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FACTORY MODERNISATION AND UNION IDENTITY: NEW CHALLENGES FOR UNIONS – REFLECTIONS FROM BRAZILIAN CASE STUDIES

Lee Pegler

June 2003

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ABSTRACT

Using detailed primary data from Brazil, this paper investigates what problems modernisation has created for unions within the white goods industry. Drawing from a detailed analysis of the modernisation strategies of five firms and their effects on work and on workers' attitudes, the research applies a model of union identity to the experiences of the unions at these sites. As it appears clear that workers are keen for unions to have a new role in relation to recent changes to the workplace, the existence of 'moderate', 'strategic' and 'radical/political' unions at the comprehensively modernised sites permits the analysis to compare the effectiveness of both 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' union response hypotheses.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Within the recent literature on industrial modernisation one strand of argument is that unions must and will develop more conciliatory relations with modernising firms. This is based on the assumption that the modernisation process will create a new ‘mutuality’ of interests between workers and the firm. The corollary to this union identity option (for this optimistic school of thought) is that if unions do not cooperate and moderate their approach they will become either social movements with no connection to the workplace and/or increasingly irrelevant to the ‘irresistible’ forces of globalisation and companies’ new competitive strategies. On the other hand, other commentators believe that moderation will seriously undermine unions’ effectiveness and that they must therefore look for new, combative workplace strategies in order to have any chance of surviving as representative bodies.

Using detailed primary data from Brazil, this paper investigates what problems modernisation has created for unions within the white goods industry.¹ Drawing from a detailed analysis of the modernisation strategies of five firms and their effects on work and on workers’ attitudes, the research applies a model of union identity to the experiences of the unions at these sites. As it appears clear that workers are keen for unions to have a new role in relation to recent changes to the workplace, the existence of ‘moderate’, ‘strategic’ and ‘radical/political’ unions at the comprehensively modernised sites permits the analysis to compare the effectiveness of both ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ union response hypotheses.

In terms of the specific Brazilian context, the paper suggests the following in respect to the challenges of modernisation for unions. First, rather than offering new opportunities, modernisation has simply added to the difficult political and institutional situation that Brazilian unions (particularly active ones) already face. Secondly, while moderation may allow some unions to hold on to power and retain an adequate financial base, this does mean that they are either involved in workplace matters or representative in any true sense. Thirdly, ‘radical/ political’ unionism faces the largest challenge from moderation as it appears that Brazilian managements’ ‘new’ HRM/TQM policies continue to be based on the older objective of union avoidance. However, even

¹ The material comes from: Pegler, L. (2000) ‘Workers, Unions and the “Politics of Modernisation”’: Labour Process Change in the Brazilian White Goods Industry’, Phd Thesis LSE, University of London; and from follow up interviews with the firms and unions between November 2000 – January 2001.

those unions which develop innovative, new workplace related strategies (for engaging workers) will find that they face considerable difficulties gaining workers 'ears', particularly when plants are located in 'greenfield' sites.

Finally, while these specific conclusions have a relation to the Brazilian context, they also hold great importance for unions in other developing or 'transitional' economies. In environments where there are political/institutional constraints on union action, where social actors have not yet found a clear space for relations and where the labour market is slack, often informal, and workers lowly paid and poorly educated, modernisation adds another challenge to independent and active unions. Union hierarchies may also be destabilised as modernisation may lead to a much wider degree of differentiation in employment and industrial relations conditions between areas, sectors and firms. This will make attempts to develop union movement policies and to standardise conditions increasingly difficult and irrelevant.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2.0 (2.1) discusses the debates about the effects of modernisation on unions as well as the range of possible union responses. It then notes the model of identity used in the paper's analysis. The section (2.2) then discusses the institutional and political factors which define the Brazilian industrial relations context. Section 3.0 summarises the nature of the modernisation process at the case study firms, grouping them into 'comprehensive' and 'partial' (moderniser) categories. The section also notes the results of research into workers attitudes to the employer and union at these firms. These results are most important in terms of what they say about workers preferences for future union action. Section 4.0 is the core of the paper. It applies the model of union identity to the unions at the firms, particularly the most modernised ones. The analysis documents the interrelation of union identity, firm strategy and context up to early 2001. Section 5.0 summarises and concludes the paper.

