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**BRITISH AND SPANISH UNIONS' RESPONSES TO
RELOCATION AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOLIDARITY
IN THE AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR**

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, pressure by companies in the automotive sector to relocate production from Western Europe to lower labour-cost countries has been increasing. Unions have had the option to organise coordinated responses at the international level or to respond locally, potentially accepting concessions on wages and working conditions. This comparative qualitative study, based on 12 semi-structured interviews with key sector-level union officers in the United Kingdom and Spain, analyses unions' responses to relocation in the automotive sector, and asks whether concepts of solidarity could lead to changes in these strategies. It shows that unions' strategies are shaped more by contingent situations than by identities, and that international and local competition among workers pushes unions to adopt short-term strategies to defend local jobs. British and Spanish unions use different strategies: in the UK, the response is based on "market-related" strategies and industrial action, while in Spain, aid from state and authorities plays a prominent role.

INTRODUCTION

The automotive sector, traditionally very important for the economies of Western Europe, the United States, Canada, and Japan, is now expanding to new countries especially in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, due to their expanding internal markets and the relatively low cost of labour (Dicken, 2007). Within the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom and Spain, the countries analysed in

this study, have had a long history of car manufacturing, although suffering a sharp decrease in production in the last decade. According to the International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers (2010), Spain was in 8th place in the world for cars and commercial vehicles produced, while the UK occupied 15th place, although they are respectively in 2nd and 4th place in Western Europe. However, neither the UK nor Spain currently hosts an independent multinational car manufacturer. The British automotive sector has been in decline since the 1980s, especially in terms of employment (Katz & Darbshire, 2000), and the main British automotive company, British Leyland, was privatised in 1988 and then sold to the German company BMW in 1994. Spain's two main automotive companies, Motor Ibérica and SEAT, were bought respectively by Nissan between 1979 and 1981, and by Volkswagen in 1986.

In this context, unions are weakened by the current economic crisis, with companies threatening redundancies in order to keep their competitive position. Concession bargaining has become increasingly common in recent decades, and unions have often accepted increased flexibility in wages and working conditions in order to safeguard jobs (Marginson & Meardi, 2010). Besides using local strategies, unions can try to develop responses to the international expansion of capital by establishing links of cooperation with other unions across borders. This union cooperation in the automotive sector is fundamentally structured on a company basis (Anner et al., 2006), in Europe through the European Works Councils (EWCs) and globally around the more informal World Works Councils (WWCs), or global councils. The main unions are also federated at the sector level in the EU through the European Metalworkers Federation (EMF) and globally in the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF).

The defence of the jobs threatened by relocation and the establishment of international links with other unions open up a question about the role of solidarity and identity in union strategies. On one hand, international cooperation activity in the automotive sector might provoke changes leading toward an internationalisation of union identity and the concept of solidarity, which could influence the way unions react to relocations. On the other hand, unions might be driven primarily by sector and company-specific factors, or by national and international institutions. The findings of this study suggest that structures and interests influence unions' behaviour more than their ideas about solidarity. Union identity and national industrial relations institutions seem to influence the choice of the specific tools with which to respond to relocation threats, but not the choice of whether to act alone or in coordination with other unions.

This study is structured as follows: in the next section the relevant literature on the topic will be critically analysed and the research aims introduced. A further section will describe the research design and methods used to carry out this project research, and this will be followed by a section presenting the findings from the analysis of the empirical data. The final section will discuss the findings and draw conclusions from the study.

RELOCATIONS AND UNION SOLIDARITY

The Automotive Sector between Relocation Threats and Union Strategies

Given the strong competition in the automotive sector and the relative labour intensity of production, multinational companies (MNCs) try to reduce their labour costs by adopting a wide range of strategies. The first one is to relocate the production of vehicles to countries where labour is cheaper. The enlargement of the EU to Central and Eastern European countries (Bernaciak, 2010) and the global decreasing of barriers to foreign capital investment and trade have given capital the opportunity to move across borders more freely. In labour-intensive sectors such as the automotive sector, MNCs often choose to invest where labour costs, taking into consideration productivity, are lower, and where the legal and industrial relations system is more favourable, a phenomenon defined as “regime shopping” (although the picture is quite complex: see Traxler & Woitech [2000] and Meardi et al. [2009]). Research has been carried out to analyse whether the spread of relocation in the sector is as strong as it would seem to be from the attention given to it by the media (Meardi et al., 2009; Pastore, 2007). Management, however, can simply use the threat of relocating to obtain more favourable terms and conditions from workers (Galgóczi, 2008). Relocation threats have the objective of pushing unions into concession bargaining, defined as negotiation over the concession by workers of a lowering of wages and a worsening of working conditions in exchange for job security (Hancké, 2000). Relocation threats can be more frequent than actual relocations, as Marginson and Meardi (2010) point out, although threats have to be accompanied periodically by actual instances of relocation by management to be credible.

Complementary to the previous strategy is “whipsawing,” also defined as beauty contests or coercive comparisons, consisting of placing different plants in competition with each other over new production and investments. The plants offering the most favourable terms and conditions to management will receive the new production, while the others will risk becoming inactive and obsolete, losing production and employment, and eventually closing (Pulignano, 2006). The standardisation of the production process and the diffusion of internationally accepted best employment practices (see Woywode, 2002) make it easier for management to benchmark plants and companies in order to foster competition among plants and workers (Bernaciak, 2010; Hancké, 2000).

