

Reconceptualizing Local Union Responses to Workplace Restructuring in North America

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Abstract

To date no clear consensus has emerged about how industrial relations scholars ought to conceptualize union responses to workplace restructuring. Yet, local union responses to management-initiated workplace change can differ markedly and can have important implications for the outcomes of restructuring. This study examines the experiences of three local unions engaged in workplace restructuring in the North American steel industry and suggests a reconceptualization of local union responses, away from a simple 'militant'–'cooperative' dichotomy towards a conceptualization based on the process by which local unions engage with management over restructuring.

1. Introduction

The current era of rapid technological change, deregulation and global competition has put unions under considerable pressure to alter traditional Taylorist forms of work organization. Job control unionism and its demarcation and protection of narrowly defined jobs is seen to be a substantial barrier to high performance in the current competitive environment. As the process of transformation to more flexible models of work organization continues, we observe considerable variation in the outcomes of these restructuring initiatives. Understanding and explaining this variation is a critical research undertaking, with important implications for the firms, workers and unions involved.

Over the past decade, a number of researchers have used the strategic choice framework (Kochan *et al.* 1986) to explain such variation in workplace outcomes by focusing largely on the strategies of management (see e.g. Arthur 1992; Walton *et al.* 1994). However, in many cases management strategy alone appears to be an insufficient explanation. The inability to

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explain the often considerable variation observed creates the need for a more integrated and richer conceptualization of workplace change.

In this paper I argue that the responses of local unions to management-initiated workplace change are an important variable in explaining variation in the outcomes of workplace restructuring. The local union is a critical actor in workplace restructuring initiatives, as many of the changes sought by management to ensure the firm's future competitiveness occur at the workplace level — the domain of the local union in unionized environments. Moreover, the decentralization of bargaining that has occurred throughout a wide range of industrialized countries over the past two decades has made local unions, rather than national unions, increasingly responsible for negotiating such workplace changes (Fairbrother 2000; Katz 1993; Katz and Darbishire 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptualization of local union responses to management-initiated workplace restructuring that allows us to better explain variation in the outcomes of workplace restructuring. Traditional conceptualizations of labour's responses have tended, to one degree or another, to rely on a unidimensional dichotomization between 'militant' and 'co-operative' positions. Yet they frequently mask significant and important variation within each category. For example, 'militant' responses can range from refusal to negotiate at all over workplace change to those that force management to negotiate an agreement that better meets the needs of all parties. Similarly, 'co-operative' responses can range from negotiation that meets the needs of both parties to responses that are little more than union acquiescence in the face of powerful management. Badly needed in the literature is a richer conceptualization of the role played by local unions in shaping workplace outcomes. That is the point of departure and motivation for this paper.

I focus on the *process* of workplace restructuring. Using evidence from three case studies of United Steelworker locals involved in workplace restructuring initiatives, I examine how and by whom alternative models of work organization were generated, the process by which an alternative was selected, and how the selected model was then implemented. By doing this, I show that traditional conceptualizations have masked important differences in labour responses to management-initiated restructuring. In contrast, the conceptualization of local union responses developed here serves to better explain how, in two cases, workplace restructuring initiated by management led to positive benefits for the stakeholders involved, while change in a virtually identical setting produced little lasting change and few sustainable benefits for the parties involved.

2. Previous conceptualizations of union responses to workplace restructuring

Empirical evidence is emerging that labour's involvement in the process of restructuring often leads to superior outcomes (Bacon *et al.* 1996; Cooke

1992; Eaton and Voos 1992). Yet, no clear consensus has yet emerged about how industrial relations scholars ought to conceptualize and describe union responses to workplace restructuring. Traditionally, much in the industrial relations literature has relied on a conceptualization of union responses to management strategies that arrays labour's responses along a unidimensional continuum anchored by the adjectives 'militant' and 'co-operative' (see e.g. Bluestone and Bluestone 1992; Katz 1988). The 'militant' are seen as simply blocking change as a means of preserving the status quo, while the 'co-operative' are viewed as willing followers of management's agenda.

Recent attention in this area of research has begun to greatly enrich this simple dichotomization. Katz and Darbishire (2000), for example, describe industrial relations patterns in a number of advanced industrial economies undergoing significant industrial restructuring. Moving from the simple 'militant' and 'co-operative' adjectives applied to unions, they instead refer to new patterns of industrial relations that emerge in the wake of the breakdown in the traditional New Deal system which they term 'conflict' or 'joint team based' patterns. Although more descriptive of industrial relations outcomes on the shop-floor, the categories remain dichotomous and represent ends of a unidimensional continuum running from 'militant' to 'co-operative'.

A more nuanced view is offered by Kelly (1996), who notes the increasing workplace-level diversity occurring in unionized environments in both the USA and the UK. Kelly highlights the dangers for unions associated with moderate unionism and emphasizes the importance to unions of protecting the right to strike and mobilizing members to take collective action when their interests run counter to those of management. He proposes a five-dimensional framework for understanding union responses that takes into account a union's goals, membership resources, institutional resources, methods and ideology (Kelly 1996: 80). Importantly, Kelly recognizes that unions may not respond the same way over time or the same way to different issues, and that militancy may express itself in different ways. Yet, despite its added sophistication and the recognition of the multi-dimensionality of union responses, Kelly's framework speaks largely to the characteristics of particular unions — be they 'militant' or 'moderate' — and not to how they may affect the outcomes of restructuring.

Bacon *et al.* (1996) also describe union responses in 'militant' or 'moderate' terms. However, their work is notable for its attention to tracing the differential levels of involvement of unions in the UK and German steel industries in the restructuring of those two industries and the implications of such involvement on outcomes. The authors document the relative lack of institutions to allow for union involvement in restructuring decisions in the UK steel industry (and the corresponding lack of union involvement) and contrast it with the more proactive responses by the German union enabled by a much richer set of institutions in the German steel industry.

