Northumbria Research Link

Partnership and process in the maritime construction industry

Jo McBride and John Stirling
University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Abstract *The authors provide a case study of a partnership agreement in the Tyneside maritime construction industry. They focus on the role of trade unions and the complex tensions that emerge between regional and local officials and workplace representatives. They argue that agreements can only be understood within the context of existing employee relations structures. Their conclusion suggests that the agreement had little impact on a "branch plant" of a national company and that it was often received with hostility and little commitment. As a consequence the partnership became a symbolic agreement with potential significance for external customers but no role in shaping workplace employee relations.*

Introduction

Partnership, as a description of the collective employment relationship, has a relatively recent genesis, although it is suggested that its roots can be traced to an "alternative" tradition in British industrial relations that has always embraced co-operation (Claydon, 1998; Haynes and Allen, 2001). In this paper we seek to explore the application of partnership in an "old" industry with industrial relations shaped by a high density of trade union membership and often characterised by adversarial collective bargaining and overt conflict rather than co-operation.

Our analysis raises significant questions about the conceptualisation of partnership and its systematic application in research. We are also concerned to argue that partnership agreements must be contextualised to be understood (Stirling and Wray, 2001). This context includes external factors such as market position as well as the historical development of industrial relations and current developments within an organisation and with its trade unions. Partnership must be viewed as a dynamic relationship that can develop in stages and reflects both adversarial and co-operative behaviour (Hammer and Stern, 1986).

In our case study we are seeking to address the issues noted by Taylor and Ramsay (1998, p. 119) when they suggested that:

> Few attempts have been made to explore the complex relationship between national trade union organisation, lay representatives and the actual experience of work and the labour process under a partnership regime.

While we are not able to explore the labour process, given the short-lived nature of the partnership, Taylor and Ramsay's (1998) emphasis on the

complexity and significance of relationships within trade unions is borne out by our analysis. There are clear tensions between different levels within the trade unions nationally, regionally, locally and at the workplace. Further tensions are evident between the two case study unions that are a reflection of traditional job demarcations in the industry, of different approaches to partnership and of the personalities involved. The difficulty of implementing the final agreement on the Tyne is also related to the yard's "branch plant" status.

The partnership agreement itself was seen as "symbolic" and received considerable publicity in the local business press, where it was seen to represent a break with the history of adversarial industrial relations in the industry (*The Journal*, 2000). Its significance was reinforced by its signing at 10 Downing Street and being witnessed by the Prime Minister. Since the conclusion of the agreement the company has gone into receivership and its future status is unknown.

Methodology

The focus of our analysis is a case study of a partnership agreement in the Tyneside maritime construction industry (MCI). The partnership is shaped by three significant contextual factors (Geddes Report, 1966; Commission on Industrial Relations, 1971), which are:

(1) the highly competitive nature of the industry;

(2) the impending employment relations legislation; and

(3) an established industrial relations framework deriving from the traditional shipbuilding industry.

The company identified for this case study was the only establishment within the Tyneside MCI to have signed a formal social partnership agreement, thus allowing for some comparisons with other companies on the River Tyne.

We are particularly concerned with the relationship between the agreement and its implementation, and its consequences for trade union organisation. Our case study data, therefore, are derived from interviews with all full time officials (FTOs) directly involved in the Tyneside MCI and a sample of shop stewards. Interviews were conducted with senior regional officials (including one with national responsibility for the case study company), district officials with day-to-day responsibility for the industry and shop stewards, including convenors and senior stewards. The unions involved in the research were the key industry unions, the GMB and the AEEU, which combine together in the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU). They reflect a wide range of experience in the industry and have representation in companies other than the case study organisation.

The interviews were semi-structured and exploratory and allowed the respondents to speak freely and identify key issues themselves. This qualitative approach to data collection was supported with documentary

material from regional minutes of the GMB trade union, the company and local press. The companies covered by our research are listed anonymously in Table I.

Solutions or problems: trade unions and partnership?

