

**POLICY AND PRACTICE IN  
GENERAL PRINT: THE  
WORKPLACE REALITY OF  
NATIONAL BARGAINING**

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**Abstract**

As a counterweight to analysis which stresses the necessity of moves to individual or workplace bargaining in the UK and Australia, the paper investigates the operation of the National Agreement in the General Printing Industry in the UK. Set against a highly competitive, technologically dynamic environment, the paper demonstrates the general resilience of the National Agreement alongside a complex and uneven picture at the level of the workplace.

# **POLICY AND PRACTICE IN GENERAL PRINT: THE WORKPLACE REALITY OF NATIONAL BARGAINING**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The globalisation debate and in particular its subset regarding the inevitability of flexibility in labour terms has predicted or demanded the end of trade unions, at worst, or, at best, the end of national systems of collective bargaining to be replaced by company or workplace based schemes. Although recent trends in trade union membership in Australia, the US and UK have called this doomsday scenario into question, there still remains a debate as to how far surviving union structures are empty shells or real living organisms. It is in this light that we want to examine the day-to-day lived reality of union organisation under one of the last remaining nationally negotiated multi-employer collective bargaining agreements, that between the GPMU (the Graphical Paper and Media Union) and the BPIF (British Printing Industries Federation) covering workers in general print. We are not seeking to explain here why the National Agreement exists, rather our focus is on the relationship between the Agreement's terms and conditions and what actually exists in workplaces.

The WIRS/WERS found that evidence of multi-employer bargaining fell from 41 per cent of private manufacturing workplaces in 1984 to just six per cent in 1998 (Cully et al 1999). The researchers claimed, "The declining importance of multi-employer bargaining over this period reflects the demise of national agreements in industries such as engineering, textiles and cement manufacture" (1999: pp 187-188). Indeed, Gospel and Druker (1998) in their study of national bargaining in the electrical contracting industry describe that industry as a 'deviant case'. The importance of sector is brought out by Arrowsmith and Sisson (1999) in their emphasis on the relevance of structural boundaries created by market, technology and labour. They argue in their study of four sectors, one of which was print, that employers in the settlement of pay and working time continue to move 'like ships in a convoy' (1999:63). The 'convoy principle' is evident in general print, where the influence of the National Agreement stretches beyond firms who are members of the BPIF to non-federated (particularly very large and very small) firms.

The industrial relations characteristics of the general print sector are complex and paradoxical and appear to challenge the general trends in contemporary industrial relations. The general print sector consists of a number of analytically distinct sub-sectors. There is also a sharp sectoral division by size, with large firms characterised by massive merger and concentration amongst increasingly international giants alongside a vast army of SMEs with increasing specialisation in niche markets. What little industrial relations research there is in the sector concentrates on the giants. Indeed a recent influential report on the printing industry claimed that despite its prominent position in the UK economy, the sector is one of the least documented (Keynote 2000).

Historically, trade unions in the printing industry were characterised as strong, closed unions with a high degree of autonomy over the management of labour. The GPMU reflects the contemporary picture of unionism in print. It is the result of a merger in 1991, between two unions that represented workers in the paper, packaging and printing sectors, the National Graphical Association 1982 (NGA) and the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades 1982 (SOGAT), which is often described as a marriage of convenience. Ostensibly, the NGA represented the craft workers in the industry while SOGAT represented the semi-skilled and un-skilled workers, although there was some blurring around the edges. The NGA was a largely male dominated union while SOGAT catered for a high proportion of women members mostly employed in hand finishing work in binderies (Webster 1996). The technological changes that were rapidly being introduced into the industry were breaking down what had previously been clear demarcation lines and led to inter and intra union conflict. This amalgamation was the last in a long line of printing unions that had come together over the years, not 'borne out of a love of each other' but rather because a failure to amalgamate 'would not resolve the inter-union disputes between SOGAT and the NGA. It was only through coming together to form one union that such problems could be permanently resolved' (Gennard and Bain 1995: 238). There was a realisation that there was a better chance for maintaining some control over workplace conditions when united than in opposition. There was furthermore an increasing understanding that print was rapidly being subsumed into a much wider media industry structure.

Despite the existence of giants in the industry, the general print sector is characterised, in numerical terms, by small firms, which the conventional wisdom suggests generally tend to be less unionised. The general print sector is the exception to this. Some 89 per cent of print workers are found in firms employing less than ten people; the average number of people per firm is nine (Gennard et al 2000:11).

The general printing sector forms a part of the wider printing industry and is often confused with the newspaper industry. For example, Gennard argues that the media attention attributed to the newspaper unrest "created the impression in the minds of the general public that the NGA is predominately a newspaper union", but provides statistics to show that this was far from true and that in fact only eight per cent of the total membership of the NGA was employed in newspaper production (1990:468). This important distinction is emphasised by Elgar and Simpson who point out that their "research on the trade union side confirmed that the newspaper and general printing sectors were seen to be quite distinct and that management – and trade union – approaches in the two sectors were markedly different". The writers go on to highlight the extent of change that the industry has undergone between the 1970s and the 1990s and how, in contrast to the newspaper sector, "considerable change had been achieved in printing without major confrontations with the unions" (Elgar and Simpson 1994:11).