Following in this more contextualized stream of research, a number of researchers have documented the micro-level responses of unions to

management-initiated workplace restructuring (Babson 1996; Martinez Lucio *et al.* 2000; Rinehart *et al.* 1997). These authors present a comprehensive understanding of the unions' responses to workplace change by providing detailed analysis of the contexts (both internal and external) in which the unions found themselves and documenting their on-going interactions with management. Although authors such as these provide rich material and detailed analysis of the workplace interactions of labour and management, they still conceptualize the union's approach as 'oppositionalist' (Martinez Lucio *et al.* 2000), the union as 'militant' (Rinehart *et al.* 1997), and bargaining as 'adversarial' (Babson 1996).

The framework developed by Boxall and Haynes (1997) offers a different perspective for understanding union responses to management-led workplace change, one that emphasizes not the characteristics of the union *per se*, but rather its mode of interaction with both members and employers. Four distinct strategies emerge from the overlay of two dimensions: the mode of union-member relations (whether a servicing model or a servicing/organizing model) and the mode of union-employer relations (whether characterized by limited or broader forms of engagement). Moreover, Boxall and Haynes note that the choice that unions make regarding their engagement with employers is not a dichotomous one between adversarialism and co-operation, but rather some form of engagement that will have elements of both. What appears critical, they argue, is the level, extent and form that such union-management engagement takes. An understanding of a union's level of engagement with both its members and the employer sheds significant light on actual workplace outcomes.

This is the leaving-off point for this research. It appears that in much of the industrial relations literature union responses continue to be construed largely along the traditional 'militant'-'co-operative' continuum, albeit in an often more nuanced and sophisticated fashion than in the past. Recent research has also begun to emphasize the importance of context and workplace institutions in shaping the outcomes of workplace restructuring. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that what unions choose to *do* in response to management-led change shapes the eventual outcome. In what follows, I seek to examine union-management interaction during the process of workplace restructuring to better understand how what unions do affects the results of workplace restructuring. In addition, I seek to show that it is a union's action, rather than its 'militant' or 'co-operative' outward appearance, that provides more insight into explaining observed variation.

3. Research design and data collection method

In this paper I detail the responses of three local unions to management-initiated change in the North American integrated steel industry. (For another treatment of these cases, see Frost 2000.) This industry provides an ideal setting for this research, as it has undergone significant work-

place restructuring: not only massive downsizing in the 1980s (Arthur and Konzelmann Smith 1994), but also the subsequent reorganization of work. Further, empirical research has shown that the reorganization of work in this sector has large and important performance effects (Ichniowski *et al.* 1997).

This research draws upon both qualitative and quantitative sources of data. The qualitative data were collected via intensive field-based research during 1994 and come from multiple sources. I conducted more than fifty interviews with union representatives, union members, operating managers and plant-level managers across the three sites. The interviews focused on understanding and describing the previous form of work organization, the new form of work organization and the process of restructuring that led to the adoption of the new form of work organization, including any contractual provisions, committee structures or task forces that were used. Each of these semi-structured interviews lasted between one and two hours and was conducted during visits to the three union halls and the plants at which each local union's members are employed: Inland Steel's Indiana Harbor Works, Stelco's Hilton Works and Stelco's Lake Erie Works. I visited each local union and plant on either two or three occasions, spending two full days each time meeting with the parties jointly as well as separately. In addition to the interview data, I gathered other qualitative data from documents provided to me by informants: copies of collective agreements, formal job descriptions, committee reports, memoranda of understanding, union newsletters and company annual reports.

The quantitative data for this research were provided to me by management at each plant. These data consisted of monthly performance measures related to the outcomes of the process of restructuring I was studying, spanning a period from two years before until two years after the particular workplace change.

Given the small sample used in this work, it is critical to control for as many alternative explanations of the phenomenon to be explained as possible, and thus to allow the effects of the local unions' actions to be isolated and observed. These three cases were selected because they offer a number of such controls. First, all three locals belong to the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), which allows me to control for national union strategy and resources. Second, all three local unions represent workers at steel mills located in North America's traditional industrial heartland: two in south-western Ontario and one in north-western Indiana.

Third, because the focus in this research is on understanding local union effects on workplace restructuring, I wished to minimize the variation in management strategies and actions so as to explore the local unions' actions and their effects more carefully. In the three cases described below, the employers are pursuing an identical product market strategy, focusing on the production of the high value-added cold rolled and coated steel used in appliance and automobile manufacturing. In addition, in each of the three cases management faced similar pressures to restructure. Restructuring in each case was precipitated by a significant competitive threat: without

substantive changes in work organization, all three areas studied faced the threat of closure. Further, in dealing with workplace change, the companies have all adopted similar, more collaborative, industrial relations strategies with their local unions. Moreover, two of the three local unions studied here represent workers at two plants of the same company and provide a unique opportunity to control even more closely for management strategy. Situated only 30 miles from one another, plant management transfers frequently between the two sites. As a result, there has been little opportunity for management at either site to adopt a unique set of institutions or practices that differentially affect the implementation of corporate strategy.

Finally, because part of the motivation for this research is the lack of explanatory power associated with the traditional 'militant'–'co-operative' dichotomy, the three local unions studied here come from both ends of the continuum. On the basis of their external characteristics and past behaviour, two of these local unions would be characterized as traditional 'militant' locals; the other would be characterized as a 'co-operative' local. Thus, the use of these three cases allows me to explore whether an understanding of local union actions in response to management-initiated change provides any improved explanatory power over the more traditional 'militant'–'co-operative' dichotomy.

4. The cases: key characteristics

Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of each local.

USWA Local 1010 (referred to here as Local M1 (militant no. 1)) represents workers at Inland Steel's Indiana Harbor Works in East Chicago, Indiana. Its work-force is drawn from the surrounding industrial area, and many are second and even third-generation steelworkers. As the single local representing the 6000 production and maintenance workers at this sprawling, century-old steelmaking complex, Local M1 is the USWA's largest local. In addition to its size, Local M1 is also well known throughout the USWA for its member activism, militancy and dissidence in the face of the dictates of the international union (Herling 1972). Moreover, its long history of conflictual labour–management relations (Nyden 1984) sets it apart from other Steelworker locals.

