

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS:  
THE CONFLICT ASSUMPTION REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

This study examined a fundamental assumption underlying the Industrial Relations field in North America, namely that employment reactions are inherently conflictual. In response to a call for reexamination of such assumptions, data were examined from a broadly representative 1991 poll of U.S. workers. Empirical results provided some indication of inherent conflict, but at the same time suggested workers may perceive the level of conflict as low. Analyses aimed at determining whether incentive pay reduces perceived conflict yielded mixed results. The article concludes with implications, limitations, and additional research questions.

The decline in interest in and support for industrial relations (IR) as a discipline in U.S. academic circles has been well documented (e.g., [1, 2]). Not surprisingly, scholars have attempted to identify the influences causing IR's status to deteriorate and to provide potential approaches for rejuvenating interest in the field as a subject worthy of scholarly attention [2, 3]. Observers often link this decline to low and falling unionization in the U.S. private sector [1, 2]. Although these developments have been most acute in the United States, they have some parallels in Canada (i.e., stagnant or even declining private sector unionization) and in some other advanced industrial nations [4]. The issue of IR's status is thus at least North American and, quite possibly, international in scope.

A recent and comprehensive effort to address IR's status in the United States concluded that IR urgently needs to "undertake a reevaluation and reformulation

of the basic assumptions that underlie the field” [2, p. 173]. One of the most important IR assumptions concerns the relationship between the employer and employee and the apparent conflict that is both latent and manifest in this relationship [2, 5]. That conflict is perceived by IR scholars as an inherent characteristic of the employment relationship can be traced back at least as far Commons’ work at the turn of the century and may have roots in Marx’s earlier work. Barbash provided one of the stronger statements on conflict’s centrality: “[C]onflict, latent or manifest, is the essence of industrial relations . . .” [6, p. 130]. Godard reported that 79 percent of U.S IR scholars and 72 percent of Canadian IR scholars agreed with the statement: “Fundamental conflicts underlie the relations between workers and management,” and, respectively, 71 percent and 77 percent agreed: “All too often, the well-being of workers is sacrificed in management’s pursuit of profit” [7, pp. 132-134].

The generally accepted view among IR scholars is that conflict is the *inevitable* outcome of the different motives, vis-à-vis the employment relationship, of the various parties involved [8]. In Barbash’s terms, workers’ equity interests clash with employers efficiency interests [6]. More specifically, workers seeking employment and income security necessarily find themselves at odds with employers’ desires to reduce costs and increase profit margins (Kochan and Katz, 1988). Barbash suggested that managerial actions, intentional or not, are driven by the desire to “economize on scarce resources in a systematic way” [6, p. 17]. Managerial adherence to this concept of “cost discipline” gives rise to development of the “work society,” which is manifested most directly in the form of labor unions [6, p. 4]. In response to managerial efforts at cost discipline: “Unions represent employees in the determination of wages, hours, and working conditions. Since these matters involve the allocation of scarce resources, there is assumed to be some conflict of interest between management and unions” [9, p. 11]. Thus, to IR scholars the employment relationship has traditionally consisted of mixed motives. That is, while workers and managers share some goals (e.g., enterprise viability) and are interdependent (firms need workers and workers need jobs), these facts serve to limit the conflict arising from their divergent goals (profitability versus wages) [10, p. 19]. In Walton and McKersie’s terms, the integrative potential of the bargaining relationship helps to keep its distributive nature in check [9].

Indeed, many IR scholars would argue the presence of conflict in the employment relationship was the main force behind the historical development of both the labor movement and the establishment of industrial relations as an academic discipline. Strike activity by a resurgent labor movement following World War II played no small part in the establishment of many IR academic programs. Thus, recognizing conflict as one of the fundamental assumptions of IR is clearly consistent with a majority of opinions held by IR scholars since the beginning of the labor movement in America [2, 11].