Transnational Bargaining and Solidarity

Unions’ answers to relocation threats can vary, and are highly dependent on their sector and opportunity structure (Anner et al., 2006). Unions are traditionally embedded in their national dimension and institutional environment (Hyman, 2007; Pulignano, 2009) and might therefore adopt a nation-specific strategy,

shaped around concession bargaining and political and industrial action, especially when production is highly segmented across countries (Marginson & Meardi, 2010). However, internationally integrated production, and the existence of supportive institutions and structures sustained by regulation, might instead promote coordinated international action and contribute to shaping its nature. According to Anner et al. (2006), international competition between workers can encourage the construction of links across unions and workers, representing a “push” factor for cooperation. According to the same authors, regulation also plays a fundamental role, potentially creating structures that will function as incentives (“pull” factors) for unions to cooperate.

The structure of the automotive industry offers unions both incentives and disincentives to pursue an internationalisation of responses to relocation. On one hand, the presence of relatively few big operators in the industry favours the concentration of union presence and eases the coordination of the different units at plant and company levels. Moreover, the existence of EWCs, introduced and regulated by the European Union EWC Directives of 1994 and 2009, gives unions the opportunity to sit at the same table with management and the right to be informed and consulted on decisions affecting the multinational group (Glassner, 2012). On the other hand, because of the integration of production and the greater mobility of capital than that of workers, nation-specific strategies can rarely stop MNCs from relocating, while concession bargaining can lead to a “race to the bottom,” in which plants are obliged to underbid each other in order to be competitive. State intervention can also play an ambiguous role, favouring workers in their own country and therefore undermining incentives for union cooperation (Bernaciak, 2013).

The strong competitive pressure and the management strategies used to place plants in direct competition with each other can also tempt unions not to cooperate and instead pursue national-specific strategies to underbid other plants and obtain advantages in terms of job security, at least in the short term (see, for example, Hancké, 2000). In the UK in particular, the decentralisation of collective bargaining to the company level and the relative weakness of national unions increase the problems of coordination between plants and the possibility of local concessions, since management requests have to be met at the local level (Katz & Darbishire, 2000). This is all the more relevant since the capacity to connect different levels of workers’ representation (local, national, and international) is crucial for unions if they wish to adopt proactive solidarity strategies leading toward international cooperation (Lévesque & Murray, 2010).

Institutions, then, are not the only factors influencing union cooperation strategies. As Erne (2008: 190) points out: “structures constrain, but do not predetermine, the choices of labour.” Meardi et al. (2009), following a similar line, highlight the importance of agency in the response to relocation threats. Bernaciak (2010), using a game theory approach and analysing East-West European cooperation, finds that interests and cost-benefit analysis are the factors that mainly

influence unions in Germany and Poland in their decisions on whether to establish international cooperation links or not.

Regarding EWCs in particular, past studies do not provide unequivocal results regarding the factors affecting their effectiveness in countering MNCs' strategies. According to Marginson et al. (2004), several factors influence the scope and power of an EWC, among which is the preexistence of a strong industrial relations platform. Kotthoff (2007) shows that some EWCs can help construct a European identity among unionists by acting together to counteract internationalised management. However, the same author points out that these EWCs are just a minority. Similarly, Greer and Hauptmeier (2008) observe in the EWC of four automotive MNCs the emergence of a genuine cross-border solidarity based on "sharing-the-pain" agreements among the different plants. Concession bargaining, although not eliminated by cooperation, can at least go beyond the national dimension and embrace the whole European network of plants.

Taking the specific case of General Motors (GM), Pulignano (2006, 2009) shows how the EWC was able to stop obvious attempts by management to enforce coercive comparisons between the plants, but it could not avoid an uncoordinated response by plants in each country and a widespread use of local concession bargaining. This is in line with the pessimistic view of Hancké (2000), according to whom EWCs are merely vehicles for the transmission of plant interests to the transnational level, facilitating management's "divide and rule" strategies. However, Greer and Hauptmeier (2012) maintain that, in the action of GM's EWC, identities and the "education" of the workforce toward an internationalisation of interests can allow unions to cooperate across borders even when they are in a conflict of interest. Finally, Fetzer (2008) highlights the relevance of the union officers' perspectives on structures and strategies in the GM case, which can shape a feeling of "interdependence" among workers across borders.

This leads us to discuss what role solidarity can play in shaping common identities and thereby promote coordinated strategies against potential relocation. Solidarity is a frequently used word in trade union vocabulary (Hyman, 2005), but one that could be defined in several different ways. Hyman (1999) differentiates between "mechanical solidarity" and "organic solidarity." In the former, seen as in decline, unions act as representatives of the interests of workers by aggregating them and distributing "gains and losses" among workers, and implies that workers' interests are somewhat homogeneous (Hyman, 1999: 97). The latter is constructed around the coordination of the different interests of workers, which nonetheless does not suppress their diversity. It implies the recognition of different personal circumstances and the articulation of a policy that would be able to include and unify this heterogeneity of interests (Hyman, 1999). The concept of solidarity is therefore intertwined with the definition and representation of interests by unions, and unions have always historically had to come to terms with the complexity of reconciling the heterogeneity of identities and working conditions (Richards, 2001). At the international level, Hyman (2005: 30) states that

“international solidarity . . . is unattainable without an active strategy by union leaders and activists to enhance knowledge, understanding and identification of common interests cross-nationally.” The way solidarity is interpreted and applied, then, reflects the way unions understand and represent the interests of workers. This assumes strong relevance when unions have to decide whether to coordinate their action with other unions and workers at the national and international level, and which interests to defend, a crucial strategic choice when having to oppose relocation.