USWA Local 1005 (referred to here as Local M2 (militant no. 2)) represents the 4000 workers at Stelco's Hilton Works in Hamilton, Ontario. It is the largest Steelworker local in Canada and one of the largest in the international union. Like Local M1, it has a long-standing reputation as a militant, highly politicized and powerful local union (Freeman 1982). For many years, the contract negotiated between Local M2 and Stelco management set the contract terms not only for the rest of the Canadian steel industry, but for much of Canadian heavy industry as well (Adams and Zeytinoglu 1987). In addition, it has waged long, hard-fought strikes against Stelco management throughout its history. It took a seven-week strike in

TABLE 1
Key Features of the Three Local Unions

	<i>Local M1</i>	<i>Local M2</i>	<i>Local C</i>
Membership	6000	4000	980
Age of plant	100+ years	100+ years	14 years
Average age of work-force	46	46	36
Source of work-force	Industrial community	Industrial community	Rural community
Union-management relations	Conflictual	Conflictual	Quiescent
Strike history	Long strikes	Long strikes	Early return to work
Local-international relations	Dissident	Dissident	Acquiescent
Organizing experience	Struggle for recognition led by insiders	Struggle for recognition led by insiders	Automatic recognition
Traditional conceptualization	Militant	Militant	Co-operative

1946 for Local M2 to gain recognition from Stelco management (Storey 1987). Subsequently, Local M2 led a 125-day industry-wide strike in 1981 and a 106-day strike against the industry in 1990 (Verma and Warrian 1992).

USWA 8782 (referred to here as Local C (co-operative)) differs from Local M1 and Local M2 along almost every dimension. Local C represents the 980 or so workers at Stelco's Lake Erie Works in south-western Ontario. Opened in 1980, Lake Erie Works was the last integrated steelmaking site built in North America and recruited its work-force largely from the surrounding rural area. Consequently, Local C's membership is on average ten years younger than work-forces in most North American integrated steelmaking facilities. Further, Local C does not have a history of labour-management conflict. The local was voluntarily recognized by the company before the facility opened, so that no rancorous organizing campaign had to be waged. In addition, until 1990 Local C had little role to play in bargaining, as Stelco's much larger Hilton Works and Local M2 negotiated the collective agreement that covered the entire Stelco chain of locals. Moreover, during the 1981 industry-wide strike, workers at Local C voted to accept management's offer and go back to work after being on strike only 14 days, while their counterparts at Local M2 stayed out for 125 days and won additional concessions from management (Verma and Warrian 1992).

At first glance, one might be inclined to characterize Local M1 and Local M2 as traditional militant locals representing, as they do, an older, industrial work-force, operating in huge, ageing steel plants, with a long history of conflictual labour-management relations. At the same time, one might view Local C as a typical co-operative local, in that it represents a younger, rural work-force, operating in a greenfield facility, without a history of labour-management conflict. However, such characterizing of the three locals' respective approaches to dealing with management over the need to restructure at the workplace would be misleading. Not only would it obscure important variation in the processes of restructuring, but it would also prevent an accurate explanation of important differences in outcomes.

5. Local unions and workplace restructuring

In what follows I describe the process and outcomes of workplace restructuring in each of the three cases. I then return to the cases to examine differences in the processes of workplace restructuring across the three local unions and to propose an alternative conceptualization of local union responses that explains outcomes better than the traditional 'militant'-'co-operative' dichotomy.

Restructuring at Inland Steel: Response of Local M1

In 1988, Inland Steel management found that its bar making facility was no longer competitive as the mini-mills began to produce a higher-quality

product at a much lower cost. Inland Steel management was faced with the decision to either upgrade the facility with significant investment or to close it, abandoning this market as many other integrated steelmakers already had. For Local M1, the result would have been the loss of hundreds of jobs.

Inland Steel management approached Local M1, offering to invest \$150 million in equipment upgrades in exchange for workplace changes to make the facility more productive. Specifically, management needed to reduce costs by \$40 per ton and wanted wage concessions and head count reductions to achieve this objective. Although the local union recognized the significant competitive threat faced by the bar mill, it refused to negotiate over restructuring under those terms. By leading members in in-plant action, including a work-to-rule campaign and the filing of dozens of grievances, local union leaders pressured management into allowing the local union access to decisions regarding how the bar making facility would be restructured.

The negotiations surrounding the restructuring of Inland's bar business were characterized by a multi-level process of local union representatives and membership involvement with management. A Joint Committee, co-chaired by the local union president and the vice president of manufacturing, headed the restructuring effort and had to approve any changes in work design. Below the Joint Committee, four department-level committees, co-chaired by the area's elected union representative and department manager, oversaw the restructuring of each department. The department level committees' main task was assembling and staffing the joint design teams. The union representative selected bargaining unit members to serve on these teams, while the department manager appointed the salaried representatives.

The design teams' mandate was to study how work was done in their areas by consulting with front-line employees to devise ways to reorganize work that would lead to the elimination of the necessary \$40 per ton. In restructuring their areas, the design teams sought to combine the former narrowly circumscribed Taylorist jobs into job clusters in ways that made sense in terms of operations and skill requirements and that did not conflict with existing seniority provisions. Once a plan was developed by a design team, it needed to be approved by the jointly chaired department-level committee before being passed on to the Joint Committee for final approval. After final approval, the proposed changes in work organization then needed to be ratified by a majority of the workers to be affected on a department-by-department basis before they could be implemented.

As a result of this process, the post-restructuring form of work organization found at Inland's bar making facility contained many high-performance features.¹ Jobs were broadened considerably, workers were rotated through the tasks contained in the new job clusters, worker autonomy and decision-making ability were increased significantly as supervisors were replaced by bargaining unit leaders, and a forum for employee involvement was implemented. Moreover, the empirical evidence suggests that the restructuring of Inland's bar making facility was a highly successful undertaking for all involved. (See Table 2 for a comparison of outcomes across the three cases.)

