

Extension Material 8.1

Perspectives on employment relations

The unitary perspective is based on the belief that owners, managers (agents), and employees are broadly united by a set of common interests and values and that any differences that emerge are superficial, can be easily resolved, and are due in large part to misunderstanding or the behaviour of a few militant individuals. Conflict that seeks to express deeper, structural differences is considered to lack legitimacy as well as being 'irrational', and management as well as governments would be justified in attempting to suppress it and in taking appropriate action to limit the ability of workers and trade unions to express this conflict through strikes and other forms of industrial action. The unitary perspective is also characterized by the idea of a single source of authority which is legally and ethically located within management. Challenges to the right of management to manage (the managerial prerogative) are seen as dangerous to the stability of the capitalist system and while certain constraints to this right have come through legislative and social changes the basic premise, that it is managers who manage, has remained largely unchanged despite the historical efforts of trade unions and political parties on the left to challenge this claim.

The Marxist perspective on industrial relations was developed by a number of political thinkers and academics in the twentieth century who shared a common commitment to a Marxist political ideology. It became the context within which the critique of the existing system of employment and work was based. Prominent among these is Richard Hyman whose book—*Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (1975)—was one of the first to present this perspective in an academic rather than a purely political way. The class struggle based on the exploitation of workers by the capitalist class of owners and managers was the basis upon which the evolving pattern of industrial relations was interpreted and explained by those who shared Hyman's position. The trade union movement as well as the Labour Party diverged ideologically, with the mainstream membership of both parts of the labour movement becoming increasingly accommodated to the capitalist system, subject to reforms and concessions that benefited working people. Those who continue to adhere to the Marxist perspective are represented by a smaller but still influential group of union leaders/members as well as socialists and communists who remain committed to replacing capitalism with a political and economic system based on equality, state ownership of key parts of the economy, the redistribution of wealth, and worker control of the means of production. A Marxist perspective therefore rejected the notion of cooperating with management beyond the level considered necessary to maintain some kind of provisional order and saw industrial and political conflict as a legitimate and necessary tool for achieving fundamental change to that order. The weakening of the influence in political terms of Marxism during the twenty-first century, the decline in trade union membership and influence, and the sense that the vast majority of workers have become permanently accommodated to the capitalist system might suggest that the Marxist perspective on employment relations now is less influential than it was and arguably less relevant than it was.

Pluralism can be considered a kind of compromise between the unitary and Marxist perspectives and is again based on a political ideology that offered a different interpretation of how society is structured and needed to be seen. Pluralists hold the view that different interest groups exist within the workplace and within the economic system more widely and that each group has its own legitimate interests which may and will under certain conditions conflict with those of other groups, but that fundamentally all groups share a common interest in working to maintain the integrity of the existing order and share in the advantages as well as disadvantages of a capitalist system of production. Conflict for pluralists is inevitable and legitimate as owners/managers and workers seek to resolve differences over a wide variety of issues but this is or should be bounded and influenced by a shared realization that all interests are best served by working within rather than breaking the existing system and that cooperation between these different interest groups is the way forward. Our reference in Chapter 8 to the growing importance of employee engagement, the fall in TU membership and influence, and the reduction in industrial conflict suggests that certainly in the twenty-first century the 'reality' of employment relations is much closer to a merged unitarist/pluralist position than a Marxist one.



REFERENCE

Hyman, R. (1975) *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, Macmillan.