This study analyses the responses to the issue of relocation, and the connected issue of beauty contests, from a union perspective, instead of the company or EWC perspective used by most of the literature that has analysed this topic. The focus on unions also allows us to explore which union-specific factors can help explain the attitude and the vision of unions on workers’ solidarity and their reflection on strategies. In order to discern the country-specific factors that affect the unions’ response to relocation, this project is structured as a comparative study. The article therefore aims to explore the following:

- The strategies used by unions when faced with relocation threats, national differences in these strategies, and the factors that might account for them, and
- The trade unions officers’ perceptions of solidarity, and how these impact on the strategies they use to face relocation in the automotive sector.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

This article has been designed as a case-study analysis of trade unions in two countries, the UK and Spain. The choice of these European Union countries is justified by the strong tradition of their automotive industry and the presence of several multinational car makers. According to Hall and Soskice (2001), the UK belongs to the group of Liberal Market Economies (LME), while according to Molina and Rhodes (2007), Spain can be considered a Mixed Market Economy (MME), offering the possibility of comparing two different economic and social national contexts. Spain and the UK also differ in their industrial relations system, the Spanish system being characterised by encompassing multi-employer bargaining and agreement extension rules coming from the state, which are absent from the British model. This research design, taking trade unions as units of analysis, offers a suitable way to analyse in depth the factors behind anti-relocation strategies (see Stake [1998] for “instrumental” case studies). The research was based on qualitative research methods, which are especially suited to understanding the construction of meanings and the perspectives of the subjects analysed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative methods are therefore particularly appropriate for analysing the views of union officers on relocation issues and solidarity. The main research method was the use of semi-structured interviews, which are well suited to multiple-case studies (Bryman, 2008).

Six interviews were carried out in each country, making a total of 12, between April and July 2010. The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours, during which questions were asked about the automotive sector (situation, collective bargaining, relocation threats), union responses to relocation threats, international cooperation strategies, and finally perceptions regarding solidarity, interests defended by the unions, and the role of ideology in the unions' activity. The interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the interviewee (English, Spanish, and Catalan were used), transcribed and translated into English, and then coded with the support of NVivo software.

Trade union officers from Unite (four) and GMB (two) were interviewed in the UK, and from Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO.) in Spain. Unite and CC.OO. are the most representative unions in the automotive sector in both countries, while GMB is still present in some automotive companies in the UK. The choice of the officers to be interviewed was driven by the relevance of their position to the issues of relocation and cooperation, and by their experience in the automotive sector. They were either national officers, regional officers in areas with a strong presence of automotive companies (the Midlands in the UK, and Catalonia in Spain), or senior officers in companies threatened by relocation in the automotive sector. The relatively high profile of the interviewees played a crucial role in the project, since, as Marshall and Rossman (1995) point out, "elite interviewing" can reduce the limitations of a small sampling and provide rich and relevant data. In the text below, interviewees are identified only by number, not by name. In order to complement the information collected through the interviews, an analysis of the documentary data has been added to the interview transcripts. These documents included leaflets, collective agreements, and reports downloaded from the unions' Web pages, and magazines, minutes, and correspondence accessed at the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, UK.

UNION RESPONSES TO RELOCATION IN THE AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR

The analysis of the unions' responses to relocation will start with a description of their perception of the situation in the automotive sector. This will set the context in which to analyse their responses to relocation and the reasons behind them. Next, the officers' perceptions about the meaning of solidarity and their effects on these strategies will be described.

The Perceived Situation in the Automotive Sector

Union officers feel their position has greatly weakened during the economic crisis, and if they felt they fought in the past for the improvement of terms and conditions, now the union's activity is mainly focused on survival:

Now in a situation of crisis, the priority is to keep jobs, and then the socioeconomic conditions of jobs. (Spain Officer 3)

The trade union movement in Britain hasn't been fighting to enhance terms and conditions as it was in the '70s; if anything it's been the opposite; we've been fighting to stay open. Survival. (UK Officer 4)

Certain specific factors, in their opinion, are to be held responsible for this situation: the situation of the automotive sector, the ownership structure of companies, the competition from foreign workers, MNC management, and in the UK the role of the British state.

UK trade unionists feel the manufacturing sector is declining and in danger, and they observe the loss of well-paid jobs with good terms and conditions, to whose achievement they feel they have contributed through long struggles (see also Unite, 2008). When asked about the main threats in the sector, officers also mention exogenous factors, such as quality and environmental requirements and cost reduction, which, they consider, exert strong pressure on automotive companies operating in the UK. In Spain, officers observe that the situation in the automotive sector is difficult and there have been many redundancies (layoffs), although they consider that Spain has not been hit by relocation and plant closure as seriously as other countries. Interviewees from both countries agree on the fact that the increase in competitive pressure started with the enlargement of the European Union to Eastern European countries. Now, however, they see their competitive position in terms of labour costs as threatened by Asian and other developing countries, where labour is even cheaper. Interviewees also affirm they would never be able to compete, nor would they be interested in competing, in terms of costs with workers from those countries.

