# Focusing or Fragmenting Representation at Work? Specialist Trade Union Representation in the United Kingdom

Edited by Andy Hodder and Miguel Martínez Lucio
Emerald Publishing Limited First edition 2025
https://bookstore.emerald.com/focusing-or-fragmenting-representation-at-work□hb-9781801174831.html.
Enjoy 30% off this title, available in print or ebook, with code EME30 at https://bookstore.emerald.com

## Review

'An important, engaging and scholarly volume that considers contemporary debates about how, and where, labour can reassert its influence and voice'
*Professor Tony Dundon, University of Limerick, Ireland*

## Introduction

This book is about the changing nature of workplace representation in the United Kingdom (UK). Having observed the evolution of a range of focused and specific representative positions since the turn to organising in the mid 1990s (Simms and Holgate, 2010), we wanted to reflect on the changing nature of these trade union roles, and consider the role they play in interest representation in the contemporary world of work. The aim of this briefing is to introduce the debates around the forms of representation discussed in the book. Trade union and worker representation, defined quite broadly, have always taken different shapes and have been organised for different purposes. At a basic level, unions are 'primarily organizations that exist for the representation of members' interests, both individual and collective' (Hodder and Edwards, 2015: 844–845). Trade unions are very clearly membership organisations, which heavily rely on the work of volunteers to undertake union business and activities. Workplace union representatives operate primarily at the level of the workplace, usually elected by members of the same workplace. These individuals perform union duties on an unpaid basis alongside their paid employment, and in some circumstances receive 'facilities time' – that is paid time off work to undertake union duties. Workplace union representatives are often supported by paid union officials who work to support the activities of both members and representatives. Yet, union activity is not limited to the workplace. Unions rely on a network of workplace representatives embedded in formal and informal union structures and hierarchies to advance member interests at a range of different levels.

Kaine (2014) identified four levels at which worker representation takes place: the individual level (where unions deal with individual grievances and personal case work), the level at which collective bargaining is conducted (which can be a combination of the workplace, company and industry level), the national level (where unions engage in political lobbying and engage in pressure group tactics), and the international level (where unions engage with employers and bodies such as the International Labour Organisation in an attempt to counter negative impacts of globalization). These levels 'operate in different ways at different times' (Martínez Lucio and Mustchin, 2019: 147), and unions have to structure their systems of representation to be able to act accordingly.

These issues are explored in the book's five chapters. Each chapter focuses on a worker representative with distinct portfolios – green-related issues, health and safety, young workers, equality, and diversity, and learning. The book attempts to locate these discussions in a range of industrial relations literature regarding the historical nature and tensions related to worker representation.

In Chapter 2, Miguel Martínez Lucio and Stephen Mustchin focus on health and safety (H&S) representatives. This is one of the first forms of specialist or focused representation within the UK trade union movement. The role of such representatives intensified from the 1970s onwards due to various legislative supports and supportive types of state intervention (especially through the Health and Safety Executive). These have had an extensive role to play in the industrial relations arena due to the extensive regulatory context and the increasingly high profile of H&S issues. As a body of representatives, they have also been highly innovative in collaborating across unions and workplaces. Nevertheless, the political challenges that H&S regulations have faced since 2010, and the increasing stigmatising of H&S have provided a significant set of challenges. In addition, the governmental cutbacks and austerity measures with regards to the Health and Safety Executive – coupled with attempts by management in various companies to bypass such forms of representation – have further eroded their influence as representatives although they remain one of the more innovative organised forms of trade union intervention.

Gill Kirton's Chapter 3 focuses on equality representatives (ERs). ERs have started to emerge as significant actors that engage with equality related issues where possible both in relation to management strategies, individual employment issues facing members of trade unions, and the general organisational politics of trade unions themselves. This chapter outlines some of the ways in which this form of representation has developed. The general regulation and legal context in relation to equality has advanced significantly although ERs do not have the types of legal and regulatory underpinnings – especially statutory recognition – that health and safety representatives have. Whilst seen as providing an important space for raising equality issues within workplaces and trade unions, they often compete with other equality networks within these two contexts, and the issue of equality has become fairly contested in recent years.

The fourth chapter, by Stephen Mustchin and Miguel Martínez Lucio, relates to union learning reps (ULRs). This group of representatives address issues of training, learning and to some extent career development. They have little regulatory support from the state and thus have depended on uneven state initiatives in terms of funding. They lack the cohesiveness of health and safety representatives but do represent and deal with a critical social and economic theme within the workplace. However, their presence is much more fragmented within trade unions. They remain very much the legacy of previous political attempts to raise awareness of, and engagement with, the skills gap in the UK although they have sustained their role in various workplaces, especially those of relatively more progressive employers who are concerned with worker development generally.

In Chapter 5, Melanie Simms and Andy Hodder discuss the extent to which unions have developed representative structures for young workers. This form of representation has also emerged without any employer or statutory support but follows a different pattern to the previous chapters. Despite widespread recognition of the aging profile of union members and activists, unions have only recently begun to create structures and space for young trade unionists. As such, few unions have actually developed a specific role of Youth Representative at the level of the branch or workplace. It is more common for young worker issues to be represented via separate young worker structures at regional or national levels within unions, in addition to reserved seats in some unions. The chapter demonstrates that whilst there have been several important initiatives developed by unions in recent years, more work is required to ensure that young workers have access to dedicated representation in workplaces and unions.