Our purpose is to revisit the assumption of conflict. Specifically, we answer Kaufman's call for reconsideration of IR's fundamental assumptions [2] by examining one of the most important and central assumptions underlying IR: the description of the employment relationship as one of inherent conflict. Essentially, the question we address is: Is it still accurate, in the 1990s, to characterize that relationship as one necessarily embroiled in conflict? We are not so foolhardy that we propose to answer this question definitively. Rather, our aim is to open the debate on a critical but relatively neglected issue and to provide initial evidence. To the extent we are trying to provide initial evidence about the presence or absence of conflict in the workplace of the 1990s, our study is essentially exploratory in nature.

As a first step in addressing this topic, we present historical, theoretical, and empirical findings from various literatures. In doing so, a set of propositions is developed and then empirically tested. The article concludes with a discussion of the results, their implications, and further research questions.

## HISTORICAL, THEORETICAL, AND EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

### The Personnel Management School

In his important and influential 1993 book, *The Origins and Evolution of the Field of Industrial Relations in the United States*, Kaufman traced the genesis of modern IR to the 1920s, when it was composed of two distinct schools of thought concerning the employment relationship [2]. One School, the Institutional Labor Economics (ILE) group, consisted primarily of scholars with economics backgrounds and interests who argued unions were necessary to address conflict and secure much needed workplace reform. The second school, the Personnel Management (PM) advocates, agreed reforms were needed, but opposed independent unions [2]. Strauss gave a concise description of the differences between the two schools. "PM people would have preferred to rely primarily on education and managerial self-interest. ILE people saw those means as insufficient, and believed that unions were necessary [12]. The two wings also disagreed as to the role of conflict. Those in PM felt that conflict was preventable by good management, whereas the ILE wing believed conflict to be inevitable and, within limits, even desirable [12, p. 396, emphasis added].

The point is that from nearly the birth of the field, there were individuals involved with IR who believed conflict between employer and employee is not necessarily inevitable. To the PM school, for example, the Hawthorne studies of the 1920s and 1930s offered proof of the potential impact enlightened management policies and humane attitudes toward employees could have on both worker satisfaction and organizational productivity [12].

Support for the belief that circumventing conflict and increasing desirable organizational and employee outcomes simultaneously are feasible objectives

was not restricted to the management practitioners and scholars of the PM school. During the 1920s and 1930s, many firms offered company-sponsored employee representation plans as alternatives to independent unions. To a large extent, these plans were built on the philosophies and policies of the PM school. While the vast majority of these plans were clearly little more than anti-union programs wrapped in the guise of benevolent managerial efforts [2], there were some company unions that effectively served and promoted the interests of both employers and employees [13, 14]. Indeed, a few of the most successful company unions lasted until the Wagner Act of 1935 ended their existence [14]. Some of these evolved into formally autonomous and yet company-oriented unions that maintained independence from the mainstream labor movement [13].

Thus, even in the early stages of IR research and practice, the view of the employment relationship as inherently conflictual was by no means unchallenged. That this fact has been somewhat obscured is not surprising. As the discipline of IR developed and matured during the 1940s and 1950s, it was the ILE branch of IR that came to dominate the field [21]. This school pointed to the spread and acceptance of independent unionization and adversarial bargaining as “proof” that the employer–employee relationship is conflictual (why would we need unions if it weren’t?) and argued collective bargaining (not “enlightened” unilateral PM policies) was the technique necessary to deal with conflict.

### Human Resource Management

Despite being jettisoned from the IR field in the late 1950s [2, 12], researchers in human resources management (HRM, the modern-day PM equivalent) continue to examine issues pertinent to the employment relationship. Granted, the original PM school argued for these types of managerial actions from a normative perspective—i.e., “it’s the right thing to do”—and asserted its role and that of the practitioner was to champion both employer and employee interests [2]. This dual allegiance was premised on a harmony of interests between employees and employers that was disrupted only by management failures, such as poor communications, misguided supervisors, or a failure to structure reward systems properly.