TABLE 2
Outcomes of Workplace Restructuring in Each Case

	<i>Local M1</i>	<i>Local C</i>	<i>Local M2</i>
Management outcomes			
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased \$40/ton 		
Productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45% improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7% improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21% improvement; dissipated over 5 years to 0%
Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3% improvement in yield 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3% improvement in coke size; 4% improvement in coke stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No change
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market share to 10% from 7% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less equipment downtime due to cross-training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to survive financial crisis
Worker outcomes			
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average \$0.25/hr increase • Up to \$2/hr 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average C\$0.75/hr increase for operators • Up to C\$1.75/hr 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C\$0.50/hr increase for trades
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-training and addition of minor maintenance skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-training and addition of minor maintenance skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No increase in skill
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with greater autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with greater autonomy, less supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain closely supervised
Union outcomes			
Role in governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local plays joint role in all restructuring decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local plays joint role in all restructurings, training, new technology, and contracting out decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local president consulted by management
Relevance to members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High for grievance handling • Marginal otherwise

By restructuring, management was able to reduce costs by the required \$40 per ton. In addition, productivity improved by 45 per cent as labour hours per ton fell from 1.54 to 0.9; quality improved as yield rates increased from 91 to 94 per cent; and Inland's market share in this product niche rose to 10 from 7 per cent. Workers gained as well, as their wages increased by \$0.25 per hour on average, with some workers earning up to \$2 an hour more.

Local M1 also benefited as an institution from the successful restructuring of Inland's bar making facility. The success of the bar mill restructuring made the model used for that process the one used subsequently in other parts of the plant, giving Local M1 and its members access to those decisions. In addition, by providing members with this involvement in restructuring and putting more control over their work environment into their hands, Local M1 made the union a more valuable institution to its members. Rather than something far off in Pittsburgh that negotiated a new contract once every three years, Local M1 became more salient as its members' 'union', providing direct and tangible benefits to members on an ongoing and immediate basis.

Restructuring at Hilton Works: Response of Local M2

The other 'militant' local, Local M2, responded to the need to restructure at the workplace in a way that differed substantially from that of Local M1. In late 1992 Stelco management was faced with a financial crisis as its stock price plummeted from its historical C\$20–25 range to C\$0.90. The primary end² of Hilton Works was targeted as an area that, if restructured, would yield significant improvements. During the previous contract negotiations in 1990, the parties had established the Joint Hilton Works Senior Restructuring Committee (JHWSRC) to deal with workplace change initiatives. This was to consist of no more than two members of the local union executive and two members of senior plant management. In practice, the JHWSRC was composed of the president of Local M2 and the operations manager of Hilton Works.

Plant management approached the president of Local M2 with its plan for restructuring the coke ovens area (a significant portion of the primary end). The plan for the reorganization of work had been designed by members of departmental management in the coke ovens and byproducts area. The redesign entailed replacing the 308 operators, 70 assigned maintenance employees and 63 trades people from central maintenance (a total of 441 people) with 215 maintenance operators — skilled trades workers who would operate the equipment and then maintain or repair it when needed. These maintenance operators were also expected to learn all operating jobs in the department in order to facilitate job rotation and enable the flexible deployment of workers to overcome the rigidities and inefficiencies associated with traditional Taylorist forms of work organization.

Two problems quickly arose. First, many of the operators displaced by this reorganization had higher levels of seniority than did the trades people sent in to replace them, and, in the context of potential layoffs resulting from the worsening financial position of the plant, this angered many workers. Second, the trades people sent in to perform the new maintenance operator jobs soon began to complain about (a) the nature of the work being well below their acquired skill levels and (b) the monotony of, and the constraints imposed by, the operating tasks.³ As a result, whenever they could, these trades people sought out pure craft jobs in other areas of the plant and moved into them as soon as they could, leaving critical skill shortages in the coke ovens area.

The local union president suddenly found himself beset with significant criticism from his members. In reaction, he began to pressure management to find solutions to the seniority issue (of junior trades people replacing more senior operators) and to the loss of skilled trades knowledge from the coke ovens department. After several months of failing to gain the performance effects it had hoped for (in part because of the high levels of turnover), management reversed its decision. Instead, it provided training in minor maintenance skills to the original operators and returned them to the coke ovens equipment where they were expected to learn all operating jobs, carry out minor maintenance work on the equipment and assist the skilled trades workers during major maintenance and repairs. Management also added dedicated skilled trades positions to this department.

The post-restructuring form of work organization at Hilton Works differed little from conventional forms. After the initial reorganization, the high levels of turnover of trades people in the maintenance operator function prevented most cross-training and any job rotation from occurring. After the subsequent reorganization, a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills among many operators⁴ prevented cross-training of this group once they were returned to the coke ovens as operator maintenance personnel. Also, supervisors preferred to keep those most proficient at a particular job on that job rather than move them to facilitate cross-training. In addition, supervision in the area remained high, so that workers gained no added autonomy or decision-making authority. Moreover, as consultation between labour and management remained highly centralized in the office of the union president, rank-and-file members gained no voice in the decisions that affected their work.

The empirical evidence suggests that the outcomes of the restructuring of the coke ovens and byproducts department at Hilton Works were mixed (see Table 2). Management achieved initial cost savings and a 21.5 per cent improvement in productivity as a result of staffing the coke ovens with maintenance operators. These improvements were sufficient for Stelco to weather the financial crisis it faced in late 1992. However, the notable improvements were relatively short-lived: after the subsequent reorganization that replaced the maintenance operators with operator-maintenance personnel plus trades people dedicated solely to the maintenance function, virtually all savings disappeared.

For workers, the changes also brought costs and benefits. The skilled trades workers who took on the maintenance operator jobs received an additional two job classes over their trade rates, or about C\$0.50 per hour more. However, they were deeply dissatisfied with the jobs for the most part and many left the area as soon as viable openings became available. At the same time, the former operators were highly dissatisfied with the initial changes because they lost their jobs to trades people who often had lower seniority. In the second reorganization of work, operators benefited — not only by getting their former jobs back, but also by receiving minor maintenance training and an additional two job classes for the acquisition of those skills.