## METHOD

The research has been undertaken in three parts in a region close to London, a regional labour market characterised, generally, by low unemployment and skill shortages.

Firstly, a brief closed interview survey was undertaken during 1997/8 by officials of the GPMU to provide accurate mapping information on membership by company to aid recruitment and retention. 118 questionnaires were completed from a possible 130 chapels<sup>1</sup> (91 per cent response rate). The companies that were surveyed were all considered to 'work under the umbrella of the National Agreement' but 60 per cent of all companies were not members of the employers' association, the BPIF. This broadly reflects the national picture (BPIF 1999). This is interesting in that the industrial relations literature tends to focus on non-union member coverage in analysis of collective bargaining; less attention is paid to the resilience of national bargaining influence with respect to non-employer association members.

Secondly, the mapping exercise was followed by a postal survey in late 1998 of the 118 chapels. This resulted in a return of 63 questionnaires which represented 42 organisations<sup>2</sup> (a response rate of 53 per cent). The postal survey provided data about pay and conditions, union organisation, new technology and flexibility at work, equality and management style. Only three companies in the sample employed more than 100 people and 16 employed over 50, therefore the majority of the sample were small companies.

Finally, the survey was followed up with an interview programme during 1999/2000. FOCs. (Fathers of the Chapel) and one MOC (Mother of the Chapel) from 16 companies were interviewed and the aim was to explore the postal survey issues more deeply. For the purposes of anonymity, the firms to which we refer are given pseudonyms derived from one of their main production purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Printing has traditionally adopted a different nomenclature to the rest of the trade union movement. In printing, a branch is synonymous with a geographical region, a chapel is comparable to a workplace branch. A branch secretary is a full-time paid regional official of the union and a shop steward is referred to as a father or mother of the chapel (FOC or MOC).

<sup>2</sup> An organisation may operate under a single trading name or comprise two or more trading names. Equally, one organisation may house one or more chapel.

## THE RESEARCH

### The Context

The general print sector is dominated by small firms and the region studied was no exception (see table 1). We estimate that union density in the firms surveyed is 53 per cent with higher density in the press and pre-press areas. The sector is diverse and complex producing a wide range of print products. These include magazine and periodical production, advertising literature, books, diaries and calendars, brochures, children's books, leaflets, business cards and stationery, printed labels, programmes and tickets and packaging, etc. An interesting characteristic of this sector is the number of companies operating under the umbrella of one organisation and owner. This has important ramifications for industrial relations negotiations which are often carried out with the same owner for multiple companies. Threats of action are constrained across such an organisation by the laws on secondary picketing.

Despite the research being undertaken in the south-east labour market, all firms' labour turnover appears to be low or virtually non-existent. There is little evidence of mobility in search of higher wages amongst skilled workers and the London labour market appears to hold little attraction.<sup>3</sup> This is partly explained by the relatively high wages paid in the print sector. Whilst basic rates are generally adhered to, gross pay is also the result of a huge reliance on overtime. The National Agreement covers three grades of workers, Class I, II and III.<sup>4</sup> Most employment is in pre-press and press areas, work that is categorised as skilled, relatively well paid, full-time and dominated by men. Any evidence of casualisation or part-time, fixed term contracts, etc., was limited to the binderies in general print and in firms such as diary makers and direct mail; in these sub-sectors the work force is largely female, the work is classified as unskilled and there is much greater reliance on casual or temporary labour. The existence of a gendered hierarchical structure in the industry is reflected in the interviews. From the transcripts it is clear that the so-called 'craft' or skilled tasks are dominated by men and that women are mainly concentrated in the clerical and finishing areas. Only in two firms were women involved in skilled work – typesetting in one and a woman being trained in skilled tasks in the bindery in another. There were no women in any of the machine rooms we visited. Post press was almost a totally female domain but men undertook the higher paid jobs, attributed as 'skilled'. This was clearly demonstrated in the direct mail company where all the 'skilled' tasks were undertaken by men and the 'bench' work allocated to women, many of whom were employed on a part time basis and complimented by casuals on an 'as and when' basis.

Skill shortages are exacerbated by little evidence of training and there are few apprentices and no female apprentices. There is little or no promotion/career development on offer. Caucasian workers dominate the industry; the only person from a minority ethnic group in the survey firms was an agency temporary worker. The traditional process of recruitment through the union, though still in evidence, has largely broken down. Recruitment now is through job centres, adverts or informal networks more closely resembling the pattern found in most small to medium sized firms. Despite commitment (at least rhetorical) to the concept of equal opportunity, there appears to be no evidence that the traditional highly gendered division of labour has broken down in the remotest sense.

<sup>3</sup> There was evidence of low labour turnover among the companies in the area. One FOC emphasised that 'some of the lads have been here most of their lives' (BookCo) and another commented 'being here for 20 years is nothing like unusual' (ColourCo).

