

# THE MANCHESTER INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SOCIETY: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

by Ralph Darlington

## Introduction

Over the last decade or so some commentators have suggested the apparent transformation of employment that has occurred since the 1970s and 1980s – such as the demise of manufacturing industry and growth of the private services sector, the decline in the level of trade union membership and collective bargaining coverage, and the sapping of union militancy as reflected in the historically low strike figures - has meant the world of 'industrial relations' has been completely changed. In the process there has been a move away from the 'them' and 'us' orthodoxy of the past, the bad old days of workplace conflict and union militancy, towards a New World of co-operation, partnership, flexibility, and non-unionism. Human Resource Management (HRM) is heralded, as an alternative set of management practices that will do away with the need for trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes.

Although this is an extreme view not necessarily shared by most commentators, it nevertheless reflects a more diffuse interpretation of recent developments that is widely discernible. For example, business and management schools in a number of universities (including the London School of Economics) have changed the title of their academic industrial relations degree programmes and modules to HRM, and their traditional subject matter – of trade unions, collective bargaining, strikes - has been replaced with the study of management, reward, motivation and control, commitment, and non-union forms of employee representation (Kaufman, 1993; Kelly, 1998; Ackers and Wilkinson, 2003).

Ironically, as with most claims of a fundamental departure from the past, there has often been a failure to recognise that, notwithstanding very real *changes* in the institutional workplace industrial relations structures and processes that were established in the post-war years, there still remain some very important *continuities* in terms of the nature of the employment relationship. For example, despite their shrinkage, trade unions are still the largest single pressure group in society and remain absolutely central to the employment relationship in many industries and workplaces (notably in the Greater Manchester area). Similarly, despite the low levels of strike activity the underlying tension, if not antagonism, between employees and employers that arises from the exploitative structure of social relations within a market economy remains as relevant as ever to the study of industrial relations (demonstrated, for example, by recent industrial disputes at British Airways, and in the Royal Mail, London Underground, the Fire Service and Civil Service).

In fact, the continuing success of the Manchester Industrial Relations Society is testimony, at least in part, to the continuing theoretical and practical contemporary relevance of such matters, notwithstanding the undoubted changes in the structure of employment and balance of power between workers and managers that has occurred since the Society was originally founded 40 years ago.

But also important in explaining the Society's durability – particularly in the face of the growth of HRM in more recent years - has been the way in which it has always avoided a narrow definition of what constitutes the field of 'industrial relations'. No doubt partly because of the Society's direct practical engagement with many employers and managers, it has always viewed the *management* of industrial relations, as well as non-unionism, as an important line of inquiry and discussion. In addition, the Society has been increasingly willing from the early 1990s onwards to examine the dynamics of industrial relations in new and growing areas of employment – such as the retail and call centre industries – and amongst part-time and women workers, as well as consider a much broader range of topics than traditional 'mainstream' IR has regarded apposite – for example, on bullying at work and stress at work.

In words that are especially pertinent to the history of the Manchester Industrial Relations Society, Berridge and Goodman (1985: 174) observed of the British Universities' Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA):

This openness, avoidance of narrow definition of the field and capacity to absorb diversity has proved a considerable strength, and suggests that BUIRA will prove sufficiently catholic to accommodate recent trends towards changes in emphasis, such as human resource management.

However, at the same time the Society has always been very conscious of the fact that:

The workplace is not just about work being done quickly, efficiently, economically, and good quality – important though these purposes and processes are; it is also about good pay and conditions, dignity, and social justice. There will always be much to occupy students, teachers and researchers who do not choose to work solely within a managerial agenda' (Towers, 2003: xvi).

It is for this reason that unlike the academic study of HRM (and some contemporary industrial relations textbooks such as Edwards, 2003) workplace conflict has remained a central concern for the Society.