For Local M2, the outcomes too were somewhat mixed. As a result of the series of negotiations between the local union president and Hilton Works management, a closer working relationship developed between plant management and the local union president. Below the level of the local union president, however, the role of the union remained virtually unchanged. Neither elected shop-floor representative nor rank-and-file members gained any added role in workplace decision-making. The local union continued to represent the best interests of its members in a traditional manner, with the local union president negotiating tightly worded contract language and the steward network policing that language through the grievance and arbitration process.

Restructuring at Lake Erie Works: Response of Local C

In 1992, Lake Erie Works management was informed that its coke ovens and byproducts area was in danger of failing to meet increasingly stringent environmental controls. As the most environmentally damaging area of an integrated steelworks, coke ovens receive close monitoring from local regulatory bodies. Failure to comply would mean the closure of the coke ovens and the need for management to purchase coke from outside sources. Not only was the additional cost damaging to management's bottom line, but the closure of the coke ovens would result in the layoff of a significant number of Local C's members. To cope, management sought to reorganize work in the mill's coke ovens department. In reorganizing work, management sought to find a way to get the necessary luting (the application of sealant to the coke oven doors to reduce noxious emissions) done on the battery tops to ensure that environmental standards could be met. Initially, management wanted to adopt the Hilton Works maintenance operator concept (which was still in place at the time). Local C vehemently disagreed, however, and invoked contract language providing the local union with access to decisions regarding workplace restructuring.

The 1990 collective agreement enshrined Local C's right to be involved in workplace restructuring and created the Senior Level Committee (SLC), made up of three members of senior plant management and three members of the local union executive. To reorganize work in the coke ovens area, the SLC appointed working committees in each department co-chaired by a

labour and a management representative (usually the departmental superintendent and the chief steward from the area) to formulate plans for workplace change. Each working committee then went out on the shop-floor to talk to all workers and solicit their ideas regarding ways in which work could be reorganized to free up the necessary personnel. After consulting with workers and supervisors in the area, each working committee prepared a report outlining its proposals for change. The SLC then had to come to a consensus regarding each proposal's merits and feasibility.

Once accepted by the SLC, however, the new form of work organization was not automatically implemented. The workers affected by the proposed changes first had to ratify the proposal. Further, workers also had the option of 'red circling' themselves — that is, accepting the changes in principle, but choosing not to be affected by them. In such cases, workers would continue to perform their usual jobs, receiving their usual pay, while others around them adopted the new practices. However, once they made the move to the new system, they could not opt to go back. This provision helped to smooth implementation by securing the buy-in even of those workers reluctant to accept the changes.

Local C's active involvement in the process of workplace restructuring led to a number of high-performance innovations in work organization. Jobs were broadened considerably as the former Taylorist jobs were combined into job clusters and paid on a pay-for-knowledge system. As well, job rotation was undertaken by the incumbents of the new job clusters. Worker autonomy was enhanced considerably as workers managed their own job assignments and rotation schedules, and worked without direct supervision. Although no formal employee involvement programme was implemented, the joint restructuring process became institutionalized at Lake Erie Works, and worker involvement in that process has continued to lead to improvements in operating efficiency.

The reorganization of work at Lake Erie Works also produced positive benefits for management, workers and the local union (see Table 2). Lake Erie Works management succeeded in freeing up the labour to do the luting needed to meet emission standards, without lowering productivity, decreasing quality or adding to the costs of coke making. In fact, productivity and quality both improved after restructuring: productivity by 7.5 per cent and quality, as measured by two standard indicators, by 3 per cent (for coke size) and 4 per cent (for coke stability). Workers also benefited, as their wages rose by an average of C\$0.80 per hour with many workers gaining increases up to \$C1.75 per hour. Local C also gained, as it took on a greater role in the governance of the workplace. The parties' 1993 collective agreement solidified the increasing role played by the local union in the day-to-day affairs of the plant, giving the local union input into decisions regarding not only restructuring, but also training, contracting out and the selection and implementation of new technology. With this contractual provision, Local C and its members gained consultation rights, if not *de facto* co-determination rights, with respect to a wide range of ongoing workplace changes.

6. A process-focused view of the three cases

The case study data presented in the previous section suggest that the processes and outcomes of workplace restructuring varied markedly between these three sites. In two cases, the active involvement of the local unions and their members in the process of restructuring produced lasting productivity and quality improvements, increased workers' wages and led to an increased role for the local union in workplace governance. In the other, the local union president's arm's length dealings with plant management failed to produce any long-term benefits for management, brought about few minor changes for workers, and had no effect upon the role of the local union in the workplace beyond that of the local union president. Yet, of the two local unions whose interactions with management led to sustained improvements in outcomes, one was a 'militant' local, while the other was a 'co-operative' local. Moreover, the local union in which few sustainable benefits were delivered to the union, its members or management was also, like the first local, a 'militant' one.

How do we explain this empirical puzzle? The traditional 'militant'–'co-operative' dichotomy does not appear to shed much explanatory light on these three cases. Thomas (1991) offers an alternative perspective. He urges researchers to go beyond examining only the outcomes of workplace change and instead to adopt a process-focused research strategy that studies the entire change process, from proposal generation to proposal selection through to implementation. He argues such an approach yields significantly greater insight into the factors that influence the choice and subsequent implementation of a particular system. By adopting this perspective, a number of critical differences can be seen in the processes of restructuring across these three cases.

Table 3 summarizes the similarities in the processes of restructuring undertaken by Local M1 and Local C, and the differences between those two processes and the process undertaken by Local M2. These differences, I argue, define distinct responses by the local unions to management-initiated workplace restructuring, responses that have shaped importantly the outcomes of restructuring across the three sites.

