis.

First, partnership in AR originated in a joint union-management commitment to building a new type of industrial relations consistent with the principles of CP. FTOs were permitted to explore such a new model and the resulting partnership arrangements were not seen to have been imposed under duress. No ‘decommissioning’ of traditional shop steward or activist roles and representative arrangements occurred and established collective bargaining procedures and processes remained in place in parallel to partnership arrangements. Critically, partnership in AR did not involve, as in other cases, a re-distribution of power towards FTOs at the expense of shopfloor representatives. That this had not occurred would seem to have been an important factor in explaining the absence of opposition and the relatively positive orientation amongst shopfloor representatives towards partnership.

Shop stewards, too, were encouraged to engage with partnership initiatives at multiple levels and training was provided on the union side to cover the new negotiating and representative skills required by CP. Many of these features seem to have been absent in the UD and UDL cases and in Saskatoon Chemicals, where serious intra-union conflict arose.

Second, the context of the partnership initiative in Saturn was positive, as in AR, with joint commitment to partnership as a new model of industrial relations and joint design of partnership arrangements. What distinguishes Saturn from AR, however, was the unique radicalism of the former, which entailed the near complete encoding of partnership into mainstream organisational structures and into decision-making processes at all levels. This required intensive involvement by shop stewards and activists and effectively left them with only one model of representation and trade unionism. The partnership initiative in AR was, as has been outlined, more variable in its penetration of mainstream decision processes and co-existed with established industrial relations structures. Shop stewards could in this sense ‘ride either horse’ or even both in their dealings with management. This set of contingencies at AR, we would argue, involving less disturbance to traditional roles and structures than observed in UD, UDL or Saskatoon Chemicals, and less radicalism in partnership arrangements than at the unique Saturn experiment, account in major degree for the findings reported in this study. The major import of the findings

reported here is that the displaced activist thesis cannot be sustained as a valid generalisation with respect to the functioning of partnership.

In conclusion, we have argued that there is no necessary relationship between partnership and the marginalisation and alienation of shop stewards and activists. Plainly, in some instances power has come to be wrested from shopfloor representatives and intra-union tensions have resulted, but in other studies including the present one, this has not been the case. In this paper we considered the consequences of partnership for unions' representative structure and capacity, and the conditions under which different outcomes might be expected. Thus we emphasised the importance of a contingency perspective. It is taken as a given that workplace partnership potentially represents a radical innovation. Similar programmes, however are likely to give rise to different outcomes depending on the context of their introduction and operation. Whether partnership becomes associated with a centralisation of decision-making, the concentration of power within unions, the marginalisation of activists, the creation of intra-union factions and challenges to partnership would seem to depend on a variety of factors.

1. The involvement of union representatives at different levels in discussions as to the merits or otherwise of partnership and how it might be developed and implemented.
2. The extent to which differences of view within unions over partnership and officer accountability are resolved prior to the implementation of partnership. Where they are not addressed, it is difficult to see, as was the case with Saskatoon Chemicals, how intra-union tensions might be prevented from spilling over into the formation of competing factions. It might be expected that such in-fighting would represent a significant challenge to the future viability of partnership.
3. Where partnership is imposed on a union and where there is an attendant expectation that collective bargaining will be reduced in importance, the resultant disturbance to representatives' traditional roles and structures is likely to lead to tensions.
4. The prevention of such conflicts is likely to depend on FTOs' ability to bring activists and the membership with them and to balance the need to exercise control with rank-and-file participation. The capacity to develop dense social networks, through consultation, training and education, as prescribed by Rubinstein and Kochan (2001), would seem to be important here. It might also be expected, as Terry (2003) has

emphasised, that the role assumed by management will be important, particularly whether representatives are granted the time and resources to consult with and involve lay activists and the rank-and-file.

Appendix

Table A1 Involvement in Workplace Partnership and Attitudes to Constructive Participation: Scales and Scale Statistics

1.	<i>Membership of Constructive Participation Groups and Committees and Occupancy of Support Roles</i>	Mean	S.D.
	7 item scale; each item scored 1 = yes; no/don't know = 0 Scale range: 0-7.	0.64	
	Member of a regular work group	0.26	
	Member of a departmental steering or work group	0.14	
	Member of a departmental strategy group	0.13	
	Member of a significant issues group	0.11	
	Observer of any of the above groups	0.17	
	Participation mentor with a department	0.06	
	Participation office facilitator	0.00	
	Cronbach Alpha = 0.7225.		
2.	<i>Engagement with Constructive Participation</i>		
	9 item scale; each item scored 2 = frequently; 1 = occasionally; 0 = never. Scale range: 0-18.	6.28	4.00
	Have you ever attended departmental meetings or training sessions at which constructive participation was discussed?	0.76	0.68
	Have you read departmental newsletters on constructive participation?	0.94	0.71
	Have you read company/union newsletters on constructive participation?	1.04	0.68
	Have you attended any staff seminars on constructive participation arranged by the Joint Union Company Group?	0.75	0.69
	Have you attended any exhibitions on constructive participation arranged by the Joint Union Company Group?	0.35	0.59
	Have you attended union meetings where constructive participation was discussed?	0.42	0.64
	Have you used the constructive participation library?	0.13	0.42