In other words, it has been its broad-ranging parameters of inquiry, and its recognition of the continuing fundamental tension at the heart of the employment relationship between employees and employers (amongst other factors discussed below), that helps to explain the vibrancy of the Manchester Industrial Relations Society over the last forty years.

The foundation, early development and general contours of the Society in more recent years can be briefly traced.

## **Foundation and Early Development**

The Society had its origins in a preparatory meeting that was held over dinner in the Refectory at the University of Manchester in November 1963 organised by Dr. Shirley Lerner (Lecturer in Industrial Relations, Faculty of Economic and Social Studies, University of Manchester) and Bryan Luckham (Organising Tutor, Workers'

Educational Association). Already for a number of years previously there had been an informal seminar discussion group that linked together a number of higher educational institutions within the Greater Manchester area. But it was the recent expansion of industrial relations and related studies within the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies and new School of Management (University of Manchester), the College of Science and Technology (UMIST), and Royal College of Advanced Technology (Salford) that gave the impetus for this discussion group to be placed on a more formal basis.

It was proposed 'a scientific society be founded, whose main function should be the presentation of papers on topics within the broad field of industrial relations'. It was felt that membership 'should be by nomination and election' mainly from industry, the trade unions and institutions of higher education, but the total number of members be limited 'to ensure that reasonably informal gatherings can be retained' [1]. Fourteen people were invited to this preparatory meeting. They included: a handful of lecturers in industrial relations, personnel management and industrial sociology; the labour directors or managers of the Manchester Engineering Employers' Association, AEI and ICI; the general secretary of the Amalgamated Weavers Association and education officer of USDAW; the Regional Industrial Relations Officer of the Ministry of Labour; and an organising tutor for the WEA. The meeting agreed to go proceed with planning for the launch of a formal Manchester Industrial Relations Society, and subsequently contacted a wide list of academics, personnel managers and employers' representatives, trade union officials, and other potentially interested parties.

Other subsequent organising meetings were held before the first 'public' meeting of the Society was held in the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies, University of Manchester on 12 June 1964 which adopted a set of formal rules and a constitution. The preamble declared the object of the Manchester Industrial Relations Society to be 'the study and the discussion of industrial relations in all its aspects'. Candidates for admission as members of the Society had to be proposed by two members, with 'bona fide students, not exceeding 25 years of age' eligible as student members at a reduced annual subscription [2].

From then on the Society became established as a permanent body with an annual programme of meetings addressed by prominent local and national speakers drawn from employers' organisations, trade unions, government bodies, and universities. In the process it quickly succeeded in bringing the expanding group of industrial relations academics together with a broad network of practitioners from across the North-west. These included members from the National Federation of Building Trades Employers, Engineering Employers' Association, North-west Electricity Board, North-west Gas Board, Co-operative Insurance Society Ltd, United Kingdom Atomic Authority, British Aircraft Corporation, North-west Electricity Board, Lancashire Steel Manufacturing Company, ICI, National Coal Board, Mather and Platt Ltd, as well as from trade unions such as USDAW, GMBWU, Amalgamated Engineering Union, National Union of Textile and Allied Workers, and ASTMS. AGMs enabled the Society's membership to participate in its organisation and activities, elect its officers and Council, and scrutinise its Report and Statement of Accounts. The 1967 annual subscription for employed members was set at two pounds and two shillings [3]

During the course of each year the Society held six to seven well-attended meetings, which were held on Thursdays at 5.30pm at the Blakett Lecture Theatre, Schuster Building, on Brunswick Street, Manchester University. The subject matter in these early years reflected some of the most topical industrial relations issues of the day. These ranged from shop stewards' organisation, productivity bargaining, prices and incomes policies, and the Donovan Commission Report during the 1960s - to the Industrial Relations Act, Third-Party Conciliation and Arbitration, Workers Participation, and the Grunwick dispute during the 1970s.