Local M1 and Local C became involved in negotiating over workplace changes at a very early stage. In both cases, the local unions were able to gain access to the proposal generation stage of workplace reorganization prior to management designing any changes unilaterally: Local M1 through shop-floor pressure — the filing of grievances and a work-to-rule campaign — and Local C by having contract language guaranteeing this access. In this way, Local M1 and Local C could help structure the criteria by which new forms of work organization would be judged acceptable. For example, at Inland Steel, Local M1 insisted that head count reductions and wage roll-backs were not acceptable — that costs would have to be reduced by other means. Similarly, Local M1 and Local C ensured that their members were able to participate in the process of generating proposals through the efforts

TABLE 3
Similarities and Differences in the Process of Restructuring

	<i>Local M1</i>	<i>Local C</i>	<i>Local M2</i>
Proposal generation			
Timing of union involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the beginning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the beginning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not involved in proposal generation
Who from union involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union members and elected representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union members and elected representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No one (unilaterally developed by departmental management)
Proposal selection			
Levels involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single
Proposal refinement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iterative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iterative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
Decision method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local president could negotiate over implications
Implementation			
Ratification by those affected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None

of the design teams and the working committees. In the words of the chair of the grievance committee at Local C, published in the union newspaper,

In the last round of bargaining we negotiated rights that allow us an unprecedented voice in the areas of health and safety, contracting out, scheduling, trade descriptions, and restructuring. But with all rights so too come new responsibilities, and in this case the new price tag to be paid is one of active involvement. . . . we have to be willing to interact with our Committees and to take time to communicate our ideas and thoughts to those people who represent the membership.

Member involvement ensured that the solution was technically sound by drawing upon bargaining unit members' technical knowledge of the work they were redesigning. It also ensured that important workplace norms were not violated. Moreover, the involvement of elected union representatives on the overarching committees (the Joint Committee at Inland Steel and the Senior Level Committee at Lake Erie Works) ensured that members' best interests as a whole were taken into account — that the interests of one group were not maximized at the expense of those of others.

Local M2, in contrast, allowed management to design the changes it wanted without input from the local union or its members. Only after management had redesigned the work process did the local union president negotiate over the implications of the plan. Not liking what he saw, Local M2's president then felt he had no alternative but to try to get the best deal possible for his members. In his words,

The union leadership took a philosophical approach and negotiated the restructuring agreement. We were totally opposed to crafts and operator combos, but we made them pay two job classes to do it and we got language to go to flat seniority for layoffs (rather than skill and seniority).

Later, management's initial plan had to be withdrawn after union member protests, and work had to be redesigned to meet the needs of both the trades people and operators involved. Yet, even the second plan failed to deliver the expected benefits, because it had not taken into account the poor literacy and numeracy levels in the department, which proved to be an insurmountable barrier to the cross-training and job rotation that had been envisioned. In both instances, the union stood by while management designed inappropriate forms of work organization.

The differences in these two local union responses can be seen again at the second stage of work redesign: proposal approval. Both Local M1 and Local C negotiated a multi-tiered system of joint committees to oversee the restructuring. These committees ensured that management had to interact with the local union and its members at several levels and that the local union had multiple points of access to management decision-making. The proposals of the design teams and working committees (themselves jointly constituted) had to be approved by both departmental and plant-level joint committees. In this way, labour and management had to reach agreement at each stage of the redesign. During this process, negotiation between labour and management led to iterative refinements of the proposal until the parties at each level were able to reach consensus on the proposal's merits. In such instances labour possessed considerable leverage, and therefore could ensure that its arguments were heard and resolved satisfactorily, as it could hold up or refuse changes with which it disagreed. In contrast, Local M2 met management at a single point: in meetings between the local union president and the plant's operations manager. This single point of access reduced Local M2's potential leverage *vis à vis* management: the local union could not use multiple channels to get its message across, nor could it use pressure at multiple points to persuade management to take its wishes seriously.

The final stage in the process of workplace change highlighted by Thomas (1991) is implementation. Once again, the process followed by Local M1 and Local C offers a sharp contrast to that followed by Local M2 at this stage. Both Local M1 and Local C insisted on rank-and-file ratification of the proposed plans. By requiring ratification by those to be affected by the changes, they effectively put control in their members' hands, making any changes contingent on workers' approval. This ensured that change was not imposed by management on a recalcitrant work-force. Thus, implementation flowed more smoothly and the expected benefits of restructuring materialized.

This stands in stark contrast to the experience of Local M2, where management initially foisted change upon a resistant work-force. Both the skilled trades workers and the original operators were deeply dissatisfied

with the original maintenance operator concept. Indeed, because of workers' discontent, management was forced to undo the original restructuring of work and implement an alternative, using dedicated trades people in combination with operators trained in minor maintenance skills. In this instance Local M2 had little control over changes in work organization, except to force management to undo what it had already done and to start again.

Thus, although Local M1 and Local M2 at the outset looked to be very similar local unions and ones that by our traditional categorizations would fall into the 'militant' category, they approached the need to restructure at the workplace in very different ways at each stage of the process. Moreover, Local C, which varied along virtually every dimension from both Local M1 and Local M2, and which by most conventional approaches would be considered a 'co-operative' local, responded to management-initiated restructuring in a manner almost identical to that of Local M1.

7. A reconceptualization of local union responses

In all three cases presented here, the local union negotiated with management over workplace restructuring. However, the substance of those negotiations varied, as did the depth of involvement by the local unions and their members. These differences, I argue, define two distinct local union responses to management-initiated workplace restructuring. In what follows I outline how each response — which I have termed the 'Interventionist' and the 'Pragmatic' — is distinct from the other and draw upon evidence in the broader industrial relations literature to flesh out, and suggest the generalizability of, this reconceptualization of local union responses.

The Interventionist response is exemplified by the actions of Local M1 and Local C, whereby the local union entered into negotiations with management at an early stage and where a broad cross-section of members and elected representatives was deeply involved in the process of designing, selecting and implementing the new form of work organization. On the basis of evidence presented in this paper, the Interventionist response was associated with outcomes that met the needs of all stakeholders: management, workers and the local union.