Union officers also mention that management often uses the possibility of relocating elsewhere to push unions into concession bargaining:

We have received threats, of the kind "if we don't make this product cheaper, we're going elsewhere." (Spain Officer 1)

Besides the competitiveness with regard to labour costs, Spanish union officers consider their main weakness is that the MNCs with production units in Spain are all foreign, and therefore the decisional centres are beyond the boundaries of Spain. Interviewees, then, feel they cannot influence the source of strategic decisions in the company, and that this limits the effectiveness of their activity. They also fear that the lack of headquarters (HQs) in their territory might mean an easier escape for MNCs if they find other countries to be more convenient:

It's logic, if I've got the HQs here, I'll keep this [production] here. . . . The same would happen if SEAT had been Spanish; we would have behaved the same way here. (Spain Officer 2)

Curiously, however, British interviewees did not mention this as an issue for them, although at the moment the MNCs operating in the UK in the automotive sector are all foreign as well.

Turning attention to management, MNCs are accused of increasingly being separated from the local dimension and of being indifferent to the consequences of their strategic decisions on workers and their families. Senior management personnel are seen as unable to think other than in terms of pure financial profitability:

They're just puppets of modern-day capitalism to be quite honest. . . . You know, sometimes the social side of this global economy . . . they forget the history, they forget the heritage, what's important to local people, you know.
(UK Officer 1)

Local management is seen as highly dependent on the decisions taken at HQs, with very limited autonomy. Many local managers will not engage in meaningful negotiation on relocation issues; in the eyes of union officers, they merely transmit the position of the corporate HQs:

The problem of an MNC is that local management does not have any margin when having to make decisions. They assume that it's been decided in Tokyo or Paris. . . . There's no intention to defend the manufacturing industry in Spain, not even [to engage in] dialogue. (Spain Officer 1)

HQs are also criticised in that they take into consideration purely cost-related aspects when judging the competitiveness of a plant, instead of considering other elements such as the quality of products, job rotation, or other competitive advantages:

Senior management treats the different plants of the group like cost centres, which have to guarantee a certain profitability, and they don't care much about the place or the fact that it could produce a certain quantity of cars.
(Spain Officer 1)

Furthermore, interviewees mention the use made by MNC management of coercive comparisons or beauty contests to obtain concessions from workers. These managerial strategies are considered particularly dangerous by union officers, because they set workers from the same company directly in competition with each other, at the national and international level, and represent a potential zero- or negative-sum game with other workers and unions. This therefore creates a stronger strategic dilemma than "simply" opposing a relocation threat:

[At Peugeot] we used to see our competitors as perhaps people like Vauxhall, Rover, Ford, and they used to argue that no, your competitors are the other Peugeot plants, because they are the ones we're fighting for new models, and if you're not cost-efficient with them, you know, it doesn't matter how much money Rover make, it's Peugeot that decides where they're gonna make their next car or their next Citroën. (UK Officer 1)

UK officers, however, also consider that the British state has both abandoned the manufacturing sector and created a difficult environment for unions by imposing on British workers legislation that is unfavourable to them (Unite, 2008). Union officers in the UK feel the legislation on redundancies and industrial action is more unfavourable to workers than in other countries. Their perception is that redundancies are easier and cheaper than anywhere else (even than in the United States), and that it is much easier to organise a strike, for example, in France, than in the UK:

Companies certainly wouldn't be allowed to get away with some of the things they're getting away with here in terms of closing firms, of not retraining the workforce . . . in Germany, in France for instance, or Spain. . . . I'm sure the labour laws in Spain protect their workers more they've ever done in the UK. (UK Officer 3)

Our hands are tied to a certain extent today with the legislation on balloting and industrial action. (UK Officer 2)

Importantly, British and Spanish union officers are united in considering relocation as a major threat to the industry. This leads us to the next subsection, which analyses the union reactions to relocation from the officers' perspective.

Union Reactions to Relocation

As mentioned above, union officers in both countries feel that MNCs use relocation threats widely and systematically as a strategy to obtain more favourable conditions for management. Relocation threats seem to be more common than actual relocations, although unions feel almost powerless when having to face them. Assertions that MNCs can eventually do what they feel like, and that stopping them is basically impossible, are very common:

I've never found myself in a situation where the entrepreneur first wants to relocate [production], and then does not relocate. (Spain Officer 2)

Nonetheless, in order to achieve the best possible deal for their workers, unions articulate a reaction to relocation threats around mobilisation and negotiation, and pragmatically choose the most appropriate strategy in each case:

It depends on the situation, again, there's no one-fits-all really. (UK Officer 2)

The philosophy is negotiation and mobilisation. . . . You react any way you can. (Spain Officer 4)

At the beginning you try and look for flexible situations, . . . but you try every possible way. (Spain Officer 5)

For unionists in both countries, concession bargaining is one of the main options. Unions acknowledge the generally difficult situation of the car industry, especially in the current economic conjuncture, and their weaker competitive

situation in terms of costs compared to workers in developing countries, and point out they currently engage in concession bargaining with regard to local working conditions and wages, an option that was not taken into consideration in the past. This is consistent with the aforementioned change in priorities, with job security being considered more important than improvements in terms and conditions.