Speakers were a roll call of some of the best-known policy makers, practitioners and academics in the field. They included Campbell Adamson (Director-General, CBI), Pat Lowry (Director of Industrial Relations, British Leyland), L.T. Blakeman (Director of Labour Relations, Ford Motor Company), H. Briggs (Head of UK Personnel Services, Unilever), T.J. Connelly, (Industrial Relations Adviser, National Board for Prices and Incomes), Sir Kenneth Barnes (Chair, Manpower Services Commission), Lord Cooper (General Secretary, GMBWU), Alan Fisher (General Secretary, NUPE), Moss Evans (National Officer, TGWU), Marie Patterson (National Women's' Officer, TGWU), Eric Batstone, (University of Warwick), Professor Hugh Clegg (University of Warwick), Professor H.A. Turner (Cambridge University), Allan Flanders (Oxford University), Alan Fox (Oxford University), Otto Kahn-Freund, (Oxford University), Lord McCarthy (Oxford University), Professor Bill Wedderburn (LSE), and Professor Ben Roberts (LSE).

The two most important founders and early organisers of the Society were Shirley Lerner and Arthur Priest. Shirley Lerner, a senior lecturer in industrial relations at Manchester University, published widely on the subjects of pay systems, shop steward combine committees, and breakaway trade unionism. She was vice-chair of the Society until her early death at the age of 44 in 1969. Arthur Priest, an Industrial Relations Officer for the North-west electricity supply industry, was awarded the MBE for his public services to industrial relations. He acted as the Society's secretary from 1966-1970 and chair until his death in 1986. The contribution of both these individuals to establishing and building the Society has continued to be honoured with memorial lectures each year.

Other notable individuals involved during these early years included Professor Tom Lupton (Manchester Business School; chair from 1966-1970: President until 1987); John Goodman (UMIST: vice-chairman 1970s, Council member 1980s and President 1990s); Eric Armstrong (Manchester Business School: secretary 1970-1977); John Hebden (Royal College of Advanced Technology, Salford [4]: Council member late 1960s and early 1970s); R.N. Eades (Personnel Manager, Exors of James Mills Ltd: treasurer 1970s), Colin Gill (University of Salford: secretary 1977-1880); and George Bain (UMIST) and John Purcell (Manchester Business School) individual members during the 1970s.

Although attendance at the Society's meetings throughout the 1960s and 1970s was apparently fairly large, formal membership only averaged about 60, and administrative and organisational arrangements often left in the hands of a few dedicated individuals. For example, in 1968 (the year the Donovan Commission Report was published) membership was 75, with only 11 attending the AGM; and in

1972 (the year Britain was swept by a wave of industrial and political struggle, the depth and political character of which was unprecedented since the 1920s; Darlington and Lyddon, 2001) membership was 45 (although it may possibly have later reached close to 60 as was anticipated) and only 9 people attended the AGM [5].

In addition some Society initiatives did not always prove successful. For example, a day long preview of training films in industrial relations in March 1982 had to be cancelled because the response was judged to be not sufficient to cover the costs involved, despite the success of a similar event organised together with a number of companies two years earlier. Similarly, the attempt to set up a series of Industrial Relations Research Workshops (under the auspices of the Society), with the aim of attracting those 'engaged in current research keen to give papers or lead discussions', was abandoned after 18 months (when its convenor John Purcell moved to Oxford University) after it was reported there 'had not been many offers of papers and attendance had averaged 8, but with a low of 3' [6].

Nonetheless, the Society became an established and permanent landmark within Manchester with its meetings successfully bringing together some of the leading industrial relations practitioners and academics within the North-west, and providing an intellectually stimulating forum for discussion and debate on a variety of topics. A number of Shirley Lerner Memorial Lectures were subsequently published in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*.

