

# Academic Workers and Union Membership: An Inevitable Dilution of Solidarity?

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The growth of service employment and new forms of work has supposedly fostered the diffusion of individual orientations at the expense of traditional forms of union solidarity. These developments suggest that academics are likely to manifest an individualist orientation and a weak attachment to trade union membership. Based on a survey of unionized employees in a university setting, we examine whether there are differences in union attachment and solidarity between professionals and other occupational groups.

MANY COMMENTATORS CLAIM THAT DEVELOPMENTS IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY since the end of the 1970s question the continuing relevance of trade unions, solidarity, and collectivism (Clark and Lipset, 1991; Clark and Rempel 1993). It is argued that socio-economic trends such as increasing individualization, the growth of service sector employment, and new forms of work arrangements have fostered the diffusion of individual orientations at the expense of traditional forms of union solidarity (Beck, 1987; Valkenburg, 1996; Zoll, 1996). These developments would suggest that knowledge workers, or professionals in particular, are more likely to manifest an individualist orientation and a weak attachment to trade union membership.

According to Crouch's (1982) rational choice model of union joining, the propensity to join a union will vary depending on the usefulness of the union to the employee, and the intensity of employer opposition. The logic of this model predicts that while blue-collar workers have a high propensity to organize collectively, there will be less incentive for professionals to make a similar choice (Crouch, 1982: 67–74). Lockwood (1989) put forward a more nuanced explanation for the varying propensity for collective organization between manual and white-collar workers. This is based on a contrast between the market, work, and status situation of the white collar and manual employee. In these areas, professional or academic workers may still

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retain a comparatively privileged position. Thus the application of Lockwood's framework to the academic or professional worker would suggest that these workers are unlikely to unionize. Crouch's rational choice model prompts a similar conclusion. Indeed, in the United States, there has been a continuing debate regarding the compatibility of professionalism and unionization (Northrup, 1948; Raelin, 1989; McHugh and Bodah, 2002). Conventional wisdom would suggest that the process of professionalization undermines or dilutes a collectivist orientation (Healy and Kirton, 2002). Thus, academics might be expected to have lower levels of union solidarity or attachment than unionized blue-collar or routine clerical workers. Solidarity can be defined as a community of interests, feelings, and actions (see Bild et al. 1997:1). A community of interests refers to the existence of similar material conditions and a realization that these interests can be best advanced through collective means. If this expectation is correct, academic status in a university setting should be predictable from union-related attitudes. But at least in the sample described in succeeding discussions, confirmation of that expectation was not found.

### Data and Measures<sup>1</sup>

The survey was carried out in an Irish university in March 2002. The sample population consisted of approximately 400 union members, heterogeneous in function and status, organized in a single union. A total of 152 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 38 percent. From these returns, senior managerial (2) and administrative supervisory staff (19) were excluded, leaving a total of 131 respondents. For comparative purposes, respondents were then grouped into three distinct categories. The number and percentage in each category was as follows: 66 or 50 percent were academics, routine administrative staff accounted for 43 or 33 percent, while the remaining skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers accounted for 22 or 17 percent of the total. This is an atypical sample, as multi-unionism is the norm in all other Irish universities. Academics are in the main, represented by the Irish Federation of University Teachers. A single union represents all categories of workers in our sample. Thus, any difference in solidarity between occupational groups cannot be attributed to differences in union character that might arise on a multi-union site (see Scheuer, 1986). Three levels of worker solidarity or three types of interest have been identified (see Bild et al. 1997; Lockwood, 1989; D'Art, and Turner, 2002). Group

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<sup>1</sup> A full description of all the measures used in this study are available from the authors upon request.

solidarity is assessed by a single item measuring the extent of a sense of "them and us" between workers and management. Three items measure the extent of union solidarity: (1) a union is not necessary in this company because management treat workers fairly; (2) if there were no union in this firm, management would take greater advantage of the workforce; and (3) improvements in terms and conditions at work will only be achieved through trade union action (items scored 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree).

Political solidarity is measured by six items: (1) informing workers about social and political issues in society; (2) pushing for laws that help working people in general; (3) pushing for laws that strengthen the ability of unions to represent workers in the workplace; (4) helping nonunion workers to unionize; and (5) fighting for the interests of Irish workers in general (items scored 1 = very important to 4 = not at all important).

Union orientation is a further measure of the member's solidarity and their relationship to the union. The measure is comprised of five categories denoting increasing levels of psychological involvement in union affairs, beginning with those who are reluctant members, secondly, card carriers who are indifferent to the trade union, thirdly, members who are active only on special issues, fourthly, apolitical stalwarts who are active trade unionists but nonpolitical, and finally, ideological activists who are politically/ideologically committed to the union movement and its wider aims. Moreover, it is a proxy measure of the extent to which union members participate in union activities (see Flood, Turner, and Willman 1996). Finally, levels of solidarity may vary depending on the age, gender, and length of union tenure and employment status. In subsequent statistical analyses, these variables are entered as controls. If over time, classes are fragmenting and solidarities weakening, it might be expected that younger workers would have significantly lower levels of solidarity than older workers.