The Interventionist response does not appear to be simply a product of the particular setting or industry studied here. Cutcher-Gershenfeld (1988) documents the experience of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union local at Xerox in dealing with management's threat to outsource the assembly of wire harnesses used in Xerox machines. By threatening to withdraw from a QWL programme in which the parties had been heavily engaged, the union forced management to allow the union access to the decision-making process. A study team composed of union members and management was formed to find ways to lower costs, and after six months of study the team had exceeded the target savings level and kept the wire harness work in-house (Cutcher-Gershenfeld 1988).

Similarly, Rinehart *et al.* (1997) document the experience of Canadian Autoworker Local 88 in forcing management to renegotiate the implementation of lean production at CAMI, the GM–Suzuki joint venture. Through a combination of in-plant action and an eventual work stoppage, Local 88 was able to win significant changes in workplace governance. The union won five additional full-time union representatives, expanded the role of the Health and Safety Committee and established a joint training committee. Workers also won the right to elect team leaders, rather than have them appointed by management. Finally, provisions were included that limited line speedups and placed floors on staffing levels, ensuring greater regulation of work-loads.

The second distinct local union response that emerges from the evidence presented in this paper is what I have termed the Pragmatic response and is exemplified by the actions of Local M2. In contrast to the process of negotiating with management throughout the entire restructuring process, as is the case with an Interventionist response, a local union responding in a Pragmatic way relies on management to make workplace-related decisions, and then negotiates with management over the implications of those changes.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that this form of local union response can lead to less than optimal outcomes. This results from work being redesigned without management access to important information, either about the work itself or about workplace norms; from change occurring only after a full retraction of completed plans rather than through iterative negotiated change; and from workers being less than committed to workplace changes that they perceive to be foisted upon them by management from above.

Again, the Pragmatic response does not seem to be unique to the case described in this paper. On the contrary, it appears to be a very common union response, and one documented more than forty years ago by Slichter *et al.* (1960), who noted that the role of management was to act and that of the union was to grieve. Pollert's (2000) work, documenting the implementation of teamwork (and its associated 'transformed' human resource management system) at a large food processing company, records several instances of such a Pragmatic response by the union representing workers at that facility. Each time a workplace innovation was introduced, the union was informed and was then able to negotiate over the outcomes — for example wages, or the content of a new training programme. However, in no instance did the union gain access to the proposal generation or selection stages, and therefore it was unable to alter the overall direction or purpose of the changes management was implementing.

In both the Interventionist and Pragmatic responses, the local union responds to management-initiated workplace change with some form of negotiation. Two other local union responses become apparent if we look at the converse of these negotiating responses, i.e. at responses in which the local union does not negotiate. Although the three case studies presented in this paper do not provide evidence of such responses, examples suggestive

of two other distinct responses can be found in the broader industrial relations literature. I have termed them the Apathetic and Obstructionist responses.

The Apathetic response is characterized by a failure of a local union to negotiate at all over management-initiated workplace change. In some such instances the union fails to see the management-initiated change as affecting its members' interests, and therefore does not respond to such changes. In other instances the union may perceive itself as powerless in the face of management and as having no alternative but to accept management's proposals as they are. As a result, members' interests are not represented during the process of workplace change and likely are not adequately attended to. Management's long term interests may or may not be maximized with such an approach. To the degree that workers have valuable information regarding the work or workplace norms, and to the extent that worker commitment to the new course of action is required, the Apathetic response on the local union's part serves neither union members nor management well.

An example of an Apathetic response comes from the retail food industry, in which local unions have failed to recognize and combat management's objective of virtually eliminating full-time jobs and subjecting the remaining part-time employees to less stable work and deteriorating employment conditions. Kainer (1998) attributes much of this lack of response to a tradition of 'business unionism', in which the union focused on negotiating over the narrow economic interests of its members with a relatively accommodating management. Management in this industry, however, has adopted a radically more aggressive industrial relations strategy, which has caught many unions unprepared and to which they have not yet responded.

Stephenson (1996) describes the experience of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union local at Nissan's plant in the UK. Rather than have the presence of a strong shop-floor-based union, Nissan employs a Company Council to carry out communication, negotiation and problem-solving. With virtually no presence at the workplace (a single steward to represent the more than 2,500 workers in the plant), management has been able to access worker knowledge to speed up work, to engender worker monitoring of peers, and to formalize competition between groups of workers (Stephenson 1996).

The final ideal type of labour response identified here is one I have termed the Obstructionist response. This is characterized by a refusal of the union to accept management-initiated workplace change. Little or no negotiation takes place, and the parties are brought to impasse, with either management forced to retract its initial proposal (see Waters 1993) or the union forced to strike (see Walton *et al.* 1994). This response is motivated by the union's desire to preserve the power and benefits the status quo provides its members — whether this be wages, jobs or conditions of employment. To the degree that the local union has a power advantage *vis à vis* its management counterpart, then the Obstructionist response makes sense from a

practical standpoint of the union doing its utmost to represent its members' best interests.

Several typical examples of unions responding in an Obstructionist manner come from the US pulp and paper industry in the mid-1980s. As documented by Birecree (1993) in her case study of management-initiated workplace change at International Paper, management's demands for the reorganization of production and maintenance work and for wage concessions resulted in the union's refusal to negotiate. In a series of strikes, United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) locals withdrew their members' services from International Paper. Shortly thereafter, their members were permanently replaced at Jay, Lockhaven and DePere, and these UPIU locals were eventually lost to decertification several years later.

I have introduced and described four distinct local union responses to management-initiated workplace restructuring. Two responses were induced from the case study evidence provided in this paper and were shown to affect the outcomes of workplace restructuring. Two others — the Apathetic and the Obstructionist — were suggested as additional responses that will have distinct effects on the outcomes of workplace restructuring for management, workers and the local union. The latter two responses are sketched only briefly here. Detailed fieldwork to examine these responses and their impacts on outcomes for the parties is still needed. However, the two responses examined in detail in this paper — the Interventionist and the Pragmatic — and the possibility of two other plausible responses provides reasonable grounds, I believe, for suggesting that we move away from relying on descriptions of a local union's type — whether 'militant' or 'co-operative' — towards a more finely grained, multi-dimensional conception of local union responses that describes more accurately what local unions *do* to affect the outcomes of management-initiated workplace change.