The focus of our analysis is on trade unions and partnership, and from this perspective we regard partnership as a collective relationship between employers and trade unions. We recognise that others have suggested that partnership can be delivered in a non-union environment and may view it as reflecting a relationship between an organisation and its employees (Guest and Peccei, 1998). It is our view that, as Kelly (1996) and Taylor and Ramsay (1998) have argued, partnership models present a serious challenge to independent union organisation and workplace mobilisation.

Models of partnership are being developed in three separate but interlinked ways. First, as ideology, second as process and third in relation to outcome. Guest and Peccei (2001, p. 212) develop a parallel argument in relation to principles, practices and outcomes. The TUC (1999, p. 8) model of partnership at the level of ideology is clear – it wishes to distance trade unions from the past and engage in the future:

> Embracing partnership is therefore the right strategic choice for the trade union movement ... it identifies trade unions with high performance and best practice – and it responds to employer's needs too.

At this level partnership develops a symbolic status and becomes a *leitmotif* for the whole organisation, and the exact nature of the agreement is not critical.

Company	Product	Industry	Number of employees	Unions recognised
Offshore developments	Oil and gas platforms	Offshore construction	300	GMB, AEEU
Bird Shipbuilders	Shipbuilding and conversion	Shipbuilding	1,000	GMB
Shields Shiprepairers	Ship repair and conversion	Ship repair	700	GMB, AEEU
Marsden Offshore	Offshore supply	Offshore fabrication	100	None
Tyne Ship Repair	Ship repair and conversion	Ship repair	260	Confederation
Rake Fabrications	Oil and gas fabrication	Offshore fabrication	1,000	GMB
Leslie Marine Supply	Offshore and marine supply	Offshore fabrication	100	None

Table I.
Tyneside maritime construction industry

However, partnership has to be operationalised and this shifts the focus of a model to process. In this second respect, the relationship between partnership and existing models of collective bargaining is critical. Their analysis of process has led some authors to suggest that, following developments in the USA (Kochan *et al.*, 1986), UK models of partnership reflect a shift from "distributive" to "integrative bargaining" (Roper, 2000). This represents a move from adversarial negotiations rooted in opposing power relationships to mutual gains generated through problem solving, although the same outcomes may result from both. Thus, while in terms of ideology partnership may be regarded as all-embracing, in terms of process it is likely to be more complex and dynamic, with some issues, such as training, covered by partnership arrangements but others, such as pay, not covered. In effect, we are left with complex questions in relation to the process of partnership and its relationship to traditional collective bargaining with its perceived legacy of conflictual industrial relations.

Finally, it is clear from the ideology of partnership that employees are to share in the success of the business and they do that most visibly in terms of outcomes rather than process. There is a wide-ranging literature suggesting employee benefits from partnership which concentrates on areas such as employee involvement and development, increased communication and training (Knell, 1999; Guest and Peccei, 2001). Our focus is on trade union organisation, and in this respect Kelly's (1999) review of nine partnership companies suggests job security, improving terms and conditions of employment and strengthened workplace organisation are the key potential benefits.

In briefly reviewing each of these ways of conceptualising partnership it is clear that unions are seeking to develop "strategic choices" that extend their influence into new areas of decision making. At the level of ideology, trade unions are seeking to establish themselves as "solutions not problems" that add value to organisations. In terms of process there is some ambiguity over the relationship between partnership and collective bargaining, but it is clear that unions are seeking to participate in strategic management decisions as well as workplace issues like training that have traditionally been part of the "managerial prerogative". In relation to outcome, trade unions are seeking to improve terms and conditions of employment, enhance job security, maintain their role in a period of weakness (Brown, 2000) and maintain or increase membership at a time of decline.

Each of these strategies brings related problems: an identification with the ideology of partnership brings an identification with management. At the national level this is unproblematic for the TUC, which wants unions associated with successful business. However, at the workplace, trade unions retain representational and bargaining roles that generate "ambiguities" in their relationship with management. In effect, partnership in process leads the trade unions to share responsibility for management decisions, though it is

questionable whether it offers them the power to shape those decisions (Horvath and Svyantek, 1998).