## Results

The levels of group solidarity, union solidarity, and political solidarity are relatively high across the three occupational groupings. Over 70 percent of each occupational group reported a strong sense of "them and us" between workers and managers in the university, and was highest among the administrative employees. The level of union solidarity is extremely high with only a minority (12 percent of administration and 5 percent of academics) agreeing with the statement that a union is not necessary in this organization because management treats workers fairly. Similarly, over 77 percent of all respondents (and 94 percent of academics) felt that if there were no union in their

organization, management would take greater advantage of the workforce. Regarding levels of political solidarity, pushing for laws that working people in general, helping workers to unionize and fighting for the interests of Irish workers, are generally rated as important by 65 to 88 percent of semi-skilled and administrative respondents, and by 52 to 72 percent of academics. There were fewer respondents, between 50 and 67 percent, who regarded informing workers about social and political issues in society as important. In the routine administrative group, 24 percent categorize themselves as active members who have a strong belief in trade unionism compared to 18 and 12 percent, respectively of semi-skilled and academics. However, a much greater proportion of academics describe themselves as loyal and active members who are not interested in the political aspects of trade unionism.

An analysis of variance was used to assess whether there was any statistically significant difference between the occupational categories on the various measures of solidarity and union orientation. There was no statistical difference in the levels of group solidarity, union solidarity, and union orientation between any of the occupational groups. Consequently, both semi-skilled and administration grades have been combined as one category in the subsequent multivariate analysis. A number of controls, age, gender, union tenure, and employment status are used in order to ensure that the presence or absence of a relationship between the occupational groups is not spurious. Indeed, as Table 1 indicates that academics are at least eight times more likely to be males than females.

Separate regression equations are run for each of the independent variables, group solidarity, union solidarity, political solidarity, and union activism (equations 1 to 4). Equation 5 includes all the independent variables together, and equation 6 includes only previously significant variables. Among the control variables, gender is highly significant, indicating as previously noted that females are much more likely to be in the administrative group than the academic group. Only one measure emerges as significantly different between the occupational categories. Academics are less likely to regard fighting for the interests of workers as important. On the basis of these results, differences between the three occupational groups can only be regarded as relatively modest and do not support the prediction that academic workers have significantly lower levels of group, union and political solidarity and union orientation.

## Conclusion

Our findings do not support the expectation that academic workers have significantly lower levels of group, union or political solidarity. Contrary to

TABLE 1  
OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL AND UNION ATTACHMENT

Independent variables	Odds ratios 1	Odds ratios 2	Odds ratios 3	Odds ratios 4	Odds ratios 5	Odds ratios 6
1. Controls						
Age	1.3	1.4	1.1	1.8*	1.6	1.6
Gender	9***	9***	19***	10***	22***	8***
Union tenure	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6*	0.6	0.5*
Employment status	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.6
2. Group solidarity	1.1				0.6	
Sense of "them and us"						
3. Union solidarity						
Union not necessary		1.2			0.8	
No union take advant.		0.9			1.1	
Management's right		0.8			0.5	
4. Political solidarity						
Inform sol/pol issues			0.5		0.5	
Laws to help workers			0.5		0.5	
Help workers unionise			1.6		1.5	
Interests of workers			3.6***		7.3***	2.8***
5. Union orientation				1.0	1.9+	1.5
N	126	126	125	127	119	124
Model chi-square	35***	37***	64***	44***	73***	57***
% predict correctly	72%	73%	78%	75%	85%	78%

Significance levels: \* < 0.05 \*\* < 0.01 \*\*\* < 0.001. The statistical method used is binary logistic regression and the dependent variable is occupation: scored 1 = academics; 0 = skilled and routine administration. The odds ratios for the control and independent variables are reported in the table.

what might be expected, we found there was no significant difference in the levels of solidarity between academics and other occupational groups. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the measure of union orientation, between the three groups. The gradual proletarianization of academic labor appears a plausible explanation for such a result. In the United Kingdom, it is claimed the traditionally unique characteristics of universities as employers and academic work itself are giving way to patterns of management, industrial relations, and work organization familiar in industrial and commercial organizations. Consequently, the previous high-trust/high-discretion nature of academic work is being eroded (Wilson, 1991). Apparently, the collegiality and autonomy enjoyed by academics has been displaced by tight management control (see also Burchill, 2001). Irish universities, at any rate, have not experienced the same competitive pressures.

Academics within the Irish system still retain high levels of autonomy and discretion in their jobs, and their influence in collegial governance has

not diminished. Thus, in the Irish context, many of the conditions identified for academic proletarianization appear to be absent.

If as a general explanation, the proletarianization thesis is inadmissible, then the similar levels of solidarity between the three occupational groups may be explained by the particular nature of the university under study, and its comparatively recent establishment. Granted university status in the 1990s, it lacked the status, privilege, and prestige, which time, reputation, and tradition had bestowed on the older universities. The absence of these conditions may have facilitated a common identity with other employees. Indeed, the coverage of all occupational grades by a single union is unique to this particular university, and may have reinforced a sense of common interest.

Another factor explaining the high levels of solidarity and activism among the academics surveyed may be the more adversarial industrial relations climate particular to the university. For instance, there is a higher usage of government agencies such as the Labor Relations Commission and the Labor Court in the university under study than the older universities. Finally, the very nature of the market system and its operation may also explain these findings. A tendency of capitalist market systems is to erode the diffuse relationships, characteristic of traditional societies, to one of the cash nexus (Marx and Engels, 1968; see also Kuttner, 1999). Indeed, it has been suggested, that in modern societies, status is most easily determined by reference to the market. That been so, then the constraints upon behavior provided by the professional self-image and intellectualism will have to be very strong to prevent unionized academics acting like any other trade union (see Kleingartner, 1967; Loveridge, 1968). Ultimately, beyond the speculative, it is difficult to definitively explain the findings. This will require further comparative research in other single or multi-unionized academic institutions.

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