



## **THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT OF THE REFORM OF ENGLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE AND STRUCTURE**

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This article examines the impact of neo-liberal reforms since 1979 on UK local government. In particular we trace the relationship between increased central government control over both the level of funds and the ways in which monies are spent, and the management of labour. Our interest centres on what happened to labour management practices, given that the sector is labour intensive and has high levels of union membership. The main research method was a longitudinal case study of one large local authority in England. We found that central government policies resulted in downward pressure on unit labour costs, forcing local decision-makers to try to reduce union influence in collective bargaining and to introduce Taylorist programmes to deskill labour and to regulate it. As part of this process there was an attempt by senior managers to reduce political accountability within the council.

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### **Introduction**

This article explores the impact of central government regulation on the management of industrial conflict and decision-making practices in English local government. Our analysis is rooted in a brief general examination of the history of the local government system and in a specific case study since 1979. We argue that there was a more or less clear set of progressive developments from 1919 to 1979 in terms of the organization and management of local government labour, linked to the development of the services provided by that labour (Hobsbawm, 1994). Such a progressive outcome was itself based on a growing consensus of conflict resolution through the accommodation of rival power factions—central government, elected local councillors, senior local government officials, and the trade unions. We then note that the election of Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative government in 1979 brought in a period of substantive change rooted in a neo-liberal (Washington consensus) critique of the role of the state (Chomsky, 1999) and a substantive shift

*Received 18 January 1999; revised 29 June 2001; accepted 20 September 2001*

to neo-classical market type reforms. These were aimed at centralizing decision-making and *pari passu* reducing local government discretion, and at cheapening the costs of services through reducing both total and unit labour costs, primarily through cash limits, rate capping, and compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). This twin track approach could only be achieved by attacking the local government trade unions, weakening collective bargaining, and making the labour process more oppressive through the application of scientific management (Taylorist) techniques (Taylor, 1911; Ironside & Seifert, 2000). In turn this could only be brought about by increasing the pressures and regulations on local managers, both elected and appointed.

The evidence to sustain our argument is based on primary and secondary sources for the long-term developments (Royal Commissions being an instance of the first and academic commentaries being an instance of the latter), set out in the next section of the paper. This provides a brief overview of the themes and issues that dominated the progressive phase of local government in England: more or less steady expansion of funding and functions; the professionalization and unionization of staff; the expansion of collective bargaining as the main mechanism for setting pay and conditions; the ambiguous concerns of the central state with regard to finance and control; and the growing influence of private sector managerialism.

This is followed by a detailed case study of the impact of more recent changes in a large local authority. The case study builds on and develops earlier fieldwork carried out by one of the authors (Gill, 1994), and was based on interviews and observations between 1996 and 2000. It concentrates on the links between central government's efforts to secure greater control over local decisions and the management of labour required to deliver that control, noting in particular that such efforts are impeded by both the resistance of the staff and the contradictory roles asked of senior managers.

A major part of this since the early 1980s has been to tighten the grip on labour management in particular as the necessary condition for other changes such as contracting out of services. We analyse the imperatives placed on managers to cheapen labour costs which lead, *ipso facto*, to the degradation of local government labour through the imposition of human resource management (HRM) and total quality management (TQM) techniques, even in councils controlled by the Labour Party and where workforces are highly unionized (Foster, 1991; Colling, 1993, 1995). We suggest that such an approach offers a stronger explanation of changes in local government labour management practice than either Public Choice Theory (Dunleavy, 1991), New Public Management (Pollitt, 1993), or indeed the proponents of HRM and partnership (Kochan *et al.*, 1986; Guest, 1995). While we do not engage in these debates here, we do recognize that by stating our line on labour process, which is firmly rooted in Braverman's (1974) enduring analysis of the degradation of work, we are by implication both attacking those other methods of analysis and setting out an alternative to them.

We conclude that as the conservative counter-revolution led to more damaging outcomes for local services so there were forged alliances of some staff and some managers to minimize the negative impact of policy while maintaining reasonable levels of compliance with audit. That since local government services

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