<sup>4</sup> Examples of these grades of workers:

**PRE-PRESS: CRAFT/CLASS I** - Scanner Operator, Planner-platemaker, Apple Mac Operator, Proofing, **CLASS II** - Platemaker, Film Stripper

**PRESS ROOM: CRAFT/CLASS I** - No.1 Machine Minder, No.2 Machine Minder, Machine Minder, **CLASS II** - Small Offset Machine Minder, Machine Assistant

**POST PRESS: CLASS I** - bookbinders, machine rulers, experienced cutters, envelope machine adjusters, **CLASS II** - persons engaged in the following operations: casemaking, quarter binding, indexing, laying on gold, person in charge of automatic fed sewing machine, **CLASS III** - other operations including: baling waste, ahnd banding, book canceling, book packing, creasing, dyeletting, inspection and checking, jacketing, sewing machine assistant, lithographic preparers.

Table 1 provides a summary of the firms in both the mapping exercise and the subsequent survey.

**Table 1: Size of Firms (No. of Employees)**

Size Band	No. of Firms in Mapping Exercise	No. of Firms in Survey
0 - 4	2	1
5 - 9	21	7
10 - 19	34	12
20 - 49	37	17
50 - 99	13	3
100+	3	1
Total	110*	42+

\* 8 chapels did not identify number of employees in the company.

+ this figure does not account for the multiple trading names of companies operating in the sector nor multiple chapels. The survey does account for multiple chapels hence the total return of 63 questionnaires.

Table 2 demonstrates the significance of unionisation in these firms and reminds us of the importance of not deterministically associating the size of a firm with non-unionisation, with the majority of respondents reporting that they had no non-union members (see Rainnie 1989). Table 2 demonstrates that whilst this is the case, it is important to note that within print there are different sub-sectors and that these have different levels of union organisation. The GPMU branch mapping exercise indicated that all workplaces had union members but the proportions varied by grade and occupation. The high union density areas were in the pre-press and the press areas, areas associated with higher graded pay and dominated by men. The mapping exercise was used by the union to identify potential membership areas in recognised companies as part of their retention, recruitment and reorganisation strategy and known as an 'in-fill' exercise.

**Table 2: Respondents Reporting NO non-union employees in Mapping Exercise**

Section	No Non-union %	Total Respondents
Pre Press	60 (55)	110
Press	71 (65)	110
Post Press	59 (54)	110
Average proportion of chapels reporting no non-union members	58%	110

Despite the relatively high proportion of *de facto* closed shops evident in the study, this level of organisation is not translated into chapel activity. The postal survey revealed variable practice in the frequency of chapel meetings but the pattern demonstrated that chapels did not meet often; there were exceptions in that eight chapels met at least fortnightly whilst at the other extreme some did not meet at all. Further explorations in interviews demonstrated that chapel meetings tended to be called when problems arose, echoing union organisation in other sectors dominated by small firms (see Rainnie 1989).

The study shows that some ten years after the NGA and SOGAT amalgamation, in some cases there are still two chapels in practice and where there are unified chapels they are usually dominated by male former NGA members. Again with the aim of providing a picture of chapel activists, respondents reported that few union representatives had received time off for union training in the last two years. Only nine had received such training whereas 53 had not. This is likely to be because many of the representatives are long standing. Whilst this may provide the explanation, the changing nature of industrial relations suggests that union training remains important to activists as a means to inform and to motivate (see Kirton and Healy 2001). Interestingly specialist training in health and safety provided a different picture; union organisation in health and safety indicated that broadly half of the chapels had safety representatives and a slightly higher figure (58 per cent) had received time off for health and safety training. This pattern was not repeated in the specialist area of equal opportunities with some 54 per cent reporting having a policy whilst only 5 per cent reported having specialist training in the area, despite the union provision of such training.

## **NATIONAL AGREEMENT**

The National Agreement sets base rates and annual basic increases which are adhered to a greater or lesser degree but provides a basic order for an industry dominated by SMEs. However, where the wage increase by National Agreement was once a minimum basis for house agreements supplemented by second tier bargaining, the increase set by the National Agreement now tends to set the industry standard (Telford 1995).

**Table 3: Pay Determination analysed by basic pay, basic plus extras and individually agreed pay**

Method of pay determination	N=	%
Basic plus extras	17	29
Basic	25	42
Individually agreed	17	29
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100</b>

From Table 3, it is evident that the dominant form of pay for this region is determined by the basic increase or basic increase plus extras set by the National Agreement. Therefore there is a high degree of compliance with the National Agreement with regard to pay. However, it is nevertheless of note that some 29 per cent of respondents stated that pay was individually determined. Labour market shortages mean that when printing workers are recruited they are able to individually negotiate their starting pay rate. In this context, the comments of the GPMU General Secretary are noteworthy. He argues that 'poaching is a major problem for the industry, but is the inevitable outcome of the current situation. It also pushes up wage rates which may be good for our individual members, but it is certainly not good for the industry as a whole' (Dubbins 2001). Poaching is a reflection of the skill shortages experienced across the sector. Concern about skill shortages was reflected in a recent study on competitiveness in the UK printing industry which concluded that: 'printing is facing a serious 'skills squeeze'. The average level of skill required is increasing and more workers need to be multi-skilled' (BPIF 2001).