This dual allegiance almost certainly contributed to PM’s second-class status in business and business schools. Increased competitive pressures in the 1970s and 1980s put further pressure on PM’s tenuous status, contributing to a reorientation of PM as HRM. In contrast to IR’s assumption that labor is not a commodity, the very name adopted in the transition from PM to HRM suggested a new legitimacy (in the eyes of business) for PM/HRM. Now it was recast as management of a particular source for the benefit of the employer (and ultimately shareholder interests). Although HRM specialists still assert concern for employees, the concern of employees have clearly become secondary to concerns for competitive advantage and profit [15, pp. 636-637]. Indeed, employee concerns generally receive priority

attention from management and HRM specialists only to the extent that resolution of such concerns is likely to lead to desirable organizational outcomes (e.g., decreased turnover rates and increased employee productivity).

HRM scholars today advocate many of the same ideas their PM ancestors did as a means of establishing and maintaining a competitive advantage [15]. More than ever, the success of these programs is premised on the assumption that the interests of employers and employees can be aligned with each other and, therefore, are not inevitably at odds. In Godard's terms, HRM scholars tend to hold a "managerialist perspective." "Managerialists typically attribute adversarial labor relations to inappropriate managerial practices, arguing that the adoption of progressive HRM practices will result in a consensual, cooperative relationship" [16, p. 243].

### Research on the Effects of HRM Policies

Unfortunately, no studies to date have directly examined the impact of HRM policies on employer–employee conflict. There is, however, research that may indirectly shed light on the topic. Huselid, for example, recently examined the effects of various human resource practices on both organizational—and employee-level outcomes. He found these practices increased corporate financial performance, increased worker productivity, and lowered employee turnover rates. Another empirical study has similar results [17]. These authors studied the impact of job enrichment and realistic job previews (both HRM practices) and found both were moderately effective at reducing turnover. To the extent that conflict between management and workers may be reflected in high levels of employee turnover, findings from these two studies provide limited indirect support for the position that HRM policies can reduce conflict between the two parties.

### Incentive-Based Compensation Programs

Numerous and varied HRM policies are relevant to conflict in employment relations. For example, performance appraisal meetings and company newsletters for employees may improve communications, helping to clarify expectations and role responsibilities while job evaluation and pay surveys can rationalize differential rewards that might otherwise contribute to perceived inequity. Yet particular attention has and should be given to incentive-based compensation programs in addressing inherent conflict. Kochan and Katz asserted that "conflict arises out of the clash of *economic interests* between workers seeking jobs and income security and employers looking to promote efficiency and organizational effectiveness" [5, pp. 6-7, emphasis added]. Although Kochan and Katz cited no other sources of conflict in their discussion of basic assumptions of IR, others have noted that what might be termed "frictional conflict" seems to arise inevitably in superior–subordinate relations. Wheeler, for example, linked some conflict

in employment relations to basic human nature, drawing parallels between modern organizational hierarchies and primitive social organizations (e.g., tribes, packs), noting common elements of dominance and submission [18]. Nonetheless, economic conflict between employers and employees is clearly at the center of the conflict assumption. More directly than other HRM policies, incentive-based pay programs represent an attempt to harmonize the economic interest of employers and employees. Thus, these programs are particularly germane to the assumption of inherent conflict.

Incentive-based compensation systems are also among the most extensively researched HRM programs [15]. There are several different types of plans, but what they have in common (theoretically) is that some or all of the employees' financial compensation is incentive pay tied to the employees' work performance. The idea is to "marry" the workers' interests (pay) with those of management and shareholders (increased productivity and, hence, profit).