The relationship between union full time officers, shop stewards and members becomes critical if trade unions are not to be identified as an arm of management. The tensions that partnership brings to these relationships is discussed in our case study, but others have also noted the significance of this point both within unions (Tailby and Winchester, 2000) and between them (Heaton *et al.*, 2000). In terms of process, the conclusion of Kochan *et al.*'s (1986, p. 180) study in the USA has resonances with Kelly's (1996) conclusions and the situation in the UK:

> Given management's instinctive opposition to sharing power, especially over issues considered to be its prerogatives, there is little chance of any involvement unless a union has sufficient power to force management to deal with it at the strategic level.

In a situation of declining trade unionism is must be doubtful that such power is commonplace in UK workplaces. Finally, we have seen that discussion of the outcome of partnership is contentious with positive studies (Knell, 1999) challenged by those suggesting that it is failing to deliver significant benefits (Kelly, 1999).

Each of these issues is illustrated in our case but, as we argued at the outset, partnership must be understood in relation to the context in which it develops. The Tyneside MCI has a particularly strong and complex trade union tradition that has co-existed with divergent management practice in different companies.

Industrial relations in "the yards"

There is some difficulty in defining an industry still commonly known on Tyneside as "the yards". We are using the term "maritime construction industry" to encompass the building of ships, ship repair, ship conversion, offshore fabrication and the decommissioning of oil rigs that are all part of the work of the Tyneside "yards".

Within the industry there are strong traditions of trade unionism which has been Byzantine in its complexity, sectional in its nature and rooted in workplace organisation. There existed within this complexity a critical network of relationships. Shop steward organisation was close to the membership, with yard meetings providing the basis of decision making and the foundation of the stewards' power. Senior stewards and convenors were linked together through the "confed." (the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions) and had close working relationships with union full time officers, who had often come from the yards themselves and whose sole responsibilities might well be to continue to deal with them.

This trade union organisation was inevitably undermined through the decline of the shipbuilding industry (Stirling and Bridgford, 1985), the period of trade union mergers which challenged the old sectional strengths and a managerial offensive leading to a temporary and itinerant workforce and trade union non-recognition. Nevertheless, for those remaining in the industry, trade

unionism had been a part of the workplace culture (Roberts, 1993) and re-emerged in unofficial disputes that reflected the long-standing adversarial nature of industrial relations and the continued significance of a solidaristic trade unionism.

A comparative analysis of industrial disputes in the North East Region, drawn from GMB regional Minutes between the years 1993-1998, indicated that the MCI continued to show the most significant level of disputes. However, these figures are only recorded official disputes and there are no records held of unofficial actions taken for, as one FTO claimed, "there are far too many".

Key features of the disputes have significance for the development of partnership in the industry. From the employer's point of view, disputes are particularly damaging in relation to the tight competition for orders in the industry that also leads them to seek low labour costs. For the union, the disputes are certainly about wages and conditions but they also reflect the recasualisation of the industry following privatisation. For the employees, the expansion of short-term contracts has unsurprisingly led to an absence of loyalty to a company, as workers move from yard to yard finding jobs through employment agencies below negotiated rates. In addition to this, there does not appear to be any adequate procedure to handle members' disputes before their contract expires. Thus, the most direct way for workers to deal with a dispute before their contract ends is to take unofficial industrial action. The continuing pattern of such disputes in the Tyneside MCI reflects both the continuing influence of collectivism and the organisational role of workplace shop steward organisation as a focus for channelling discontent through the trade unions.

In this context, partnership can be viewed as another step in seeking to solve the industrial relations "problems" of the industry through challenging the remaining strength of this workplace trade union organisation. The issues of "image and orders" as well as trade union organisation were central to the negotiation of the partnership agreement at Shields Shiprepairers.

Union recognition at Shields Shiprepairers

Nationally, Shields Shiprepairers' head office was based in Birkenhead, where it had its biggest yard. Regionally, the company owned yards on the Tyne, Tees and Wear, although this case study focuses primarily on the Tyne yard in Hebburn, which was taken over by Shields Shiprepairers in the early 1990s. At the time of the partnership agreement, the Tyne yard employed approximately 700 workers, although this figure had declined significantly from its high point. Previous to the purchase of the Hebburn yard, a River Wear employer owned the Hebburn yard from the time of the departure of British Shipbuilders. This company had no formal recognition with trade unions and our respondents indicated that the employer consistently attempted to "keep the unions out" through tactics such as changing workers on shift systems, making it difficult for the unions to organise. However, it was also suggested that despite non-recognition, the main unions in the industry did have significant membership in the yard.