The main difference in unions' response is in the emphasis given to other specific strategies. The element that union officers in the UK mainly rely on in their strategies is their union strength channelled through industrial action. This is still considered to be the main factor that will cause management to negotiate with the unions:

Nothing brings the gaffer quicker to the negotiation table [than] when everybody stops working and he starts losing money . . . and that's always been the same. (UK Officer 2)

However, the officers interviewed feel their potential for industrial action has been severely weakened by the legislation on industrial action introduced by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s. They complain, for example, about the long and bureaucratic process that is needed to approve a strike, and of the illegality of secondary strikes. The latter means that unions are not allowed to strike in support of workers in other companies, and it also creates paradoxical situations in which workers in one plant cannot strike in solidarity with those in another plant, because, although they belong to the same car group, they may in fact be different juridical entities.

For Spanish union officers, instead, support from the authorities is considered to be fundamental, and the intervention of local and national politicians is at the centre of the union's strategy in opposing relocation:

The resource we always have to use is the responsibility that the public administration has toward the manufacturing sector here. (Spain Officer 1)

What do we do? Well, our industrial action, and we ask for help. Whom? The administration. (Spain Officer 5)

Public support could be shaped in the form of social plans in a case of plant closure, or in the form of political pressure that members of regional and national governments can exert on the corporate HQ. Both mobilisation and negotiation seem instrumental for involving the authorities in a dispute. Spanish union officers also strongly feel that the government should intervene more in forcing MNCs to stay in the country by using legislative measures, which would compensate the authorities for all the aid that Spanish local and national authorities have given to MNCs to encourage them to invest. One of the reasons for the Spanish union officers' desire for more government intervention in this manner is their belief that the main reasons why MNCs are staying in Spain are public incentives, as Spanish workers' competitive position has worsened in face of the increasing importance of developing countries as targets for foreign direct investment (FDI).

Searching for government support is also an option for British unions, but union officers have somewhat mixed feelings about government intervention (also see Hyman, 2001). Although they admit they received some help when the Labour Party was in power, somehow union officers feel they cannot expect much from the state, which is often accused of not doing everything that is within its range of possibilities, and they feel that other governments are better at defending their motor industry by securing production at home or successfully “bending” the European competition laws.

Other strategies adopted by UK unions to oppose relocation threats, but not mentioned by Spanish union officers, are based on market mechanisms. When plants have been threatened with closure or might be bought by another company, unions have actively engaged in searching and lobbying for the best potential buyer, as in the Phoenix consortium’s acquisition of Rover from BMW in 2000 (see Chinn & Dyson, 2000). Furthermore, the call for a direct boycott or name-and-blame strategies, which would provoke a decrease in the market share of the company threatening to divest, is an option that is used, according to some officers, to persuade companies to stay in the UK or to concede some favourable conditions. An example of this is, once again, the campaign against the closure of the Longbridge plant by BMW in 2000 (Chinn & Dyson, 2000). Another example is the campaign against the closure of the Peugeot plant in Ryton in 2006:

I think when Peugeot’s plant shut, we actually went and stood in front of the dealers inside the garages, and say “Don’t buy these, they’re gonna move it to . . . wherever.” (UK Officer 1)

British unions therefore affirm that they rely mainly on the strength of their membership, on industrial action, and on market-related strategies, while Spanish unions, on the contrary, affirm a strong link to support, in financial and legislative terms, from the authorities, both at local and national level. Examples of this difference can be seen on the occasions when unions have to face the management of relocating companies: British unions tend to send their own representatives to the corporate HQ, while Spanish unions seem to rely on politicians to represent them there. One of the reasons for this difference may be the fact that Spanish unions acknowledge the government’s efforts on bringing foreign investment into the country and keeping it there. In the UK, instead, unions feel the government has left them in a difficult position, both by hindering industrial action and by not trying hard enough to help the car industry. It is also characteristic of British unions that they rely on their own strength for the improvement of workers’ conditions, rather than on legislative support (Hyman, 2001).

It is noteworthy that union cooperation does not seem to be among the main instruments that interviewees from either country consider when facing relocation. EWCs are used for sharing information and for reinforcing connections between unions, but in a case of a threat of plant closure, EWCs seem to be of little use, especially if the issue affects only Spanish or British plants. Officers do not expect

substantial help from foreign unions if threatened with relocation, and affirm they would behave in the same way if they were in the same situation:

“If you’re doing badly, we’re doing worse,” and maybe they’re not doing as badly as they’re telling you. This can happen. But . . . is it normal? Yeah, everyone defends their own things. (Spain Officer 2)

This situation can be explained, first of all, by the fact that EWCs in general are limited by their functions of, exclusively, information and consultation, which do not imply an effective capacity for negotiation with management. Second, interviewees feel that unions from the country in which the HQ is based might not be keen on sharing information with them in a case of threatened relocation; for example, German unions, according to a UK officer, did not mention, during the BMW EWC’s meeting, management’s soon-to-be-announced decision to shut the Longbridge plant in 2000. Likewise, the Peugeot EWC was not very effective in stopping the relocation of the plant in Ryton to Slovakia, although interviewees mention that the EWC had not been working very well even before this time. Also, there is the fact, mentioned by one officer, that EWCs can only discuss issues that have a European relevance, and then relocation threats directed toward one country only cannot be discussed by the EWC.