The strong, positive effects of incentive plans on various organizational- and individual-level outcomes has been well documented in the HRM literature [19]. For example, at the organizational level, financial incentive programs have increased productivity among high-tech employees [20], retail department store branches [21], unionized iron foundry workers [22], and workers in industrial settings across different countries [23]. At the individual level, these programs have been positively associated with higher pay satisfaction [24], lower turnover and higher job retention [21], and increased manager–employee communications [23]. An important finding for our purposes comes from the Wagner et al, study of incentive payments in a unionized iron foundry, where the incentive plan increased productivity significantly without the expected increase in the number of employee grievances filed [22].

Aside from the tangential approaches in the above-mentioned studies, no research exists examining directly the effects of incentive-pay programs on employer–employee conflict or perceptions of such conflict. Taken together, the findings mentioned previously provide indirect support for the position that individuals who work for organizations where incentive-aligning HRM policies are in effect are less likely to perceive conflict between themselves and their employers than individuals who work for organizations without such policies.

HR policies linking pay and performance may take the form of an incentive pay system (e.g., piece rates) or a fringe benefit—e.g., a performance-based cash or stock bonus. For the purposes of empirical investigation, the asserted link between incentive pay and conflict perceptions is specified as two hypotheses:

- H1:* Individuals who receive all or part of their pay from an incentive-based pay system are less likely to perceive conflict between themselves and management than are employees who do not receive such pay.
- H2:* Individuals who receive part of their financial compensation from a fringe benefit providing a bonus for good performance are less likely to perceive

conflict between themselves and management than are employees who do not receive such fringes.

The logic behind these hypotheses is that HRM policies in general, and financial incentive systems in particular, have been shown to be effective in aligning the interests of management with those of the employees. Since both parties are sitting on the “same side of the table,” their relationship should be less conflictual. In terms of the traditional mixed-motive approach to conflict, HRM plans such as these can be construed as trying to realign the motives of the two parties so that both are working toward compatible objectives.

### HRM Practices and IR Research

The effect of HRM policies on organizational- and individual-level outcomes has also been of interest to several IR scholars, although for different reasons. Freeman and Medoff noted that unions influence numerous nonwage aspects of employment in addition to well-known wage effects [25]. Ng and Maki examined the impact of unions on thirty seven HRM practices, finding significant effects in several areas [26]. They found, for example, unionization reduced the likelihood of formal performance appraisal and its importance in pay decisions and the use of merit pay systems, piece rates, and profit sharing [26].

Conversely, and more directly relevant, some research has focused on how HRM policies affect unionization [27, 28]. These studies have tended to focus on implementation of HRM policies as union substitution programs, rather than as legitimate managerial efforts to establish or maintain a competitive advantage through alignment of employee–employer interests. Each of these studies has found evidence that firms utilizing “progressive” HRM policies are more effective at maintaining their nonunion position and reducing union growth than are firms that do not use such programs [27]. Both the Fiorito et al, and Kochan et al., [28] studies examined a broad range of HRM policies, including at least two related to incentive pay. The former study reported mixed results for “production bonuses” and “profit-sharing” policies, ranging from a negative union-substitution effect in some bivariate correlates to no significant effect in multivariate results. Kochan et al. did not disaggregate their HRM policy variable [28], but both studies reported strong results for composite measures reflecting use of varied progressive HRM policies. One possible interpretation of these findings is that these HRM policies effectively satisfy the work-related needs of employees, and this satisfaction, in turn, reduces the perceived need for unions (consistent with Strauss [12]).

If inherent conflict still characterizes the employment relationship (i.e., if the original ILE conception of the employment relationship is still valid), those employees choosing to either maintain their status as union members or

perceiving a need for a union on their job would likely view current management-worker relations as conflictual. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect:

*H3:* Workers who belong to unions are more likely to perceive conflict between management and workers than are workers who do not belong to unions.