When Shields Shiprepairers initially acquired the Hebburn yard in the early 1990s it decided to continue with the practice of non-recognition of trade unions. However, as the workforce began to circulate between yards, due to the closure of Bird Shipbuilders and the end of contracts in other yards, workers began to demand the same employment rights that existed in other yards on the Tyne. This began to cause industrial relations problems in Shields Shiprepairers and these difficulties, together with the impending recognition procedures in the Employment Relations Act (1999), resulted in the company acknowledging that unionisation for manual workers was inevitable. As one regional official explained:

> They approached us knowing that they had no choice, bearing in mind legislation was coming in.

In 1999, a ballot was conducted nationally for recognition of trade unions. However, the result of this ballot was viewed by the trade unions as unfair. One union officer implied that the company would have "preferred" not to have trade union recognition and alleged that when the ballot was being conducted, the company attempted to ensure that the vote was in its favour:

> They tried all ways, they fiddled the ballot and everything ... we balloted the blue collar workers, they included the staff, the apprentices, the tea woman, just to try to get their non-recognition vote up and it worked the first time but it didn't work the second time.

Due to the overwhelming result of a second ballot an agreement on recognition was reached for hourly paid workers (excluding foremen and chargehands) in the group's UK engineering production facilities to be represented by either the AEEU or the GMB. In this respect, the company's approach to recognition through partnership might be seen as the "least worst" option (Stirling and Wray, 2001). Ultimately, a partnership agreement between the company, the GMB and the AEEU was concluded in 2000, with union leaders and employers supporting the initiative.

The agreement
The agreement was signed for the AEEU and the GMB by the respective general secretaries and regional secretaries, of whom only one, the GMB regional secretary, was based in Tyneside, and none were directly involved in industrial relations in the MCI on a day-to-day basis. While it might be anticipated that an agreement signed in Downing Street with its symbolic value would attract senior union officials, the absence of local level officials is significant when we review the responses.

The agreement also reflects the competing tensions surrounding its development. Thus, the partnership represents a very public statement of commitment to the avoidance of conflict that challenges external perceptions of the industry and with the intention of encouraging customers to place orders with the company. The agreement also reflects the "new realism" of 1990s trade unionism, with its references to binding pendulum arbitration. Finally, in spite of its symbolic groundbreaking nature, its parameters reflect traditional

industrial relations concerns both generally and in the industry. For example, the agreement deals with trade union recognition and representation, job flexibility, disciplinary and grievance procedures, working time, redundancy consultation, health and safety, and equal opportunities. Key issues in relation to partnership can be reviewed in respect of the categories of ideology, process and outcomes that we developed earlier in the paper.

In terms of ideology there are clear and repeated references to the business needs of the company and the trade unions' role in supporting them. Thus:

> Shareholder value and the employees standard of living are dependent on the success of the group in the market place and they [employers and trade unions] commit themselves to do everything necessary in pursuit of the success of the group (Agreement: clause 2).

Significantly, the union role in relation to the labour government is specifically indicated:

> [Employers and trade unions will] act jointly where appropriate for the purposes of political lobbying, promoting the Group and reinforcing customer confidence (Agreement: clause 4).

Questions of process are dealt with through the establishment of "forums for joint consultation" that reflect the ambiguity we discussed earlier in relation to wage (distributive) bargaining and "matters concerning the group's performance on business activities". Employee membership of these forums was managed through the trade unions but the agenda remained firmly in the hands of management who will, through "the president" of the "group council" ". . . approve the content of agenda items". However, the key procedural matter is in relation to the resolution of disputes and the adoption of a so-called "no-strike" clause:

> If a settlement is not reached after a reasonable period of discussion either party can resolve to refer the matter to ACAS for conciliation and if that is unsuccessful for binding pendulum arbitration (Agreement: clause 8).