### **MIRS Membership Figures: 1966-2005**

1964 - 40 plus  
1966 - 40 plus  
1967 - 35  
1968 - 75  
1969 - 75  
1970 - 60  
1971 - 58  
1972 - 45  
1973 - 43  
1974 - 43  
1978 - 100 plus  
1979 - 172  
1980 - 114  
1981 - 180  
1982 - 78  
1983 - 85  
1984 - 68  
1985 - 65  
1986 - 105  
1987 - 90  
1988 - 102  
1989 - 75  
1990 - 98

1991 – 95  
1992 – 112  
1993 – 101  
1995 – 137  
1996 – 133  
1997 – 138  
1998 – 122  
1999 – 164  
2000 – 110  
2001 – 113  
2002 – 104  
2003 – 155  
2004 – 188  
2005 - 189

Note: In some cases, particularly in the earlier years, the figures should only be regarded as estimates. Because there was no formal procedure for recording membership figures, the numbers have had to be gleaned from minutes of meetings that were held at different times of the year. As a result some figures may possibly have been slightly higher.

## Recent Developments

By the late 1970s the Society's meetings venue had moved to the Manchester Business School on Booth Street West, with annual membership gradually increasing to over 100, and embracing a broader range of participants, including labour lawyers, Acas officials, and others. In 1990 the venue moved to the Main Lecture Theatre at Manchester Metropolitan University on Aytoun Street, where it has remained ever since.

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s the meetings have continued to be a weather vane of the most relevant industrial relations issues of the day. Different types of meetings have been held:

- *Case studies on industrial relations in particular industries* – for example, meetings on the transport, food and drink, and railway industries in the private sector, and Royal Mail, NHS, civil service, and the emergency services in the public sector.
- *Case studies on industrial relations in particular organisations* – for example, meetings on Nissan, Honda, Jaguar, ICI, Manchester Airport, United Biscuits, Birmingham NHS Trust, and Tesco.
- *Industrial Action* – for example, meetings on the 1980 steel workers strike, the 1984-5 miners' strike, and the 1990s rail workers and early 2000s Royal Mail strikes.
- *Trade Unions and TUC* – for example, meetings on the Future of Trade Unionism in the RMT, CWU, TGWU, GMB, and in the TUC; as well as general meetings on trade union membership trends, recruitment and organising strategies, and militancy versus partnership.

- *HRM and management* – for example, meetings on The Changing Personnel Function, HRM and Business Performance, Corporate Strategy and Industrial Relations, and HRM: Rhetoric and Reality.
- *Non-Unionism* – for example, meetings on Managing without Unions and Non-Union Employee Representation.
- *Discrimination* – for example, meetings on Gender and Equal Opportunities, ‘Mainstreaming’ Gender, and Women Managers, as well as on ethnic, disability, and age discrimination.
- *Government and Industrial Relations* - for example, meetings on New Labour, Industrial Relations and the Trade Unions.
- *Employment Law* – for example, meetings on industrial tribunals, government employment legislation, and trade union recognition.
- *Europe* – for example, meetings on the European Social Model Employment Policy, European Works Councils, and European Trade Unionism.
- *General Issues* – for example, meetings on pay determination, the media and industrial relations, quality circles, strike-free agreements, Japanisation, Acas, flexibility at work, call centres, future of work and employment, national minimum wage, partnership at work, and information and consultation.

As was noted above, from the early 1990s onwards meetings have increasingly been held on a much broader range of topics than ‘mainstream’ industrial relations, and have included stress at work, bullying at work, corporate social responsibility, business ethics, work-life balance, and migrant workers. In addition, one meeting each year has been jointly organised with the Industrial Law Society (on an employment law related topic), and another meeting reserved for the issue of (usually gender) discrimination. (However, it should be noted international and comparative issues have been noticeable by their relative absence).