Many individuals may feel that the relationship between the two parties is one of conflict, but they may not have access to union membership as a means of voicing or acting on this perception. As Kochan noted, roughly one-third of nonunion U.S. employees indicated a willingness to vote for union representation in 1977 [29]. Somewhat higher proportions of latent union support have also been reported in Canada (e.g., [30]). Subsequent studies have reported comparable patterns over time in both countries (e.g., [31, pp. 123-129]). For our purposes, the salient point is that one may interpret such indications of latent union support as indirect expressions of perceived conflict between employers and workers. Consequently, we hypothesize:

*H4:* Nonunion workers who desire union representation are more likely to perceive employment conflict than are nonunion workers who oppose union representation.

These last two hypotheses reflect the traditional approach to conflict in industrial relations. Unions are, as noted earlier, responsible for representing the interests of the workers in the employment relationship as a means of counterbalancing the "cost discipline" motives of management. Consequently, we should not be surprised that workers sympathetic to unions perceive the employment relationship as more conflictual than do workers not sympathetic to unions.

## METHODS

### Sample

Data for this study were taken from the 1991 General Social Survey (GSS), a national probability survey of adult Americans designed to measure public opinion on a wide range of issues conducted almost every year since 1972. Although basic questions, such as employment status and union membership status, are asked regularly, other issues, including attitudes about workplace relations and unions, are included on an irregular basis and may not be included in all alternative forms used in a given year. For our purpose, the required combination of questions occurred only in the 1991 survey. Depending on the combinations of questions considered, the available sample size ranges from approximately 600 to 900.



## MEASURES

### Perceived Conflict

GSS respondents were asked: "In general, how would you describe relations in your workplace between management and employees?" Responses were recorded on a 5-point, Likert-style scale with the following response codes: 1) very good; 2) quite good; 3) neither good nor bad; 4) quite bad; and 5) very bad. Thus, higher values of this variable indicate more perceived conflict in employment relations.

### Incentive Pay

To form this variable, we used responses to the question: "Do you receive any of the earnings from your main job in the form of commissions, bonuses, tips, or overtime?" Responses of *yes* were coded 1 and responses of *no* were coded 2.

### Fringe Incentive

Respondents were asked several questions about fringe benefits. Our question of interest was: "Please tell me whether you are eligible to receive the following fringe benefit: cash or stock bonuses for performance or merit?" with responses coded 1 for *yes* and 2 for *no*.

### Union Member

Union membership status is based on the question, "Could you please tell me whether or not you are a member of a labor union?" For our study, responses were coded 1 if the respondent belongs to a union and 2 if the respondent does not belong to a union.

### Vote for Union

Nonunion worker desires for union representation are based on responses to the question: "If an election were held with secret ballots, would you vote for or against having a union represent you?" The responses were coded 1 if a *for* response was offered and 2 if an *against* response was given.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Our hypotheses require analyses of differences between two independent groups of respondents. The most common parametric technique for analyzing such data is a *t*-test on the mean difference between the two groups [32]. However, the *t*-test requires that the dependent variable be measured on at least an interval scale [33]. Because our dependent variable, Perceived Conflict, has been measured at the ordinal level, a *t*-test is inappropriate [32]. The best approach is one of the nonparametric tests, such as the Wilcoxon Rank Sum statistic (also known as the

Mann-Whitney U), which can accommodate ordinal scaled data [32]. Consequently, each of the hypotheses was examined by applying the Wilcoxon Rank Sum test to differences in the means between two groups.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1

Table 1 shows the means for Perceived Conflict for each of two Incentive Pay groups. As indicated, the means for both groups are virtually the same: respondents who receive all or part of their pay in incentive form (coded *yes* in Table 1) yielded a mean of 2.057, while individuals responding *no* to this question had a mean of 2.105.

The Wilcoxon test for differences in means indicates a *p*-value of .4785, a figure too high to allow us to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference in perceptions of employer–employee conflict between incentive pay and nonincentive pay respondents. Basically, we can conclude that both groups perceive the relationship between management and employees as being “quite good” and, additionally, that these results fail to support our first hypothesis.