2 THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS AND THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

2.1 Responding to Change – Themes and Concepts

An important theme which emerged out of the 1990s debates about new factory regimes, work and workers was - how did and, in fact, how should unions respond? The body of optimistic (or managerialist) thought suggested that unions must and will develop more conciliatory relations with modernising firms.² This seemed to flow from the apparently simple idea that modernisation will lead to a change in attitudes and that this will translate into the enhanced performance of the firm.³ However, the links within this idea - between changes to work and changing attitudes to work, the employer and union (thus the 'necessity' for unions to change) - have been challenged by many studies.⁴

How then will and must unions change within this optimistic 'mutual gains' schema? First, as suggested above, unions must listen to workers (apparently) new demands and look for ways in which they can engage employers in a constructive dialogue in respect to these themes.⁵ Training and personal development are two key issues which have often been suggested as good examples for such an approach.⁶ On the other hand, it is also noted that unions may choose to expand their combative and political role as a social movement (but have no connection to the workplace).⁷

Critics of this optimistic perspective on industrial modernisation believe that moderation will seriously undermine unions' effectiveness and that they therefore must look for new combative workplace strategies in order to have any chance of surviving as representative bodies.⁸ But what form must these strategies take? Most unions have

² See for example, M. Piore, 'Unions: A Reorientation to Survive', in: *Labor Economics and Industrial Relations*, eds. C. Kerr and P. Staudohar (London 1994), pp 512-544.

³ A point succinctly made in Lincoln, J. and A. Kallenberg, *Culture, Control and Commitment* (Cambridge 1989), p 4.

⁴ For a review of a number of critical US and UK studies see: Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', Ch. 1, pp 10-14 and pp 20-27.

⁵ See, Piore, 'Unions...Reorientation' and Kochan, T. and P. Osterman, *The Mutual Gains Enterprise* (Boston 1994).

⁶ See: W. Streeck, 'Training and the New Industrial Relations: A Strategic Role for Unions?', in: *The Future Labour Movements*, ed. M. Regini (London 1992).

⁷ See: N. Bacon and J. Storey, 'Individualism and Collectivism and the Changing Role of Trade Unions' in: *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism*, eds. P. Ackers, C. Smith and P. Smith, (London 1996).

⁸ For a critical discussion of these issues see P. Ackers, C. Smith and P. Smith, *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism* (London 1996). Typologies of union responses can be found in D. Guest, 'Human Resource Management, Trade Unions and Industrial Relations' in: *Human Resource Management: A Critical Text*, ed. J. Storey, (London 1995) and Hyman, R. 'Changing Trade Union Identities and Strategies', in: *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations*, eds. R. Hyman and A. Ferner (London 1994).

had to face difficulties due to issues such as structural/demographic change on many occasions in the past. Yet the more complex and ambiguous training, evaluation and involvement mechanisms within the modernising firm may encourage workers to be more focussed on workplace issues - ones in which many unions are presently not involved or prepared for. Moreover, such a change in workers' attitudes may also challenge the effectiveness of unions' broader political objectives and campaigns.

Aside from the above workplace or social movement options, these 'new terrains' of conflict have also led to a number of combined micro-macro options for unions, such as Hyman's 'business unionism with a social conscience'.⁹ The greatest difference between all of these suggestions for union strategy is, however, over whether unions should be moderate or militant. Yet, in themselves, neither of these two concepts provides either a useful practical description of realities or a conceptual guide to possible future strategies.

For example, at a practical level, unless it is assumed that employers have become pro-union, a harsh facilitating environment may have clear effects on any union strategy. Secondly, the evolution into a social movement represents a major change to unions as most know them. On the other hand, few unions have a structure and history of workplace relations that even gets close to the model of workplace involvement that has been achieved in countries such as Germany and Sweden. Moreover, both these examples of workplace involvement are not without their problems.¹⁰ One lesson they appear to present is that union success must be based on a strong workplace role plus macro coordination and a strong, positive recognition of unions in law.¹¹ The lack of any clear international evidence suggesting workers 'dual allegiance' (to both employer and union) would appear to support the need for these features – especially if unions are to survive as independent, representative bodies.¹²

9 Hyman, R. 'European Unions: towards 2000' in: *Work, Employment and Society*, (1991), 5,4.

10 See Kern, H. and C. Sabel, 'Trade Unions and decentralized production: a Sketch of Strategic Problems in the German Labour Movement', in: *Future Labour*, ed. M. Regini.