Partnership agreements elsewhere have not necessarily sought to include references to binding pendulum arbitration which was a characteristic of some collective agreements signed in the 1990s. Its presence here reflects the significance of the desire for a public acknowledgement of the commitment to settling disputes without industrial action. However, the successful implementation of such a clause is strongly dependent on local commitments in an industry where strike action is often unofficial.

In terms of outcomes, we noted earlier Kelly's (1999) references to job security, terms and conditions of employment and union organisation. In the circumstances of the company's move into receivership these issues are clear, and the commitment to job security which it gave is vividly illustrated in retrospect:

> It is acknowledged by the partners, that economic and business conditions can change leading to a situation where the Group may have little or no control over the matter. In such circumstances the Group will endeavour to minimise job loss (Agreement: clause 12).

The third potential gain for the union was of some significance as it related to the question of recognition. We discussed the circumstances of this above, but the agreement clearly offered a formal status for the GMB and the AEEU, and a role in the group forums. However, questions remain as to how far this would have encouraged trade union recruitment or supported effective organisation. In spite of the non-recognition, local officials suggest that union membership is maintained as workers move from yard to yard, so there might be little to gain in terms of numbers. It is also debatable whether the form of organisation and the restricted content of the forums would have encouraged an active workplace trade unionism. However, judgement is reserved not simply because of the potential yard closures but because of the lack of awareness of its content in Tyneside. This was an agreement signed by senior union officials in a group dominated by the major yard in Liverpool rather than the Tyneside outpost. The lack of awareness is graphically illustrated by one local official commenting on "no strike" agreements such as the one in the partnership:

> Well we couldn't agree to that in any shape or form . . . and pendulum arbitration [that's] one thing I don't believe in.

Implementing the agreement

Agreements on the principles of social partnership require evaluation in the light of practice. Issues highlighted in previous research concerning the formulation and implementation of social partnership include Marks *et al.*'s (1998) reference to "ownership" of the agreement. They report that in one of their cases it was the company which set the entire initial bargaining process and excluded union agendas. The social partnership deal was therefore perceived to be "owned" by the employer from the outset. Their conclusion suggests that trade union involvement is crucial to the development of a social partnership programme. Although trade unions were heavily involved in establishing the agenda in our case study, it was at union senior level and company national level where "ownership" of the agreement resided. It is not simply a case of recording "union involvement" but analysing the levels at which that takes place and degrees of involvement and commitment.

A clear problem highlighted from our interviews was that the agreement was weakly filtered down to regional level and divorced from local industrial relations. As support for the agreement was driven by union leaders nationally there remained considerable doubt over the practice and outcomes of the agreement regionally. Despite there being an initial indication of some support by one regional union official:

> It's a fairly new regime at Shields Shiprepairers and I think that they recognised that this was the best way to manage their industrial relations and manage their workplace . . . at local level I think it's working . . . there hasn't been a sniff of trouble.

However, the FTOs directly involved in the industry produced a contrasting set of circumstances and attitudes to the agreement in practice. As one FTO explained:

The management haven't improved their relations with the unions since, so we've got an agreement but ... well I'm over there next week, over another major problem ... and I was in there last week playing hell about the industrial relations.

Another FTO from a different union perceived the social partnership agreement as being "lop-sided" in favour of the employer:

They [Shields Shiprepairers] want to take full advantage of the situation (partnership agreement) ... I am constantly fighting a rearguard action ... the same old bloody thing's there ... the management at the end of the day just lie dead at times I feel.

The interviews with the FTOs directly involved in Tyneside MCI overwhelmingly revealed evidence of continuing conflictual industrial relations. They also indicated their lack of involvement in the deal:

Well, I think with the gift of hindsight it might have been better to involve us a bit more because it's alright to do things at national level, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty everyday stuff, sometimes, you can't put everything into the agreement you want and it's a spirit and intent behind it. You can have all the partnerships in the world, but if there's no spirit and intent then you might as well forget it, so I think that maybe, with the gift of hindsight, they should have spoken to us a bit more prior to signing it ... because I've found that the spirit and intent hasn't been applied ... the agreement's there, but it's there just written.