**Table 4: Proportion of Respondents who received BPIF minimum rates**

	N=	%
More than BPIF minimum	50	81
Same as BPIF minimum	9	14
Less than BPIF minimum	3	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>

From Table 4, it is clear that the BPIF minimum rates are paid in all but three cases. Even so, it is of concern that even three are paid below in a highly union aware industry. In addition, the survey demonstrated that there was almost universal compliance with the Agreement's provisions on working hours, overtime and holiday entitlement and this was supported in the qualitative phase of the work.

Nevertheless there was some blurring around the edges of the provisions of the Agreement in respect of pay and was manifest when the issue of machine extras is considered. In the detail of the agreement on pay there is a calculation for machine and photocomposition extras, however, although two firms in the study acknowledged that this element of the Agreement was still adhered to, the other chapels appeared to have accepted that 'extras' had been somehow absorbed into house rates. Very few chapels acknowledged that there was any discussion about the implementation of the annual increase, further reducing the opportunity for second tier bargaining. Where discussion did take place, it was more to do with what the company could claw back under some form of cost recovery. It is worth emphasising that although secondary tier collective

bargaining appears to be on the wane, and the position of machine extras is ambiguous, the strength in the local labour market that skill shortages gives skilled workers means that not only are national minima adhered to but real pay levels (albeit heavily reliant on overtime) are way above minimum rates.

## TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

The pace of technological change in parts of the general print sector is rapid and reflects the highly competitive market place. However, some areas seem unaffected by recent technological change; thus the findings demonstrate the uneven development of technology. It ranges across the sector from the retention of seemingly mediaeval style machines to shifts to PC, and computer to plate, technology and further shifts to digital technology with the corresponding differential effects on work. Speed of introduction is at least in part related to the degree of competition that owners/managers perceive in their particular niche.

Table 5a and 5b set out the incidence of new technology and its effects. Twenty-six (26) (42 per cent) of respondents reported new technologies being introduced in the previous three years. Of this group, ten reported that technology had been imposed, nine that it had been introduced after consultation and only two that it had been introduced after negotiation. Only three respondents reported that the union had influenced changes but interestingly the vast majority indicated that the union's power had not changed. It is acknowledged that these are very small numbers but knowledge of industry practices would suggest that the lack of negotiation and involvement in technological change is fairly typical.

**Table 5a: New Technology (NT): incidence and effects**

	Yes (%)	No (%)	N=
Have any NT been introduced in the last three years	26 (42)	36 (58)	62
Did NT lead to job transfers	10 (24)	29* (71)	41
Did NT lead to job losses	4 (10)	37 (90)	41
Did the union influence changes	3 (9)	31 (91)	34

\*2 respondents (5 per cent) stated 'don't know'



**Table 5b: New Technology: Consultation and Power**

	(%)	N=
Were NT changes		
a) imposed	10 (48)	
b) introduced after consultation	9 (43)	
c) introduced after negotiation	2 (10)	21
What effect has the change had on union power		
a) increased	0	
b) decreased	6 (19)	
c) no change	25 (81)	31

With the same caveat about small numbers, it is noteworthy that only four responses (of 41) indicated that new technologies had lead to job loss, although ten reported that they did lead to job transfer. This suggests that whilst labour is in an uncertain position, this has not manifested itself in job losses to the extent that might be expected. However, this is not to suggest that restructuring does not lead to a reduced number of jobs through natural wastage, some of which may be prompted by the restructuring<sup>5</sup>.

The in-depth interviews provided more detailed insights. The nature of the organisation seemed to shape the context alongside the competitive environment in which they operated. The firms varied but the 'boss' was a critical actor. The boss, more often than not, had been a printer, a current (or past) union member who had a degree of empathy with printing traditions. The new generation of owners are as likely to be professional managers with a different approach to the work and the balance sheet (see Rainnie 1993). Nevertheless, their approach to technology varied from 'he's very much a bloke for the latest technology' (*General Print Co*) to 'we've been dragged screaming into the nineties' (*Label Co*).

The uneven development of the technology is illustrated at Stationery Co:

... some of the machines are quite old, the machine I actually operate is a rotary web offset machine and during the Second World War it was bricked up, I'm not joking, so the Germans didn't bomb it. .... but it still holds a brilliant register, it's superb, it's got three leads coming through spot on. It's like amazing, I don't know how it does it. *Representative Stationery Co*.