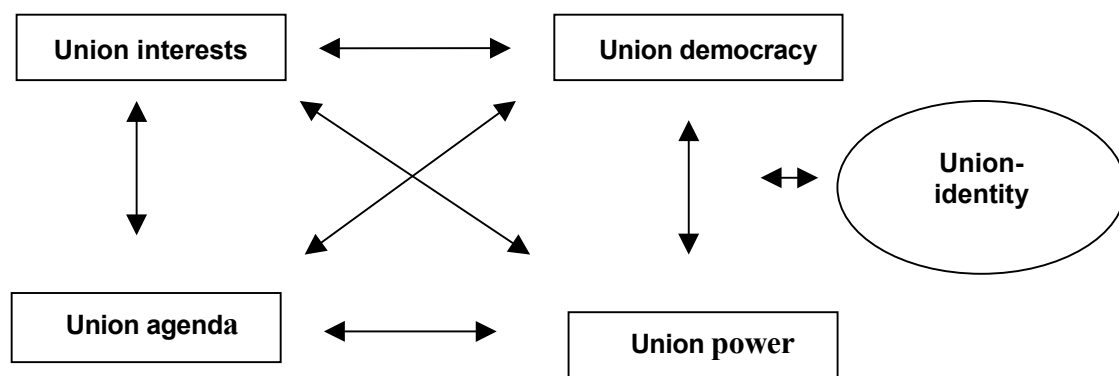
11 A point well made by M. Terry, 'Workplace Unionism: Redefining Structures and Objectives', in *New Frontiers*, eds. Hyman and Ferner and by, C. Crouch, 'The Fate of Articulated Industrial Relations Systems: a stock taking after the 'Neo-liberal' Decade', in: *Future Labour*, ed. M. Regini and L. Turner, *Democracy at Work: Changing World Markets and the Future of Labor Unions*, (Cornell 1991).

¹² Noted for the literature in Lincoln and Kallenberg, *Culture*, p 4 and for their study, ch. 9. In fact, international studies note that job satisfaction has strong links to reduced turnover and absenteeism and not to company allegiance (D. Guest, 'Human Resource Management and industrial relations' in: *Journal of Management Studies*, (1987), 24, 5, pp 513-514 and Lincoln and Kallenberg, *Culture*, p 25.

At a conceptual and analytical level, these issues challenge us to find frameworks which allow a more contextually sensitive evaluation of unions (on issues such as union effectiveness, success and representation) within this (new) environment. For example, with the modernising employer increasingly trying to persuade workers to go ‘beyond (the wage-effort) contract’ and take a firm specific but individualist perspective, how far should unions try to influence, as opposed to follow, the opinions of workers and still be considered a representative and independent voice of workers? On the other hand, even if a union has been able to alter workplace conditions, who has this benefitted? That is, if conditions are becoming more variegated and individualised, have unions’ interests and agendas adjusted so that they could (still) be considered collective and representative?

In an attempt to add depth to a ‘moderate vs militant’ perspective on these issues, this research attempted to apply a concept of identity.¹³ The model employed is one which considers the nature of interests served by the union, its level of democracy and the union agenda. Union identity is defined as the relationship of these factors to whether and how a union is able to exert power/control within its particular context. The central elements of this model (figure 1) are discussed below.

FIGURE 1
The identity model



Source: Hyman, ‘Union Identities’, p 120.

i) Union interests:

A union's interests relate to whom and in what types of issues it is interested. Challenges common to most unions are whether they can expand their interest base and still be representative. Unions may have more difficulty (than in the past) resolving their interests in an environment where internal factory conditions take on relatively greater importance (for workers) than factors external to the firm.

ii) Union agenda:

A union's agenda is evident not only from its formal policies and constitution but also from the priorities implicit within its day-to-day strategies. In this regard, quantitative demands fit more easily within unions' traditional orientation. On the other hand, qualitative demands, such as those raised by modernisation, are more challenging of managerial authority. In the face of modernising employers, a union's agenda could (in a stylised sense) become either, 1) more collaborative and narrow in scope, or 2) actively questioning of employers and broader in focus.

iii) Union democracy:

The third factor concerns the problematic issue of union democracy. To go fully into the debates about union democracy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a principal question of these debates is whether an 'iron law of oligarchy' (a conflict between union efficiency and democracy) is inevitable.¹⁴ Conflicts of this type are said to be heightened by modernisation.¹⁵

The analysis of this research is based on the proposition that participation is the key issue behind democracy and that this will also determine a union's effectiveness.¹⁶ The concept employed, participant representation, departs from an internal electoral model of democracy often derived from the 'iron law' proposition. This 'iron law', or goal displacement proposition, was based on three related arguments. These were that; the demands of organisational effectiveness would lead to divisions between leaders and the rank and file; this would be perpetuated by leaders increasing interest in re

¹³ Derived from R. Hyman, 'Changing Trade Union Identities and Strategies', in: *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations*, eds. R. Hyman and A. Ferner (London 1994).

¹⁴ R. Michels, *Political Parties* (New York 1959, 1st ed. 1915).