	Mean	S.D.
Have you discussed constructive participation with colleagues?	1.09	0.65
Have you received feedback from colleagues who are involved in constructive participation groups and committees?	0.89	0.74

Cronbach Alpha = 0.8590.

3. *Communicative Involvement*

4 item scale; each item scored 3 = a great deal; 2 = a moderate amount; 1 = only a little; 0 = none.
Scale range: 0-12.

3.5 3.0

How much information do you usually get about what is going on at each of the following?

Board meetings	0.77	0.82
Corporate senior management meetings	0.58	0.81
Airport senior management meetings	0.80	0.90
Local departmental meetings.	1.38	1.06

Cronbach Alpha = 0.8351.

4. *Attitudes to Constructive Participation*

5 item scale; each item score 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = can't decide; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

13.9 4.3

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

I know more about what is going on because of constructive participation. 2.68 1.09

I accept work decisions more easily because of constructive participation. 2.56 0.98

The quality of decisions is improved by constructive participation. 2.68 1.04

Employee interests are better served by constructive participation. 3.21 1.01

	Mean	S.D.
Better understanding and trust exist between management and employees as a result of constructive participation.	2.75	1.0

Cronbach Alpha = 0.8839

Note: All means, proportions and statistics presented in respect of the weighted sample.

Table A2 Attitudes to Unions and to CP: Latent Class Cluster Analysis Results

A2.1 Latent Class Cluster Models Fitted to Union Effectiveness, Change in Union Influence and Attitudes to the Effects of CP

	L^2	Df	P (Additional Class(es) Required for Fit)	BIC
One-cluster model	695.4	360	0.001	-1598
Two-cluster model	467.4	354	0.001	-1753
Three-cluster model	398.4	348	0.03	-1784
Four-cluster model	364.1	342	0.20	-1781

A2.2 Profile of 4-Class Cluster Model and Cluster Covariates Showing How Shop Stewards and Union Activists Distribute Across Clusters

		<i>Cluster 1</i>	<i>Cluster 2</i>	<i>Cluster 3</i>	<i>Cluster 4</i>
<i>Cluster Size</i>		0.5297	0.2507	0.1520	0.0675
<i>Union Effectiveness:</i>					
Very bad	1	0.0916	0.0067	0.6095	0.0004
	2	0.3316	0.0751	0.3407	0.0109
Unsure	3	0.2682	0.1875	0.0426	0.0726
	4	0.2942	0.6350	0.0072	0.6540
Very good	5	0.0144	0.0956	0.0001	0.2621
<i>Change in Union Influence:</i>					
Decreased greatly	1	0.1095	0.0004	0.9805	0.0007
	2	0.3683	0.0239	0.0194	0.0322
Stayed much the same	3	0.5018	0.5459	0.0002	0.5964
	4	0.0202	0.3687	0.0000	0.3268
Increased greatly	5	0.0002	0.0610	0.0000	0.0439
<i>Attitudes to Effects of CP¹:</i>					
Strongly disagree/disagree	1	0.2491	0.1102	0.4344	0.0002
	2	0.2062	0.1405	0.2309	0.0017
Disagree/can't decide	3	0.1843	0.1712	0.1584	0.0076
	4	0.2271	0.2880	0.1344	0.0620
Agree	5	0.1283	0.2901	0.1419	0.9285
		<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Beta</i>
<i>Cluster Covariates:</i>					
Shop stewards ²		-0.9585	-1.4786	-1.2840	3.7211
Activists ³		-0.4699	-3.9330	-1.1842	4.5871

¹ For ease of estimation and presentation, the categories of 5-25 scale were reduced to a 5- category scale. The resulting descriptive anchors in the table are broadly equivalent to the points ranges involved in the non-grouped categories and reveal a skew towards the lower points ranges, as discussed in the text of the paper

² Difference in distribution across clusters: $p = 0.51$.

³ Difference in distribution across clusters: $p = 0.29$.

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