Respondents were asked whether there had been local meetings with unions and the employer regarding the partnership agreement. We were informed that when the deal had initially been signed, a negotiating committee was established and the regional management, FTOs and shop stewards "went away on the same course". However, FTOs from all unions claimed that the training sessions "did not go well" and were "unsuccessful". Their opinion on these outcomes was:

You're back to people ... you're back to human beings, it's like I said before, if the spirit and intent's not there, it won't work.

In addition to this, it was evident that the regional workforce was completely divorced from the agreement and, when asked as to their knowledge of the deal, one FTO claimed:

As far as them are concerned, we've got an agreement with a company that they deliver the product at the end of the day ... he doesn't want to know if I'm going to go rolling round the floor kissing and hugging the bloody employer, he wants to know what I'm going to do on behalf of him to defend his position in the workplace.

Another officer assumed that the shop stewards would consult with the workforce concerning the social partnership agreement, although he added:

I don't think they're [the workforce] all that bothered, as long as they've got a job and a bit security and a bit in their pocket, that's as far as it goes with them.

However, the relationship between the union officials, shop stewards and members is critical to partnership, and the officers' assumptions about consultation do not necessarily reflect agreement. Indeed, our initial findings suggest clear hostility to partnership in the Tyneside MCI and a distancing

between some stewards and the local officers. One shop steward respondent argued that the full time official should have the responsibility of informing the workforce about social partnership:

> We'll just throw it back in their face and tell them [the union officers] they'll have to come down and tell the lads because obviously this will just flare up. If he wants to tell the men he'd better come down and tell them himself 'cos' there's no way I will.

Partnership was perceived by shop stewards as a way of undermining the union:

> I think the only way it would work is to get rid of the existing stewards and get somebody else who hasn't got a clue.

There was also a strong feeling that the workforce would not accept a partnership agreement, as one shop steward clearly demonstrated:

> I think if we took that to the lads they'll rip their union cards up.

Another shop steward, turning his response to future employment on the river, claimed:

> How could we possibly go anywhere on the river, Bird Shipbuilders or anywhere and say the union's signed an agreement with the employers ... they'll [the workforce] kill us ... they'll kill us. People have fought for probably the last 70-80 years to get, well we haven't got great conditions, but we've got a lot better than we used to, and some people have put their life on the line to get these conditions and some have lost their livelihood by being shop stewards and outspoken, and the union officials are protected, and us sitting here, we could go tomorrow and nobody would give a toss about us, the union wouldn't give a monkeys.

Asked whether a partnership agreement would work, the reply from another shop steward was:

> Definitely not. Not in a million years.

Interviews with FTOs produced a pattern of responses that tended to reflect cynicism towards social partnership. In a number of cases this resulted in negative attitudes and mistrust towards partnership in both principles and practice. Another FTO claimed that the concept of partnership was:

> ... just a term, like windows of opportunity and mission statements, it's all bloody jargon.

Overwhelmingly, all officers working directly with the company perceived that the agreement on Tyneside had proved to be unsuccessful:

> I cannot put my hand on my heart and say that we've delivered anything under the realms of social partnership.

Such findings support previous research by the authors in which it was argued that the partnership agreements become the property of the senior managers and union officials who negotiated them, and local officials and the workforce as a whole may be unsupportive or even unaware of their existence (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1999).

Themes central to partnership principles, such as employee consultation, employee involvement and training, were entirely disregarded throughout the

agenda of the Shields Shiprepairers' agreement. which is another reason perhaps for its shortcomings in practice. In addition to this, these findings support comments made in other research, such as Tailby and Winchester's (2000, p. 381) illustration of how union representatives:

> ... confessed to the flak that they have received from members and activists for their enthusiastic embrace of a closer relationship with management.