Spanish unions also find it difficult to collaborate with German unions in the Volkswagen EWC. They are more likely to defend the choices of management and to hold back information in order to retain a better competitive position than the other Volkswagen plants. They do this, according to Spanish interviewees, due to the principle of co-determination, which makes German unions partly responsible for corporate decisions and closer to management, to which they would be likely to pass on information.

Faced with threats of beauty contests and coercive comparisons, the union officers interviewed mention that they tend to use two types of strategies. One is to accept the contest and try to improve the competitive position of their plant by studying the position of the other plants in the company and bargaining individually with management. The other strategy is to refuse the contest, by negotiating a joint agreement with the other plants in the group. Concession bargaining, in this case, is seen as a defeat for unions, and in most officers’ perspective should not be taken as a viable option:

So we don’t like beauty contests, because there is no winner, it’s a race to the bottom, you could give up everything if you get into that. . . . You know, me and you say we give up three days of holidays, and another one three and a half, and we end up giving up everything we’ve got! (UK Officer 2)

Spanish officers seem to be less worried about beauty contests than their British counterparts. This may be due to Spanish union officers’ greater trust in their own competitive advantages, such as their relatively low wages and high productivity, and also the common currency, the euro, which protects them from fluctuations;

their better chance of obtaining help from the state; and their position with regard to redundancies, which is stronger than in the UK, where redundancies are quicker and cheaper. Another reason for the Spanish officers' attitude is that some of the MNCs operating in Spain, such as Nissan, do not place their plants in direct competition with each other, because their various plants have very different characteristics in terms of production.

The reaction to beauty contests is highly dependent on the functioning of the company's EWC. Where union officers consider the EWC works properly, they also feel that beauty contests can be stopped. Where the EWC does not perform properly, unions in some countries may refrain from sharing certain information, in an effort to obtain a better competitive position and save their plants. This seems to be especially true for unions situated in the same country as the corporate HQ. Indeed, union officers from both the UK and Spain observe a home-country effect in the effectiveness of the EWC. More specifically, the EWCs of companies based in a country with a strong industrial relations tradition and powerful unions like Germany tend to present a lower degree of perceived cooperation than, for example, the EWCs of U.S.-owned MNCs.

The absence of a dominant trade union, therefore, facilitates cooperation and shared strategies. The EWCs of GM and Ford are considered to be working very well, and one of the main elements perceived as crucial to their positive functioning is the absence of a dominant union, since the HQs are in both cases in the United States. GM's EWC might also be given a positive evaluation by UK officers because of the protection given by GM's European Framework Agreements to the otherwise relatively unprotected British unions, as Pulignano (2006) points out. In addition, EWCs are not very effective, in the interviewees' perspective, where production is highly concentrated in the home country, which places the "home" unions and workers in a stronger position than unions elsewhere. This seems to suggest that EWCs seem not to function when the interests of separate groups of workers are too different, but that they may work better when their interests coincide.

However, it is interesting to note that beauty contests can be a serious issue even for workers across different plants in the same company and country, and represented by the same union. UK union plant officers mentioned that a lack of coordination and communication can lead to a race to the bottom even within their own company and country:

A lot of it is down to the individual plant at the end of the day, where . . . it's gonna take just one plant to say "no," and then the other plants are either falling in line behind them, or again, it's a race to the bottom. (UK Officer 3)

Union responses to relocation threats seem, then, to be linked to contingencies and dependent on how well company-level information and consultation bodies, such as EWCs in MNCs, function. We will see now whether and to what extent the strategies just described also depend on union officers' perceptions of solidarity.

Solidarity and Union Cooperation

When asked about the meaning they give to solidarity, most officers considered it a difficult question to answer. Their perceptions are, however, very similar among both UK and Spain interviewees. According to some officers, solidarity is considered to be at the same time something “utopian” but also an “essence” underlying a union’s activity:

[Solidarity] should be an essence in itself, like an immediate response to the aggression we’re suffering from the capital world. (Spain Officer 2)

More practically, in the interviewees’ opinion, solidarity can exist if it is focused on a common struggle for the improvement of the working and living conditions of all workers:

My idea of solidarity is everybody fighting for something that’s fair. (UK Officer 2)

If the unity of workers and solidarity go hand in hand, the concept of competition among workers is therefore central to the question of whether solidarity and cooperation can be put in place. Conflicts of interest constitute a challenge for ideals of solidarity, as already acknowledged by Hyman (1994).