### Hypothesis 2

Table 2 indicates that responses on the Perceived Conflict for the two groups defined by the Fringe Incentive variable were superficially similar to the results

Table 1. Incentive Pay and Perceived Conflict

Incentive Pay: “Do you receive any of the earnings from your main job in the form of commissions, bonuses, tips, or overtime?”					
Incentive Pay Response	N	Perceived Conflict			
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
(1) Yes	368	2.057	.9790	1.000	5.000
(2) No	502	2.105	1.010	1.000	5.000
Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums)					
Incentive Pay Response	N	Sum of Scores	Expected Under HO	Std. Dev. Under HO	Mean Scores
(1) Yes	368	157,795.0	160,264.0	3,482.69	428.79
(2) No	502	221,090.0	218,621.0	3,482.69	440.42

Z = -.708790    Prob > |Z| = 0.4785  
Average scores used for ties with continuity correction of .5.

Table 2. Fringe Benefit Incentive and Perceived Conflict

Fringe Benefit Incentive: "Please tell me whether you are eligible to receive the following fringe benefit: cash or stock bonuses for performance or merit?"					
Fringe Benefit Incentive Response	N	Perceived Conflict			
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
(1) Yes	212	1.948	0.893	1.000	5.000
(2) No	647	2.131	1.028	1.000	5.000
Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums)					
Fringe Benefit Incentive Response	N	Sum of Scores	Expected Under HO	Std. Dev. Under HO	Mean Scores
(1) Yes	212	85,124.0	91,160.0	2,982.45	401.52
(2) No	647	284,246.0	278,210.0	2,982.45	439.33

Z = -2.023    Prob > |Z| = 0.0430

Average scores used for ties with continuity correction of .5.

for the Incentive Pay variable. On average, both groups again felt relations at the workplace are basically "quite good" between management and employees, with respondents who are eligible to receive cash or stock for performance or merit (Fringe Incentive = *yes*) viewing the relationship as slightly more positive than *no* respondents (means: *yes* = 1.948 vs. *no* = 2.131).

The Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test, however, indicates the difference in means between the two groups is statistically significant ( $p < .043$ ), allowing us to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in means between the two groups. Thus, while the average difference is not large, those receiving cash or stock for performance or merit clearly perceive less employment conflict than those who do not. This result is consistent with our expectations as delineated in Hypothesis 2.

### Hypothesis 3

Table 3 presents means for Perceived Conflict by union membership status. A relatively large average difference is shown (2.581 for union members vs. 2.027 for nonunion workers).

The Wilcoxon test indicates the difference in the means for the two groups is highly significant ( $p < .0001$ ), so the null hypothesis that there is no difference in levels of perceived conflict between the two groups is rejected. Thus, the evidence indicates union members perceive considerably more employment

Table 3. Union Membership and Perceived Conflict

Union Membership: "Could you please tell me whether or not you are a member of a labor union?"					
Union Membership Response	N	Perceived Conflict			
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
(1) Union	74	2.581	1.134	1.000	5.000
(2) Non-Union	513	2.027	0.985	1.000	5.000
Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums)					
Union Membership Response	N	Sum of Scores	Expected Under HO	Std. Dev. Under HO	Mean Scores
(1) Union	74	27,120.0	21,756.0	1,298.68	366.49
(2) Non-Union	513	145,457.0	150,822.0	1,298.68	283.54

Z = -4.130    Prob > |Z| = 0.0001  
Average scores used for ties with continuity correction of .5.

conflict than do nonunion workers, a result entirely consonant with the expectations of Hypothesis 3.

#### Hypothesis 4

Table 4 presents Wilcoxon test results for Perceived Conflict by union representation desires (Vote for Union). The mean for the pro-union group is 2.250, moderately higher than that for the anti-union group mean of 2.005.