8. Conclusion

This research provides evidence that local unions can respond in distinct ways to virtually identical situations in which management initiates workplace restructuring. On the basis of this evidence, I have argued that it is the local union's response — and not the *type* of local union (i.e. whether 'militant' or 'co-operative') — that importantly shapes⁵ the process and outcomes of workplace restructuring. Moreover, this finding has prompted the development of a broader, richer conceptualization of local union responses, which can better explain differences in workplace outcomes across otherwise similar unionized settings.

These findings, however, raise other important research questions. First, given the virtually identical settings in which the two distinct local union responses were observed in this study, we need to understand the conditions under which local unions respond in particular ways. Further, a local union may respond differently to different types of change initiated by

management (Kelly 1996). For example, the threat of layoffs or the nature of the past labour–management relationship may shape a local union’s choice of response. Moreover, the internal capabilities of a local union to mobilize its members to respond proactively to management-initiated change will also play a role in determining the local union’s likely response (Frost 2000). In short, the research presented here suggests the need for a broader understanding of the factors, both internal and external to the local union, that shape a particular response.

A second area for future research is in the mechanisms by which the Interventionist response produces outcomes that benefit a wide range of stakeholders. The involvement of front-line workers and union representatives at multiple levels in the design of new forms of work organization, the selection of proposals, and their ratification prior to implementation supports earlier findings from several works in the literature that employee participation in decision-making leads to superior outcomes. Union representatives and managers alike reported that this high-involvement process led to more favourable outcomes. In the words of one member of Local M1 active on a design team at Inland Steel,

Not only is the outcome better technically [when workers have input] but you get people to buy in. They get sold on it. It sure beats unilateral implementation [by management].

We need to explore the source of such benefits: whether it is through employee voice mechanisms and their impact on perceptions of procedural justice (Cohen 1985; Lind and Tyler 1988); whether it is through effective conflict resolution mechanisms (Jehn 1997); whether it is through simple information deficits being reduced (Jensen and Meckling 1992; Kelley 1986); or some combination of the above.

The third area to be explored in future research is the role played by conflict. Conflict appears in all three cases of restructuring described in this paper. Yet it manifests itself differently and produces different outcomes. At all three sites, conflict was expressed over management’s initial plans for restructuring and appeared throughout negotiations over a new form of work organization. However, at Inland Steel and at Lake Erie Works, conflict was channelled positively to produce an outcome that benefited all parties. At Hilton Works the conflict was never satisfactorily resolved — leaving management, workers and the local union with little effective change as a result of their efforts.

Future research, building on work in the organizational behaviour literature that has focused on the effects of conflict on work-group performance, would be potentially useful here. What distinguishes the conflict between Local M1 and management at Inland Steel and between Local C and management at Lake Erie Works from that between Local M2 and management at Hilton Works? A tentative proposition to be tested would be that conflict that can be channelled to appropriate institutional structures (such as the multi-tiered joint committee structures found at both Inland Steel and

Lake Erie Works) is better resolved than conflict that is left to be dealt with by two individuals. In the latter case, it may be that the conflict becomes more personal at the same time as it fails to receive alternative perspectives or ideas from others. Both of these conditions are highlighted by Jehn (1997) as conditions under which conflict proves detrimental to work-group performance.

This research provides evidence that differences in local union responses to management-initiated workplace restructuring shape importantly the process and outcomes of workplace change. Moreover, the process of restructuring and the role played by the local union in shaping the form, level and extent of negotiations around workplace change appears important. These findings suggest that we think in process terms about local union responses, and begin to reconceptualize responses as a set of ideal types rather than as points along a unidimensional continuum.

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Notes

1. The frequent goal of workplace restructuring is the elimination of the traditional inflexible, buffered, command and control hierarchy and the implementation of so-called 'high-performance' or transformed models of work organization. Unfortunately, a survey of the literature reveals no consistently agreed upon components of such a model. Instead, I highlight four dimensions that researchers have commonly cited as characterizing transformed forms of work organization: job breadth (Katz and Keefe 1992; Osterman 1994; Rankin 1994; Schonberger 1994); job rotation (Dertouzos *et al.* 1989; Katz and Keefe 1992; Osterman 1994); worker autonomy and decision-making authority (Lawler 1990; White 1994); and employee involvement (Arthur 1992; Dertouzos *et al.* 1989; Ichniowski 1992; Osterman 1994).
2. The primary end of an integrated steel facility converts the raw materials of coal and iron ore into steel slabs that are then sent through the finishing end of the facility to be converted into final products. The primary end includes coke ovens, blast furnaces, basic oxygen furnaces and continuous casting facilities.
3. Operator jobs require the incumbent to remain at a given work-station monitoring a console of instrument read-outs. In contrast, skilled trade jobs are mobile,

with incumbents being called to virtually any area in the plant to work. The new maintenance operators missed the mobility and autonomy associated with their former trade jobs.

4. There were also problems with basic literacy and numeracy in the membership of Local M1. However, awareness of this issue by workers and union representatives led the design teams there to redesign jobs into clusters each containing only a handful of jobs. Thus, smaller numbers of jobs could be learned more easily, and the more difficult and challenging jobs requiring more extensive literacy and numeracy could be separated from those without such demands. In contrast, Local C had much higher rates of literacy and numeracy, corresponding to a much higher rate of high school completion, owing largely to members of Local C being on average 10 years younger than workers at either Local M1 or Local M2.
5. Management's strategy and behaviours are also important determinants of workplace outcomes. My argument is not to downplay the importance of management. Rather, the focus here on local union responses is meant as an important addition to our current frameworks. Given my interest, in this paper, in understanding in greater detail the effects of local union responses, the cases were chosen carefully to minimize variation in management approaches and strategies. In other settings, management strategies are unlikely to be this uniform. Walton *et al.* (1994) provide a number of detailed examples of the effects of different management strategies on restructuring negotiations. Further, it may be that a local union's response may in fact be determined in part by the management and management strategies it faces. It has long been noted in the industrial relations literature that 'management gets the union it deserves'.

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