Such an "enthusiastic embrace of a closer relationship" between trade unions and management was perceived as being "unnatural" in the dialogue used by some of our respondents. This may be due to the resilient "us and them" attitudes still evident in the industry and may also derive from the pervasive culture of masculinity. Some of the language used by respondents reflects this, with one FTO referring graphically to the social partnership agreement as a "shafter's charter":

> And we get shafted every time by it ... the same old thing just carries on and nobody wants to change it, you've still got the same old cycle ... they just see social partnership as the trade unions baring their buttocks.

It is perhaps unsurprising that such masculine discourse dominates an industry traditionally seen as a male preserve, but it is also a reflection of an industrial relations culture deriving from power-based adversarialism where co-operative or partnership strategies are profoundly challenging. This can also be located within a broader, and strongly gendered, regional culture which is necessarily changing but retains its roots in a strongly traditional industry such as shipbuilding, which is also located in relatively closed communities. The solidarity of those communities and the network of communications within them remain an important underpinning of trade union organisation and access to jobs for a mobile workforce.

Partnership without partnership
Partnership was viewed differently in other yards where formal agreements did not exist but where our respondents would characterise them in terms of their "good" or "bad" industrial relations. As one union official explained:

> I reckon we work more in social partnership with some of the other companies than we do with Shields Shiprepairers, even though we haven't got technically speaking a social partnership deal.

The majority of respondents tended to associate "partnership" with recognition agreements rather than a set of principles that reside in formal agreements. One union official illustrated his perception of such "partnerships":

> The bones of the agreement is that we both work together, to strive to deliver what we're both saying, we work in partnership with each other to improve the company's performance and deliver to the membership better terms and conditions of employment.

Despite an indication of working within some principles of "social partnership", as outlined by the TUC (1999), further analysis revealed a different interpretation of "working in partnership". The meaning attached to the

respondents' perceptions was more one of generating orders for the companies in Tyneside MCI in order to secure employment on the Tyne. This has been a continuous theme throughout the history of shipbuilding on the River Tyne, and the recent situation was reflected in some comments by FTOs:

> We've tended to try to work with the companies to help them survive and it's worked if you look at [Birds] and [Offshore Developments] who've both been through a closure situation and they've come back to life, it's worked because it's been the combined efforts the companies and the unions, the unions using the political arena to persuade the government to assist . . . so even though technically speaking we may not have partnership deals in some of the companies, the actions that take place are along the lines of partnership.

Over recent years, such co-operation has been prominent in the industry. On the initiative of the senior officials of trade unions in Tyneside MCI, and with the involvement of employers, several rallies and lobbies of parliament have taken place to win contracts for the Tyne industries including the highly publicised "Save Our Shipyards: The Maritime Industry Campaign". According to one senior union official:

> The whole thing has been tremendous, and that to me is partnership.

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper for a reconceptualisation of partnership in terms of ideology, process and outcomes as a mechanism for operationalising it and applying it in research. We have also suggested that partnership must be analysed in terms of both its context and in the series of relationships that surround an agreement. In this respect, a partnership agreement may be seen as a reflection of pre-existing change or an attempt to create the basis for future developments. In both respects it can take on the "symbolic" status that it did at Shields Shiprepairers, but for strongly contrasting reasons. In our case study it represented a break from the past but it can also be seen as a "rebranding" of employee relations to the external world as a means of selling a product in a fiercely competitive market. Both the company and the trade union would, therefore, be committed to an agreement with the potential to enhance job security. On the other hand, the partnership grew from conflict over trade union recognition rather than a real change in workplace employee relations, where workers and local officials saw job security undermined by the temporary nature of employment contracts. Moreover, whilst the agreement represented the symbolic ending of partnership negotiations for national officials, it was the beginning of a new relationship for local trade unionists and the Tyneside management – a relationship in which they had been able to make little investment and that had little meaning for them.

We would argue that the partnership agreement at Shields Shiprepairers was a response to a context in which formal trade unionism was seeking to re-assert itself through a legally based recognition agreement. The agreement that was concluded served the company's interests in establishing a relationship with two unions at corporate level and including clauses that restricted industrial action and offered little in terms of participation at lower

levels of the group. The outcome was an agreement that was little known on Tyneside, had little impact and was negatively received by some of the full time officials, and also by the stewards we have interviewed. By contrast, the local full time officers and shop stewards were able to identify other companies in the industry where trade unions had never been de-recognised and a strongly co-operative industrial relations culture has emerged organically. In such circumstances there was little need for partnership agreements when there were established, solidaristic networks between union officers, shop stewards and members alongside strong working relationships with local management. The partnership agreement at Shields Shiprepairers, by contrast, has done little to add to membership levels that had remained strong in spite of non-recognition or to enhance workplace organisation.