This was not untypical in that within the same firm old technological processes were used as well as the newer computerised Apple Mac technology. This example offers insight into the complexity of new technology in general print. Old machines may be viewed as obsolete and cause problems of maintenance, speed and competitiveness, but this, as is seen from the rotary web offset machine mentioned above, is not necessarily the case. Secondly, the above example demonstrates that technology is not introduced in huge waves of changes, rather, it is introduced in a piecemeal fashion. There is a complex relationship between quality of production, competitiveness, new technologies, union organisation and continued reliance on the range of skills that printers possess. This complexity defies a simple unilinear model of deskilling and also goes some way to explaining the highly uneven sub sectoral development that general print displays.

<sup>5</sup> In this region, general print does not seem to have been affected by the major redundancies experienced in, for example, the paper making sector.

It was evident from the interviews that the pre-press sub-section had experienced the greatest technological change and was more likely to have experienced job losses. The following comment from a FOC captures the complexity of experience that emerges with technological change. Job loss, uncertainty, retraining, new patterns and methods of working all directly resulted from these changes.

Well the jobs in the pre-press, they had some redundancies earlier this year.... .....shift working of different kinds will be going to day working and some of them will be trained on CTP<sup>6</sup> equipment when it's installed, it hasn't been installed yet by the way, it's in the process of sorting out to be installed in the next few weeks or whenever, we not quite sure of the date yet so and then some of those people who are ex planner plate-makers will have to be trained up on new equipment, as CTP operators, which is what I call it, (the) company called (them) CTP assistants. *FOC Magazine Co.*

The quotation indicates how technological change may spur fresh local informal negotiations. In this case, the labelling of CTP workers was critical; CTP operators would be paid at grade I, whereas assistants at grade II. The outcome was that the union negotiated the retention of grade I, but management indicates that the war is not over by persisting in using the 'assistant' labelling.

Avoidance of redundancy was a key aim of the union and there was evidence that this was often achieved in practice.

.... I think a lot of the contention was the fact that number 1s, they're talking about new machinery in and cutting back on number 2s. They wouldn't force redundancy on people they'd expect them to be trained where the company needs them. As far as technology goes anything like the jobs no longer required through technology they would put people into other areas and expect them to be trained up. *FOC Medical Co.*

In some firms there was a clear trade off between productivity, new technology and employment. The following representative argued that whilst you do not need so many people on the machines, there were no job losses when the productivity was seen to rise. 'So far now you know, they just make the profits, all they do is make a profit, they'll always pick the, they'll always pick the money side of it'. (*FOC Book Co.*) Here there seemed to be frequent informal negotiations around job control and pay. The following comments are illuminating:

we sorted out the agreement but it wasn't sorted out straight away, because the way that the law is these days we carried on *status quo*, still running that machine is, .... (and then with the introduction of a bigger press) we went for two number 1s .... so um in the end we got kind of biggish pay rise so um it changed, changed the idea, but basically you do need, it's not so much the 2s, number 1 and number 2 now, I should imagine you need three men on there really because the jobs they're putting on there like, ....preparation and that but we'll have to see how it goes, that is going to be sorted out, .... six months trial thing, see how things sort out. *FOC Book Co.*

In other firms, the reality of the survey results on consultation are brought to life:

There's no discussion with the chapel at all. *FOC Medical Co.*

and

Tell you afterwards, this is where it's bringing in a lot of moans and groans, oh I'm not going to do this, I'm not doing that and they just turn round and do it. *FOC Specialist Co.*

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<sup>6</sup> CTP is an acronym for Computer to Plate – device to expose lithographic printing plates directly from computerised data (definition drawn from Birkenshaw et al. (1999)).

When reminded that in the past bringing in new equipment was always a bargaining issue, the representative responded:

Yes that's right but ha they just seem to do it here and then (the chapel) moan afterwards, and they didn't get nothing, I mean it's just stupidity it really is, the con of it all is, oh we've got this in but you've got to learn it and then when you've learnt it, you don't seem to ha it (the enhanced payment) don't seem to happen. *FOC Specialist Co.*

Informal promises seem to be made which do not materialise.

The following quotations are important in that they gives insights into the changing nature of work and its contradictory impact on job control and also on skill levels.

(*pause*) .... right, I should imagine it was a lot easier then than it is now, I mean you have to .... you sit there and tap, it's computerised so much, the type of work we do is such, so involved, it's not like normal uh sort of book work or anything like that, it's all technical and maths and everything like that so, it is quite involved whereas when you used to have to set your own keyboards, you used to tap it out and come out on the old caster, you'd have it there but now it's so involved, things disappear um .... sense and god knows what, especially when it goes from one RIP<sup>7</sup>, you know what a RIP is, to another RIP, so you've got two RIPs, one sending it one way, one to another and they're not compatible so you get funny little things that disappear or different symbols come up and it's only by chance you pick them up, it's sides where in the old days you only, where you only got a problem with the salt disappearing or coming up now and again on the old metal, now you reprint loads of jobs which by chance you well unluckily you've missed because the readers are not going to pick it up .... until you go to films go round the other side virtually and then there's something in there gone wallop, and that happens a lot, .... I should say to what it used to be in the old days, must be horrendous. *FOC Specialist Co.*

and

The new machine makes things easier because I mean like the skill of your job is going because I mean on the old press, you have to put a set of plates on, set your colour and fit the plates back again, put in nuts and bolts, new press, automatic plate loading, put them in, I mean where it takes on the old press twenty minutes to put full plates on, you can do a plate a minute on the new press, you scan the plates where you put them on, you get a card, put it in the press and it says .... and they are like ninety, ninety five percent correct and if all, you push a button .... so in some ways I think the CD is easier but they want four hours of it so what it is, where it takes us on average say an hour to make ready on the old press, you're talking, you're hardly talking twenty minutes on the new press. *FOC General Print Co*