A major current problem for unions is that they are facing a trade-off between jobs and working conditions, since the relative value of jobs in the car industry, due to their scarcity, has dramatically risen. Union officers in both countries acknowledge that workers and unions in the automotive sector have become very corporatist, attached to the survival of the plant they are working in and the company they are working for. Unions in different countries seem to be reluctant to give information to each other, because this would offer an advantage to a potential competitor. Unions primarily look after their own national interests, and their priorities are to secure the jobs and the working conditions they have achieved for their workers:

You know, you’ll never get workers’ solidarity, I don’t think absolutely and completely, because again the British will fight for Britain, the Italians will fight for Italy, the Germans will fight for German work, and you’ll always do that, that’s never gonna stop. (UK Officer 2)

The exchange in terms of “Do you need jobs? Take cars so you’ll have jobs,” no, that has never existed, according to what I know. (Spain Officer 2)

My experience is we’re all good Europeans until there’s a problem in one of our own countries, then we become very nationalistic. (UK Officer 1)

Union officers often separate the concept of solidarity from support for other unions’ claims, which is typically articulated around the issuing of public declarations or letters, the provision of financial resources, or lobbying a company or

institution, but often in situations where there is no competition with their own workers.

Given the fact that workers in the automotive sector are in competition with each other, how then, can solidarity claims be reflected in union cooperation? Where can they find a common base for cooperation and coordinated action? One of the interviewees suggested that cooperation among European unions could be possible only in the public sector, because of the similarity of the issues that public sector workers face and of the lack of competition among workers. According to most officers, however, solidarity and cooperation increases when workers realise that what happens to workers in other countries, in terms of relocation threats and the undermining of working conditions, can happen to them as well:

At the beginning, unions wouldn't intervene to defend another country, . . . but when they saw the same would happen to them, they undertook solidarity actions against the decisions of the MNC, regardless of the country affected. (Spain Officer 6)

It is therefore commonality of interests, even if not in the short term, that mainly triggers cooperation. This is mostly evident in the case of beauty contests: unions know that if they participate in a contest they will all end up worse off, since sooner or later the unfavourable terms and conditions accepted by the "winner" will be imposed on everyone else. This is the reason why union cooperation works better when unions have to face a beauty contest than when relocation affects only one plant or country. The latter case, indeed, presents a conflict of interest between the workers receiving work and those losing it.

However, having common interests does not automatically lead to the establishment of strong cooperation. As described above, EWCs receive a mixed evaluation, depending on the company's specific conditions. The presence of an EWC seems to improve cooperation but does not guarantee it. The concept of solidarity as "common struggle," when shaped by unions into specific strategies, has therefore to be adapted in response to various factors.

First, the economic situation has a clear, strong impact on solidarity. In the words of one officer,

The economic conjuncture dictates the pace of solidarity. It affects, determines the ways of acting, desiring, feeling; everyone becomes more individualist, but . . . that's because there are needs. (Spain Officer 2)

This implies clearly that the increased need during a crisis for unions to defend national jobs, and for workers to defend their own jobs, hinders cooperation.

Second, unions have to be accountable to their members. Spanish officers refer to their specific responsibilities to defend their national members' interests and to make a structural impact on their society. UK union officers explain that they could never go against the decisions taken on the shop floor, since the principle of democracy in union activity is an element that British unionists feel proud of:

Everything has to go to a vote, it doesn't matter what sort of negotiation I do with the company. (UK Officer 2)

[People's] lifestyle's changed, they've got commitments and mortgages and high purchases, and credit cards, they wouldn't step on striking indefinitely . . . so, trade unions have to adapt to the way they're thinking, to reflect the way their members react. (UK Officer 4)

Third, country-specific factors influence unions' strategies with regard to cooperation. For example, even at the European level, the attention of Spanish officers seems to be more focused on political dynamics than on cooperation at the company level. Indeed, they seem to value cooperation articulated around the EMF more highly than cooperation organised around the EWCs. The former is used by Spanish unions to access the European Union institutions in order to lobby for more favourable legislation, in line with a tradition of macro-level social dialogue (Molina & Rhodes, 2007).

Fourth, unions are more likely to cooperate with unions from the same country, and to defend the jobs in their country, suggesting that identity plays a role in the idea of solidarity. Unions are also keener on cooperating with foreign unions from certain countries than on cooperating with unions from other countries. For example, British officers often mention their links with American unions, while Spanish union officers consider their relations with countries with a similar culture (Italy, France, or Portugal) to be stronger than with the unions of northern Europe. Officers also mention the closeness of identity between the Spanish unions and some unions with the same ideology in France and Italy, which supported, especially in Italy, CC.OO.'s struggle during Franco's dictatorship.

Finally, it is important to point out the difference between the union's identity and the workers' identity. Workers, in the union officers' perception, are strongly individualistic, and would not give up their job, wage, or paid holidays, even to support their neighbour:

People talk about the unions being one big family. . . . It's not, it's every man for himself. . . . I'll guarantee, if I went to the shop floor tomorrow . . . and said: "Here's the choice. We can give all these concessions, and if we do that, [plant name, same company] will stay open, if we don't, they'll close," the first question from the shop floor would be: "What impact is on me . . . of those concessions? What if we don't give them? . . ." A plant XX miles down the road, where their friends work at, their mothers and sisters could work at, their brothers . . . they would close that plant rather than give concessions. (UK Officer 3)

And the old expression is . . . "dog eat dog," not only for Europe, but it's for the UK as well. (UK Officer 5)

Solidarity between workers and solidarity seen from the union are two completely different things. (Spain Officer 2)