The Wilcoxon Z of 3.170 associated with this difference is significant at conventional levels ( $p < .01$ ). Thus, nonunion workers who desire union representation tend to perceive greater conflict than do nonunion workers who oppose union representation. As with Hypotheses 2 and 3, the results for Hypothesis 4 are consistent with our expectations.

## DISCUSSION

From a statistical standpoint, three of the four hypotheses were confirmed. First, while individuals receiving some form of incentive pay did *not* perceive less conflict in the worker-management relationship than individuals not receiving such pay (H1), respondents eligible for fringe benefit pay *did* report significantly less conflict than did respondents not eligible for fringe benefit

Table 4. Union and Perceived Conflict

Vote for Union: "If an election were held with secret ballots, would you vote for or against having a union represent you?"					
Vote for Union Response	N	Perceived Conflict			
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
(1) For	303	2.250	1.059	1.000	5.000
(2) Against	531	2.005	0.954	1.000	5.000
Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums)					
Vote for Union Response	N	Sum of	Expected	Std. Dev.	Mean
		Scores	Under HO	Under HO	Scores
(1) For	303	136,595.0	126,502.0	3,182.85	450.81
(2) Against	531	211,600.0	211,692.0	3,182.85	398.49

Z = -3.170    Prob > |Z| = 0.0015  
Average scores used for ties with continuity correction of .5.

incentive pay (H2). Second, individuals who belong to unions do indeed perceive more conflict between management and employees than do nonunion respondents (H3). And lastly, individuals who would vote for union representation also perceive more conflict than do respondents that would not vote for representation (H4).

Taken together, our results provide qualified support for the presence of conflict in the employment relationship. Particularly noteworthy is that individuals who appear to be sympathetic to unions—either by currently belonging to a union or by expressing a desire to vote for a union if given the opportunity—perceive a substantially higher degree of conflict in the employment relationship than do those individuals not sympathetic to unions. Also noteworthy is qualified support for the proposition that incentive pay (in the form of a fringe benefit) is associated with lower perceived conflict.

Although three hypotheses were statistically supported, it should be noted that the means for both groups hovered around the quite-good value in terms of the management–employee relationship, regardless of which independent variable or group was being considered. Given this, employees in general tend to perceive the relationship between management and workers as good. To the extent that these findings suggest the worker–employer relationship can be considered to be relatively conflict-free, this article provides initial evidence, albeit qualified, that the traditional assumption of inherent conflict needs to be scrutinized more

carefully. At the same time, other data sources indicate considerable employee distrust of management. For example, one recent survey [34] found fewer than 40 percent of respondents “place a lot of trust in the company to keep its promises” [34, p. 8], while a second concluded that “the majority of workers feel unmotivated, dislike their employers, suffer helter-skelter management and believe ‘employee empowerment’ is an empty promise . . .” [35]. Together with our results, this suggests the possibility of considerable latent conflict beneath a calm surface.

### CONCLUSION

At this point a brief discussion as to the methodological limitations of this study is warranted. First, it should be noted that the data set used was not expressly designed for the purposes of this article. The General Social Survey (GSS) is a national survey of American adults designed to measure opinions on an enormous range of issues, most of which lie outside the work domain. As a result, our analyses were limited by both the nature of the questions and the years in which they were asked. This limitation effectively ruled out the possibility of a longitudinal-based design and, therefore, is directly responsible for the one year, cross-sectional nature of this study.

Another area of concern involves the nature of the variables themselves. Each of the five variables measured was based on one-question items. Clearly, it would be desirable to have perceptual variables measured as composites of several related items, but given the nature of the GSS data set, this was not possible. In our defense, however, our variables appear to have face validity to the extent that each seems to encompass the logic underlying the corresponding hypotheses. Finally, response codes for each of the variables were at the ordinal level. Use of the ordinal scale may call into question our ability to understand the magnitude of the differences between group responses. Nevertheless, the vast majority of social research is conducted with ordinal-level measures [32]. Consequently, we do not consider the use of ordinal measures to be fatal. In sum, we believe the 1991 GSS data are sufficient for opening the debate on the conflict assumption.