## **FLEXIBILITY**

Flexibility is the mantra of the modern period, and the general print sector is not immune. But once again reality is far more complex than contemporary ideologies of 'the necessity of flexibility' would have us believe. On flexibility, the National Agreement now states that

'subject to suitable training and the necessary health and safety requirements, full flexibility of working between all occupations and elimination of demarcation lines is accepted' (BPIF 2001:4).

Flexibility clauses were first introduced into the former NGA/SOGAT agreements as a trade off for the shorter working week gained in 1981 (see Gennard 1990:417 and Gennard and Bain 1995:475). Full

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<sup>7</sup> RIP is an acronym for Raster Image Processor - computer used to translate computer files into viewable or printable image at variable resolution (definitions drawn from Birkenshaw et al (1999)).

flexibility across all departments as opposed to within departments was first introduced to the GPMU/BPIF agreement in 1994. Bearing in mind the strong traditions of demarcation in printing, this agreement is undoubtedly significant in the history of industrial relations in general print. We were interested to see how this manifests itself in practice. Table 6 indicates that 86 per cent of GPMU members surveyed are required to work flexibly but interestingly (again bearing in mind the traditional 'closed' nature of the union), 97 per cent were willing to work flexibly. This is important in that it shapes the culture around which flexible working patterns operate. However, further investigation indicates that this flexibility is constrained by departmental boundaries. Whilst 90 per cent are required to work flexibly within departments, this drops to 66 per cent when flexibility is considered between departments. Given that differently graded work is separated by departments, existing patterns of segregation by grade or by sex are less likely to be changed by flexibility requirements. Table 6 also demonstrates that whilst local arrangements are not in place for two thirds of the chapels in the survey, it is nevertheless important to note that one third reported that they had local arrangements for keeping machines running.

**Table 6: Respondents Perceptions of Flexible Working Practices**

Flexibility	Yes (%)	No (%)	N=
Are GPMU members <b>required</b> to work flexibly	53 (86)	9 (15)	62
Are GPMU members <b>willing</b> to work flexibly	57 (97)	2 (3)	59
Are GPMU members required to work flexibly			
a) within departments	47 (90)	5 (10)	52
b) between departments	35 (66)	18 (34)	53
Do you have local arrangements for keeping machines running	18 (33)	36 (67)	54

Despite the provision of the National Agreement allowing for full flexibility of tasks across all departments, with the consequential breaking down of demarcation lines, there is little evidence of full flexibility being applied. However, flexibility within departments has become the norm. Pre-press workers tend to be adaptable across all the disciplines. In the press and post press areas workers are competent in undertaking higher graded tasks, and the Agreement requires the higher rate for the job to be paid for the day when the higher grade task is performed (BPIF 2000 Agreement:11)<sup>8</sup>. However, when it comes to cross-departmental flexibility there appears to be no call from employers to use this facility. It is worth commenting on the way this works in practice. In Label Co., for example, it initially appeared that there was flexibility both within and between departments, with a preparedness to work on a range of machines, and that the higher rate was available with the transfer. However, with some probing during the interview it was evident that the dominant practice was to restrict flexibility to within departments. For example:

Plate making, no we're never asked to go in there, it's a different world in there (*all laugh*) I wish we were in the summer, I tell you, they've got all the air conditioning there, any excuse to go down and change the plates up or anything oh we're straight down there like you know no uh no they, plate makers are plate makers and whatever they do down there and that's it *FOC Label Co.*

The complexity of the variety of printing processes may superficially conceal the degree of flexibility that works in practice.

<sup>8</sup> Until 1999, the Agreement provided that the higher grade payment should apply for the whole week in which the upgraded work was done. In 2000, the provision changed to the day in which the upgraded work was done.

Functional flexibility is often seen as a management tool to ensure that capital and labour are used to their optimum. However, the qualitative research uncovered patterns where management were 'reluctant flexibilisers': 'the lads on the machines are not allowed to go on to the new machine' *FOC General PrintCo*. He went on to illustrate his point 'When they're short of number 2s, the only person that's allowed to go to the back of that press is me, the other number 2s won't be able to'.

The constrained nature of flexible practices between departments is evident in this firm.