Union officers' concepts of solidarity are therefore filtered by the interests of the workers they represent, economic contingencies, the company and sector structures, and national institutions. These factors, and not identities or ideas of solidarity, are eventually what mainly define their strategies in response to relocation threats.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current economic crisis, strong competition pressures, and the availability of cheaper sources of labour in Eastern Europe or developing countries are elements used by management to threaten or announce relocations in the automotive sector, and to place plants in direct competition with each other by using beauty contest strategies. The analysis of the perceptions of British and Spanish union officers shows that the way unions react to relocation is influenced more by structural factors than by ideology or identity. Unions in Spain and the UK both respond to relocation threats with a pragmatic approach, but in practice there are some differences. UK unions tend to rely more on market-related strategies, such as name-and-blame and commercial boycott, and on their own strength in industrial action. Comisiones Obreras in Spain is instead more inclined to look for the support of the authorities. This could be explained by the different national union traditions, since the British unions have traditionally been wary of government intervention in industrial relations affairs. Also, British officers seem more worried than their Spanish counterparts about relocation threats. Regulation and the role of the state can explain these differences. UK unions feel they cannot react against relocation as they would wish because of the restrictive legislation on industrial action, which makes organising a strike a long and uncertain process, and striking in solidarity with other workers illegal. They also feel they are in a very weak position against management because in the UK it is easier and cheaper to dismiss workers than in the rest of Europe. The Spanish union, instead, feels that the support it has received from the state has been fundamental in retaining foreign investment, and uses help from the authorities in terms of social plans, incentives, and political pressure on MNCs.

In general, country-specific or plant-specific interests seem to be more important than internationally shared interests. Priorities for unions have changed in the most recent years because of the decrease in employment, and unions now tend to give more importance to keeping jobs than to improving working conditions. Also, union officers feel responsible and accountable to their shop floor, which often means aiming at short-term gains in a zero-sum game with other plants and workers. The result is that often "defensive" plant-specific strategies, in the shape of concession bargaining, take predominance over long-term sharing-the-pain strategies coordinated at the company level or European level.

Only when the danger of a permanent worsening of working conditions for several plants is clear and imminent do unions cooperate to find a common

strategy vis-à-vis management. Long-term cooperative strategies are also encouraged by the absence of a dominant union in EWCs, and by a balanced distribution of production across plants in different countries, making it more difficult for one union to achieve hegemony over the others.

There is also room for agency to produce a strategic change. Union officers paint similar pictures of the threats they face from multinational companies in the automotive sector, and have a common understanding of the problem. They acknowledge that the interests of workers are similar in the long run, and they also feel the need to strengthen interunion links to better oppose managerial strategies. In the face of this similar analysis, it is surprising that responses are in fact rarely articulated around cooperation and that unions have such a pessimistic view of international solidarity.

In order to effectively act according to solidarity principles, therefore, union officers should move from a perception of short-term interest conflict among workers to a more long-term oriented view of cooperation and mutual help. In fact, pragmatism does not benefit workers even at local levels. Local responses to management's requests under the threat of relocation can bring short-lived victories, but in the long run they often lead to defeat for all workers. Indeed, while actions at the local level can prevent relocation or concessions if the union proves strong enough, they may simply shift the burden of corporate decisions to other plants where workers and unions are weaker. If concession bargaining has proven to be largely unsuccessful, according to the same officers, as a solution to relocation threats, the practice should be abandoned or limited.

Officers from both countries define solidarity on the basis of the common struggle for the defence and improvement of jobs and working conditions, but in practice the jobs and conditions they refer to, and the interests they defend, are now local. In order to shift the strategic focus toward a cross-border defence of workers' interests, efforts should be made to strengthen existing transnational union and collective bargaining institutions, such as European Framework Agreements. Bargaining coordination and information exchange among plants can be reinforced by formally setting up common procedures and objectives at the company level. Signing separate plant agreements should in particular be avoided when this implies concessions with regard to working conditions affecting other plants. In times of economic trouble, unions in all the plants can also jointly agree on concession bargaining, but this should be shared and temporary, and the agreements should also envisage the removal of concessions once the company has recovered from the temporary crisis. Sharing sovereignty over collective bargaining can prove a difficult process, but trust among unions can definitely benefit more from stronger cooperation than from fragmented strategies. The role of unions in the home MNC country, which according to the interviewees can negatively affect relations among unions by creating a situation of mistrust, is key in this respect.

Beauty contests and blackmailing by management should already constitute a strong push factor for stronger cooperation, but structural factors are also central.

Institutional “pull” factors like the EWCs can indeed be used either as instruments to build an effective cross-border cooperation network or, conversely (and perversely), as tools to further defend the national interest. A possible way to improve the legitimacy and cohesion of the workforce could be to allow workers to elect common union representatives in the EWC by voting on transnational lists. This would shift the accountability of EWC representatives from the national to the transnational workforce and would stimulate processes of cooperation.

Finally, union identity can evolve in the long term, but this is not what mainly shapes strategies at the moment. If identity were so important, there would be cases of strong, possibly even “mechanical” (Hyman, 1999), solidarity at the national level, but this does not seem to occur often in reality. The union officers interviewed in this study perceive that a European identity may be gaining ground in organisations, but it is not in workers. It is, however, their responsibility to show the shop floor that local-based strategies can be short sighted, and to convince their members of the advantages for all workers that come from cooperation and transnational solidarity.

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