The sixth chapter addresses environmental/green representatives. In this chapter, Jo Cutter outlines the development of a form of representation that has been much more constrained in terms of statutory support and employer commitment – and to some extent trade union commitment given the nature of employment of many of its members. Regardless of the increasing interest in ecological and environmental issues across the political spectrum and within corporate discourse and social responsibility programmes (rhetorically at least) the extent and influence of such new forms of worker representation remained constrained. However, they are seen as a vital component of the ecological turn within the economy and within society that potentially connects external social changes with internal discussions within the workplace. Yet the challenges facing such forms of representation remain considerable.

The chapters in this text demonstrate that those undertaking these specialised and focused forms of representation are in some senses social and political actors in their own right. In the concluding chapter of the book, the editors reflect on the implications of these developments. The subtle and complex roles of such worker representatives more generally are exemplified by their alignments with other networks within and beyond their trade unions (Connolly et al., 2023). How they engage with the trade union leadership, other specialist networks and forms of representation within their respective trade unions, and with external social movements and regulatory bodies (for example) can vary, but in some cases, they provide us with an alternative way of viewing trade unions and social organisations. By focusing on these areas of representation, we can deepen our awareness, both academically and practically, of the relations between social and economic change, workplace politics, and issues of regulation and representation. These developments may perhaps remain fragmented and relatively dispersed in institutional terms, unable to engage more fully with the significant social and economic issues to which they are intended to respond. Alternatively, they may generate a more fissured and fragmented set of interests within the workforce rather than building common points of reference. Therefore, we might well question the longer-term impact of these developments in terms of the potential fragmentation of the politics of work. The chapters in the book demonstrate how work and employment are thematically being widened; with rights-related issues becoming extended and even one could argue overloaded (Martínez Lucio and Simpson, 1992; Moore, 2011; Stewart, 2006). The changes in worker representation discussed in this book are a response to the widening focus of industrial relations. The emergence, or increasing recognition, of different forms of oppression at work has led to growing interest in the concept of intersectionality (McBride and Rodríguez, 2024). This necessitates a broader envisioning of worker representation in terms of both form and content (see also Greene, 2015). The challenges presented by these changes require innovative approaches. It is the coordination, support, and linking to broader agendas that will deepen the voice and influence of workers in what has become a more fragmented and exploitative employment experience.

Yet the spaces of representation are changing and within these spaces there are a series of networks and actors that are generating new forms of pressures on management and employers more generally in relation to rights at work, as well as generating a possible social space for the generation of a new set of interests at work. The radical turn in trade unionism over in the past twenty years and the reinvention of a more direct engagement regarding questions of economic and social change (as outlined by various authors, see Martínez Lucio, 2018), has not undermined new forms of representation or questioned them. However, these focused forms of representation have not been at the centre of strategic discussions on the politics of work. Much may hinge therefore on whether a political narrative or purpose around such forms of representation that engender a new vision of worker democracy and social purpose within work are at some point systematically and deliberately developed (Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2009; Simms and Holgate, 2010). Much may depend also on how different spheres of union engagement in terms of social, regulatory, and political spheres are linked together not just at the higher policy levels of worker representation and trade union leadership but also across the different organisational levels of trade union structures. In this sense, how these focussed forms of representation connect across one another and into the broader political debates within and beyond their respective trade unions may be key in the coming future in determining not just their effectiveness but also their purpose.

# Further reading and references

Connolly, H., Marino, S. and Martínez Lucio, M. 2019. *The Politics of Social Inclusion and Labor Representation: Immigrants and Trade Unions in the European Context*, Ithaca, ILR Press.

Greene, A-m. 2015. Voice and workforce diversity. In *Finding a Voice at Work? New Perspectives on Employment Relations*, Eds S. Johnstone and P. Ackers, pp. 67–94, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hodder, A. and Edwards, P. 2015. The essence of trade unions: understanding identity, ideology and purpose, *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(5), 843–854.

Kaine, S. 2014. Union voice. In *Handbook of Research on Employee Voice*, Eds A. Wilkinson, J. Donaghey, T. Dundon and R. Freeman, pp. 170–187, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

Martínez Lucio, M. 2018. Trade union renewal and responses to neo-liberalism and the politics of austerity in the United Kingdom: the curious incubation of the political in labour relations, *Workers of the World.* No. 9/May 2019: 93–111.

Martínez Lucio, M. and Mustchin, S. 2019. The politics and diversity of worker representation: the increasing fluidity and challenge of representation. In *Handbook of the Politics of Labour, Work and Employment,* pp. 144–160, Ed. G. Gall, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

Martínez Lucio, M. and Simpson, D. 1992. Discontinuity and change in industrial relations: The struggles over its social dimensions and the rise of human resource management, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 3(2), 173–190.

Martínez Lucio, M. and Stuart, M. 2009. Organising and union modernisation: narratives of renewal in Britain. In *Union Revitalisation in Advanced Economies: Assessing the Contribution of Union Organising*, Ed. G, Gall, pp. 17–37, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK

McBride, A. and Rodríguez, J.K. 2024. Intersectionality and industrial relations. In *The Value of Industrial Relations: Contemporary Work and Employment in Britain*, Eds A. Hodder and S. Mustchin, pp. 137–150, Bristol, Bristol University Press

Moore, S. 2011. New Trade Union Activism, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.

Simms, M. and Holgate, J. 2010. Organising for what? Where is the debate on the politics of organising? *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(1), 157–168.

Stewart, P. 2006. Individualism and collectivism in the sociology of the collective worker. In *Employment Relations in a Changing Society: Assessing the Post-Fordist Paradigm*, Eds L.E. Alonso and M. Martínez Lucio, pp. 182–199, London, Routledge.