Despite these methodological limitations, we contribute to the existing IR research in two ways. First our work is an initial attempt to directly respond to Kaufman’s observation that the field urgently reconsider its fundamental assumptions as a necessary step in generating some positive momentum for the discipline [2]. Second, we provide initial evidence suggesting the fundamental assumption of inherent conflict in the employment relationship can be questioned on the basis of how workers themselves view those relationships.

As noted earlier, the workers in our sample indicated relations between employees and managers at their workplaces were quite good with only responses for union members approaching a neutral response of neither good nor bad. Such a finding appears to have important implications for future union–management rela-

tions. Inasmuch as these findings suggest the workplace is relatively free of conflict, unions advocating an adversarial approach to relations with management may well be operating from an inappropriate, and ultimately ineffective mindset. Clearly, union survival and success is likely to be enhanced by the presence of poor employer–employee relations. The present findings indicate such a situation does not currently describe management–worker relations, however. Consequently, one possible reaction by unions is to recognize that conflict is not as prevalent in the workplace as it was in the past and to adopt strategies more reflective of the current state of affairs. Interestingly, there are indications that unions may be willing to accept a “softer” view toward their relationship with management. For example, in an effort to boost sagging membership rates, the idea of associate union memberships has been proposed [36, 37, 38]. These memberships offer workers the opportunity to receive various benefits associated with union membership without traditional collective bargaining representation. In large part, the rationale cited for offering “associate memberships” was the desire to offer union representation of some kind to workers in situations where a majority did not favor conventional union representation: i.e., the “job-control unionism” that employers usually oppose vigorously.

Another sign that unions may be reacting to the current state of worker–management relations as reflected in our data can be found in the recent AFL-CIO report on the American workplace [36]. This publication essentially delineates the organizational philosophy of the AFL-CIO as it currently relates to the workplace. While not totally abandoning the position that conflict between employers and employees is inherent, the AFL-CIO appears to recognize a simple “us vs. them” perspective is dysfunctional:

The time has come for labor and management to surmount past enmities and forge the kind of partnerships which can generate more productive, democratic, and humane systems of work. Partnerships formed along these lines will not, as some would have it, substitute “cooperation” for “adversarialism” in labor-management relations. It is the nature of things that workers and the employers for whom they work do have some conflicting as well as common interests. But the fact that such conflicts do, will, and must exist does not mean that labor-management relations must be antagonistic. In the partnerships we envision, such conflicts of interest can be worked out in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and good will [36, p. 2].

Since this report was issued, new leadership has emerged at the AFL-CIO. Although it is too soon to form a clear sense of its direction, early indications are that the Sweeney camp favors a more confrontational approach than the Kirkland/Donahue administration it deposed. Whether this represents substance or rhetoric remains to be seen. Sweeney has clearly taken steps to encourage more aggressive organizing by affiliates. At the same time, internal staff changes

Sweeney has made at the AFL-CIO portend a business-like approach [39], which may suggest deemphasizing adversarialism. Recent research on organizing conducted by unions themselves puts less emphasis on employer intimidation of union supporters and more emphasis on worker fears of conflict stemming from unionization [40]. Although it would certainly be a gross overstatement to suggest that unions doubt the existence of inherent worker-management conflict or a substantial influence on organizing for employer coercion, there are nonetheless signs that unions are taking a new look at the role of conflict. This would seem to add fuel to Kaufman's call for industrial relations and ILE scholars to do the same [2]. Thus, our article represents a timely and important starting point for examining the traditional IR assumption of inherent conflict in workplace relations. Because the findings presented here are by no means conclusive, future studies using data developed to focus more squarely on the nature of conflict in employment relationships are clearly needed. Additionally, research should consider further the possible moderating role of incentive pay and other human resource management policies on that conflict.

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