Speakers in recent years have included:

- *HR Practitioners*: Tony Jones (Human Resources Director, Jaguar Cars), Chris Gebbie (Human Resources Director, United Biscuits Europe), Tony Stark (Head of Employee Relations, Vertex), David Vernon-Smith (Human Resource Director, Pilkington plc), Catherine Glickman (Human Resources Director, Tesco), and Caroline Wigley (Chief Executive, Birmingham NHS Trust).
- *General Practitioners*: John Cridland (Director of Human Resources Policy, CBI), Geoff Armstrong (Director, CIPD), John Taylor (Chief Executive, Acas), Professor George Bain (Chair, Low Pay Commission), Julie Mellor (Chair, Equal Opportunities Commission), and Donna Denheim (Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Racial Equality).
- *Trade Union Leaders*: Jimmy Knapp (RMT), John Edmunds (GMB), Bill Morris (GMB), Bill Morris (TGWU), John Monks (TUC), Dave Prentis (Unison), Billy Hayes (CWU), Mark Sertwotka (PCS) and Gordon Taylor (Professional Footballers’ Association).

- *Labour Lawyers*: Janet Gaymer (Simmons and Simmons), John Handy, QC, Jeremy McMullen, QC.
- *Journalists*: Robert Taylor (*Financial Times*), Will Hutton (*Observer*), Paul Routledge (*Daily Mirror*), Kevin Maguire (*Guardian*), Larry Elliot (*Guardian*) and Madeline Bunting (*Guardian*).
- *Academics*: Professor Richard Hyman (University of Warwick), Professor Karen Legge (University of Lancaster), Professor Christine Edwards (Kingston University), Professor Keith Ewing (University of London), Professor Keith Sisson (University of Warwick), Professor David Guest (University of London), Professor John Purcell (Bath University), Professor David Metcalf (LSE), Professor John Kelly (LSE), Professor Paul Thompson (Strathclyde), Professor Peter Nolan (University of Leeds), Professor Huw Beynon (Cardiff University), Professor Mike Terry (University of Warwick) and Professor Linda Dickens (University of Warwick),

Inevitably, there have been one or two occasions when at the very last minute speakers have announced they are unable to honour their commitment to the Society. However, excellent replacements have always been found, including Professor Roger Seifert (Keele University), Professor Andrew Pendleton (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Paul Smith (Keele University).

Some of the central figures helping to plan and organise Society events over the last 25 years have included Professor John Goodman (UMIST: President 1990s), Professor Mick Marchington (UMIST: Council member 1980s, President early 2002-), Harcourt Concannon (University of Salford: secretary 1980-1985), Geoffrey Broad (University of Salford: secretary 1985-1990), John Dobson (University of Salford: secretary 1990-1993, Council member 1990s and early 2000s), Ralph Darlington (University of Salford: secretary 1993-), Jane Muir (Co-operative Wholesale Society: chair 1986-1992), Lawrence Jackson (Tribal GWT: chair 1992-), Terry Sullivan (Manchester Business School: treasurer 1980s), and Hamish Mathieson (Manchester Metropolitan University: treasurer 1990-).

Other individuals involved with the Society have included John Berridge (UMIST), Alan Manning (North-west TUC), Paul Oliver, Paul Bird and Susan Clews (North-west Acas), Philip Wilkinson (Co-operative Wholesale Society), Sue Corby (Manchester Metropolitan University), David Rowthbottom (Engineers' and Managers' Association), Professor Rosemary Lucas (Manchester Metropolitan University), Professor Andrew Pendleton (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Professor Irena Grugulis (Bradford University).

During the 1990s Shirley Lerner Memorial lectures were subsequently published in *Employee Relations*, and a number of new initiatives were taken. These included the production of small glossy membership cards (re-establishing a practice originally adopted during the 1960s and 1970s), the provision of two cheese and wine buffets at the first and last meetings of the programme, and an end-of-year



dinner. In 2002 a dedicated website was designed and went online ([www.som.salford.ac.uk/mirs](http://www.som.salford.ac.uk/mirs))

Membership figures have fluctuated over the last 25 years, no doubt partly as a consequence of the changing industrial relations environment, but also because of organisational and administrative factors. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, against the backcloth of the 'winter of discontent' and election of the first Thatcher Conservative government, they reached over 100 for the first time. But then, amidst trade union decline and growing employer power, they dropped back slightly. It was only in the early 1990s, during which there was a conscious attempt to push the boundaries of the Society's concerns wider than its traditional remit, that membership lifted again to treble figures, where it has consistently remained ever since, reaching as high as 188 in 2004.