'if we've got no work in the machine room, they might ask us to go and stand on the end of the muller, or take us up a folder but they won't, it will only be menial uh manual work, it won't be actually setting the machine or being responsible for the machines. ... and if they've got no work in the warehouse, they've never been called up. *FOC General Print Co*

At another company the FOC remarked "there's some agreement .... to say that we're quite willing to be taught to make plates etc., or learn the pre-press side of it, but it didn't happen" *Book Co*.

This pattern was repeated in for example, MedicalCo, General Print Co and MagazineCo, where FOCs admitted to instances of people being asked to assist in busy departments during slack periods, but this was almost entirely confined to performing ancillary tasks which required no training.

There was also evidence of autonomous rule making by the local union on flexible working between departments

we've got a policy, a chapel policy of not doing it, unfortunately some people do especially in the pre-press to go out and help in the binding and that sort of thing um they do it, then we find out about it afterwards ..

I'm a machine minder by the way, and we base everything on that, you might say it's the machine that rules, it is the machine that is the boiler house, you might say, because we've always done it, we've always kept it that we will stay in our own departments rather than being slung here, there and everywhere, which we're all afraid could happen I think, well it would happen if we would let it. *FOC Magazine Co*.

In this firm, there were no shifts between departments except for the odd individual. To do this was seen by the union as the first step to surrendering control that had been built up around the machine minding customs. In the interview there was evidence of cracks in controlling these rules.

They have to volunteer, at least we have got that now, we say to them they shouldn't be pressurised into it, it's up to them if they want to volunteer or to ask, if they say no, they say no you know. *FOC Magazine Co*.

However, the 'reluctant flexibilisers' transform when it comes to temporal flexibility. The reliance on a large and ubiquitous amount of overtime is related to the reasons for reluctant flexibility in other areas. It is cheaper and easier to rely on extended hours for existing trained workers than either to recruit new staff or upgrade existing staff. However, this is not without its own problems from management's point of view. For example, in *BookCo*., 'I mean sometimes some weekends, he can't get the two CD lads to work, he takes to threats'. It is evident from this study that in some cases the reluctance to 'flexibilise' may have its roots in the balance sheet. This was raised by one FOC who accepted there was some flexibility but that the company said

"the cost of training people to two different departments is a waste of money .... it's two lots of training, they'd rather have people in the same department, there's lots of flexibility within departments" *StationeryCo*.

The paper has already drawn attention to the potential costs of flexibility. The payment for flexible practices where people worked between grades was contentious. When asked if a number 2 would get the rate of a number 1, the reply in *Magazine Co* was:

That's another ongoing argument that is actually, that's another thing that we're still arguing about because they all, the company have maintained that the person who negotiated the original shift agreement eight to ten years ago, always maintained that um that included extra money on the rate to cover this eventuality only we never got anything, they never got anything in writing at the time so uh it's an ongoing argument shall we say *FOC Magazine Co*.

The argument is not confined to the negotiation table, whether formal or informal, it translates into working practices:

In practice um number 1 goes away, number 2 steps up and someone else either a float minder or someone on another machine will come over and work with them for a week and they have to accept that um there won't be a lot of production, productive production coming out of that machine for that week .... (because) there isn't the extra money to get at the moment *FOC Magazine Co*.

The representative then developed this argument around what really happened:

Oh yeah, I mean the point is, the point is really to be perfectly honest, we've got number 1's and number 2's but most of us work as a team anyway, I mean it won't stop, the number 1 won't stand in front of the machine on the computer and say well I'm not moving there, .... loaded up, he'll do it. *FOC Magazine Co*.

The above quotation suggests that in this firm, flexibility and teamworking are very much on the union's terms. When management requires change, forms of negotiation take place which impact on working practices. The reluctance surrounding functional flexibility in general print is multi-faceted: there is a reluctance to invest in the required training and payments, and a push to 'downward flexibility' interrelating with a perceived historical unacceptability in the face of traditional skilled union opposition leading to a constant struggle over the frontier of control at a time when skilled labour is at a premium in a profitable, competitive industry with acute skill shortages. No such reluctance was evident in the case of temporal flexibility.

## INTENSIFICATION

In general print, a complex picture emerges on the impact of flexibility on the labour process. The impact of flexible working on existing relationships between members of the formerly separate unions and between union and non-union members was explored. As can be seen from Table 7, on the whole these relationships were not adversely affected by flexible arrangements with 83 per cent and 90 per cent reporting that flexible working practices had not caused problems between union members and union members and non union members respectively. This is important in the light of the merger between the NGA and SOGAT which did aim to resolve inter-union disputes. It is all the more interesting in that it might be expected that such disputes would simply translate to intra-union disputes.

The majority of respondents reported that work had intensified and become more stressful in the last three years. Bearing in mind the uneven development of technological change in the industry, both between sub-sectors and within particular firms, it is of particular note that 57 per cent reported that work had become more stressful and 58 per cent more intensive. Nevertheless, over a third of respondents reported that there had been no change in intensity of work or stress in the last three years. Unsurprisingly, less than a handful reported that work was less stressful or less intensive.