While it must be stressed that the agreement was short-lived and outcomes need to be related to other factors than the operation of the partnership itself, there appears to have been little gain and potentially significant loss for the company's workers on Tyneside. The company's shift into receivership clearly brings into doubt any semblance of job security. What remains is the context that created the partnership, and that is the search for new orders and the use of partnership as "symbolic" of good industrial relations and a committed workforce.

References

Brown, W. (2000), "Putting partnership into practice in Britain", annual review article, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 299-316.

Claydon, T. (1998), "Problematising partnership: the prospects for a co-operative bargaining agenda", in Sparrow, P. and Marchington, M., *Human Resource Management: The New Agenda*, FT/Pitman, London.

Commission on Industrial Relations (1971), *Shipbuilding and Ship Repairing*, HMSO, London.

Fitzgerald, I., McBride, J., Stirling, J. and Wray, D. (1999), "Striking back: shop stewards in manufacturing industry", paper presented to the International Labour Process Conference, Royal Holloway College, Egham.

Geddes Report (1966), *Shipbuilding Inquiry Committee 1965-1966, Report*, Cmnd 2,937, HMSO, London.

Guest, D. and Peccei, R. (1998), *The Partnership Company: Benchmarks for the Future: The Report of the IPA Survey*, IPA, London.

Guest, D. and Peccei, R. (2001), "Partnership at work: mutuality and the balance of advantage", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 207-36.

Hammer, T.H. and Stern, R.N. (1986), "A yo-yo model of cooperation: union participation in management at the Rath Packing Company", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 337-49.

Haynes, P. and Allen, M. (2001), "Partnership as a union strategy: a preliminary investigation", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 164-87.

Heaton, N., Mason, B. and Morgan, J. (2000), "Trade unions and partnership in the Health Service", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 22 No. 4, pp. 315-33.

Horvath, W.L. and Svyantek, D.J. (1998), "Participative management in union settings: lessons from Saturn", in Lewin, D. and Kaufman, B.E., *Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations*, Vol. 8, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT.

(The) Journal (2000), 16 August.

Kelly, J. (1996), "Union militancy and social partnership", in Ackers, P., Smith, C. and Smith, P., *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism*, Routledge, London.

Kelly, J. (1999), *British Social Partnership Agreements: Who Wins, Who Loses?*, LSE, London.

Knell, J. (1999), *Partnership at Work*, Employment Relations Research Series 7, Department of Trade and Industry, London.

Kochan, T.A., Katz, H.C. and McKersie, R.B. (1986), *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations*, Basic Books, New York, NY.

Marks, A., Findlay, P., Hine, J. and Thompson, P. (1998), "The politics of partnership? Innovation in employment relations in the Scottish spirits industry", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 36 No. 2.

Roberts, I. (1993), *Craft, Class and Control: The Sociology of a Shipbuilding Community*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Roper, I. (2000), "Quality management and trade unions in local government: demonstrating social partnership?", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 22 No. 5, pp. 442-66.

Stirling, J. and Bridgford, J. (1985), "British and French shipbuilding: the industrial relations of decline", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 7-16.

Stirling, J. and Wray, D. (2001), "What price partnership?", paper presented to the Work, Employment and Society Conference, University of Nottingham, Nottingham.

Tailby, S. and Winchester, D. (2000), "Management and trade unions: towards social partnership?", in Bach, S. and Sisson, K., *Personnel Management*, 3rd ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Taylor, P. and Ramsay, H. (1998), "Unions, partnership and HRM: sleeping with the enemy?", *International Journal of Employment Studies*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 115-43.

TUC (19990, *Partners for Progress: New Unionism in the Workplace*, TUC, London.