The composition of the Society's membership has also changed. In the 1960s and 1970s members were almost exclusively industrial relations academics, personnel managers or trade union officials. In more recent years, although these groups still form the core, there has been an increasing number of members from other quarters, including TUC officials, Acas officers, labour lawyers, and Equal Opportunities Commission representatives. Also significant has been the substantial increase in Personnel Management/Industrial Relations undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the Greater Manchester region. Meanwhile, the gender balance has improved enormously, from almost an exclusively male membership in the 1960s and early 1970s to a roughly equal balance today (also reflected in the increasing proportion of female speakers at Society meetings), although the Society has been much less successful (with a handful of exceptions) in attracting ethnic minority participation.

## **Assessment**

The Manchester Industrial Relations Society is the only body of its kind in Britain, bringing together academics, practitioners and students in a joint forum for discussion and debate. Similar societies, such as the Merseyside Industrial Relations Society organised by Ron Bean from Liverpool University set up in the early 1970s did not survive. Other similar forums, such as seminars organised by British Universities' Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) groups, have been much more episodic and recent in origin, and tend to be primarily academic based with little organic relationship with employers' bodies, trade unions and other practitioner organisations.

As noted above, the Society's success over the last 40 years is testimony to the continuing theoretical and practical contemporary relevance of the field of industrial relations as broadly defined (and reflected within the Society's extensive parameters), as testified by the enduring support of its wide-ranging membership.

It has also thrived because of the following factors:

- Keeping abreast of new developments in the world of industrial relations, employment and society.

- Organising meetings across a broad range of subject matter.
- Engaging with topical debates (for example, on flexibility, HRM, Social Partnership, etc).
- Forging a strong local alliance between academics and practitioners (with links to a number of other bodies).
- Maintaining a relatively informal Society, that is open and inclusive (for example to CIPD members)
- Providing an efficient organisation (with a programme of meetings with prestigious speakers, production of flyers, membership card and website) with enthusiastic officers.

Above all the Society has flourished because the world of work, employment, and industrial relations has remained complex and ever changing with a constant series of dilemmas confronting policy makers, practitioners and students alike. The continuing nature of such problems makes it likely such a body will have an important role to play for many years to come.

## **Endnotes**

[1] Letter of invitation from Dr. Shirley Lerner and Bryan Luckham, 21 October 1963, MIRS archive.

[2] Rules of the Manchester Industrial Relations Society, MIRS archive.

[3] Letter to members from the Secretary of the Society, Arthur Priest, 28 September 1967, MIRS archive.

[4] Renamed the University of Salford in 1969.

[5] Figures from archive records.

[6] See AGM Minutes for 1980 and 1982.

[7] See AGM Minutes 1982. The 1981 programme of MIRS Research Workshops included 'Industrial Democracy: The Role of the Shop Steward: Some Evidence From Case Studies' with Roger Armstrong, Preston Polytechnic; 'The Social Organisation of the Steel Strike in South Yorkshire' with Jean Hartley (University of Sheffield) and 'Approaches to Employee Participation in Manufacturing', Professor John Goodman (UMIST).

[8] Merseyside Industrial Relations Society meetings were held in the Business Studies School at the University of Liverpool; speakers for the 1971-2 session included L.F. Neal (chair of the Commission on Industrial Relations), Professor Hugh Clegg (University of Warwick), John Phillips (Assistant General Secretary, USDAW) and E.J. Robertson (Research Director, Engineering Employers' Federation). MIRS archive.

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