**Table 7: Impact of Flexible Working Practices**

	Yes N= (%)	No N= (%)	N=	
Has flexible working practices caused problems				
a) between union members	10 (17)	49 (83)		59
b) between union members and non-members	6 (10)	52 (90)		58
	More N= (%)	Less N= (%)	Same N= (%)	
Has work become				
a) more or less stressful in the last three years	35 (57)	3 (5)	23 (38)	61
b) more or less intensive in last three years	34 (58)	5 (9)	20 (34)	61
	Increased N= (%)	Decreased N= (%)	Same N= (%)	
What effect has flexible working practices had on union power	1 (2)	13 (23)	42 (75)	56

The following quotation provides an insight into the stressful nature of the process.

Yeah it's more stressful I think it's more, before on the older machines we trundled along a .... a much slower speed it's easier to control .... especially nowadays anyway as soon as you've got one job done oh yes I've got this to do this to do this to do it's non stop sometimes you know it's really is I'd say in the last four or five years it's been more stressful I don't think they realise that the pressure they put us under like the people out there they think we're just printers .... but we've still got to produce the thing at the end at you know at faster speeds you know

He then indicated that stress was not confined to the speed of the operation but the infrastructure surrounding the work process.

like these kids that have been trained they only get two years training they still get problems on the rollers or pressures and that or old printing problems if you ain't had the proper training you get something like oh you should know this like you know and the kids don't know it they might be alright on the little bit of computer bit at one end but you've still got the basic problems you've still you know .... together ok still so um it's all this stress you know it's got to be done by this time if you're taking too long to get it's such a common thing nowadays it's unreal it really is *FOC, Corporate Co. Press.*

The study indicates that the overall work context is faster, harder and more stressful. Nevertheless, three quarters of FOCs did not perceive that flexibility had resulted in change in union influence or power, but a smaller proportion did feel that flexibility had adversely affected union power. Although this has to be put into the context of relatively strong numerical organisation running alongside relatively inactive branch organisation. What we may also be seeing is further evidence of the uneven effect of technology and flexibility on workplace trade unionism.

## CONCLUSIONS

The long established culture of the print industry both positive (strong union, pay etc) and negative (gendered division of labour) remains relatively intact protected to a greater or lesser degree firstly by product and labour market conditions, labour process characteristics and secondly by the resilience of union organisation. Contrary to trends identified in the WERS 98 study, most companies did appear to adhere to BPIF negotiated terms and conditions with regard to pay, working time, hours and holiday entitlement. Nevertheless, the evidence in the study suggests that second tier bargaining (once common in print) is less significant and in its place more secretive individual practices (not unrelated to skill shortages) are emerging. The paper indicates that that market forces and skill shortages are more likely to affect pay structures than second tier bargaining in today's industry.

Increased investment particularly in the pre-press area has raised productivity, but jobs have been lost, however the link with greater work intensification is equivocal. Nevertheless, an industry with a high reliance on extensive exploitation now appears to be ratcheting up intensive exploitation. Despite the provision of the National Agreement for full flexibility across all departments, functional flexibility, where it was practised, tended to be limited to within departments and in some cases constrained to particular jobs within departments. The National Agreement had set conditions on full flexibility with regard to health and safety standards and appropriate training. The survey implied that flexibility was wide. Yet the qualitative study demonstrated that this was deeply constrained. Part of the reason lay with the approach of management who we have characterised as 'reluctant flexibilisers'. It was clear that 'downward flexibility' was the order of the day rather than full flexibility which would enhance printers' skills and marketability. There was evidence that union representatives indicated dissatisfaction with the operation of flexibility in that their members were being denied potential development. This was intensified by the employers' reluctance to provide training. At the same time, it was clear that there was evidence that local union activities were maintaining some control over the extent of flexible work practices. The picture on flexibility also results in the sustaining of traditional hierarchical and gendered segregation. The patterns emerging from this study will provide no comfort for those who see flexibility as the panacea for enhancing competitiveness in the printing industry.

However it is clear from the study that, despite the undoubted influence of the National Agreement, a mixed picture of industrial relations emerges. On the one hand, unions seem relatively powerless in the face of introduction of new technologies but on the other there is clear evidence of informal negotiation and control. Having said that, the industry is dynamic and in flux. The print firms we have talked about are threatened on the one side by digital and web technologies and on the other by sophisticated photocopying and in-house printing facilities. These sectors, new and old, tend to be either poorly organised or entirely non-unionised. Although the union has lost much direct control over recruitment and training, collapse in levels of training and subsequent skill shortages and continued reliance on the skills, tacit and otherwise of skilled workers, coupled with the convoy principle we mentioned at the outset, continue to give the union leverage. It is evident that the 'two sides' continue to battle over local issues and that management keep trying to whittle away at the edges of agreements - 'just trying it on'. In other words the reality of workplace industrial relations in general print is not big set pieces with stage armies but day-to-day reality of small skirmishes with managers. However, how long this evolutionary path can continue in the light of the pressures that the industry is under is an open question.



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