¹⁵ As noted by Kern and Sabel, 'Unions and Decentralised Production'

¹⁶ As noted/used by W. Mangabeira, 'Union Politics and workplace militancy: a case study of Brazilian steelworkers in the 1980s', (1991), PhD Thesis, LSE, University of London, ch 1.

maintaining in power and; that an antagonism of interests would grow between a radical workforce and growing moderation by union leaders.¹⁷

The internal consistency and assumptions of these arguments have been seriously challenged in the literature.¹⁸ Furthermore, the use of electoral models and an emphasis on internal institutional aspects of unions¹⁹ neglects external factors.²⁰ Most importantly, the implicit assumption that unions must solely follow workers' demands does not necessarily indicate that unions are representative.²¹

What does appear important is whether active collaboration exists between workers and the union. The process of participative representation will be a function of resource availability and local conditions. It is a socially constructed process wherein a representative union seeks workers' views, interprets their demands, proposes new themes, reports back to workers and pursues members' demands.²²

Participant representation may be more difficult to achieve as modernisation proceeds. This is because modernisation may lead to 1) fewer workers being interested in the union, and/or 2) viewpoints of a union's role becoming more diverse or even diametrically opposed. This may or may not destabilise the union. It may or may not also lead to particular groups taking control of the union or others facing unfair obstacles to the challenging of this group (i.e. the 'iron law' debate). More fundamentally, modernisation could reduce the incentive for and effectiveness of mechanisms of participation and accountability.

iv) Union Power:

One possible power implication of this model is therefore that, as workplaces

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See *Ibid.* and P. Cook, 'Robert Michels Political Parties in Perspective' in: *The Journal of Politics* (1971) 33; and S. Hill, *Competition and Control at Work* (London 1981). Cook criticises the concept for implicitly assuming the working class as a radical group and leaders as supporting the status quo. Hill criticises a necessary link being made between goal displacement and oligarchic tendencies.

¹⁹ Such as is done by J. Edelstein and M. Warner, *Comparative Union Democracy* (New Jersey 1979); R. Martin, 'Union Democracy: An Explanatory Framework' in: *Sociology* (1968) 2, 2 and I. Roxborough, *Unions and Politics in Mexico – the case of the automobile industry* (Cambridge 1984).

²⁰ As is argued by, E. Heery and P. Fosh, 'Introduction: whose union? Power and bureaucracy in the labour movement' in: *Trade Unions and their members: studies in union democracy and organization*, eds. P. Fosh and E. Heery (1990), pp 1-28, and in respect to Mexico, K. Middlebrook, 'Union Democratization in the Mexican Auto Industry', *L.A.R.R.*, 24, 2.

²¹ Demonstrated in other Brazilian situations by Mangabeira, 'Union Politics', and J. Morais, 'New Unionism and Union Politics in Pernambuco (Brazil) in the late 1980s' (1992), PhD Thesis, LSE, University of London.

²² Noted by Morais, 'New Unionism and Union Politics', ch. 1.

modernise unions will tend to become less powerful and influential at both the workplace and political level. On the other hand, optimists suggest that moderate unions which concentrate on workplace themes will be able to retain or regain their influence and power. This might also be the case if unions have little to do with workplace matters.

In summary, this subsection has noted the implications (for unions) of many recent management and workplace developments. Modernisation will intensify the difficult position in which most unions already find themselves - at the workplace and in the political arena. Despite the optimism of some recent writers, it appears that few environments offer unions the conditions which allow them to resolve these conflicts and remain representative and effective.

The prospects of a truly inclusive stance by employers to unions, a facilitative framework and dual allegiance to the employer and union do not look very high, especially in countries such as Brazil. However, the process by which a union responds to this situation is full of ambiguities and constraints. The use of a model of union identity may allow this process to be more adequately described. The following subsection summarises the political and institutional context in which this analysis is placed.

2.2 The Brazilian Industrial Relations Context

The political and institutional environment in Brazil has traditionally been a very tough and constraining one for workers and unions. A quite exclusionary and corporatist industrial relations model and its place within an authoritarian political system meant that few could foresee changes such as those (e.g. more democratic workplaces or the possibility of greater union inclusion) suggested by modernisation optimists.²³ However, by the 1990s quality and productivity had become popular slogans of industry and government and there were clear signs that a broad range of firms were beginning to apply quite comprehensive modernisation models.²⁴

²³ For a classic work on this history see: G. Gomes, *The Roots of State Intervention in the Brazilian Economy* (London 1986).

²⁴ For example, in 1990 the Federal Government launched an assistance programme for quality and productivity in industry along the lines suggested by optimistic theory - Ministério da Justiça et al., *Programa Brasileiro da Qualidade e Productividade* (Brasília 1990). One of the more optimistic Brazilian studies is - J. Gonçalves and C. Dreyfus (coords), *Reengenharia das Empresas - Passando a limpo* (São Paulo 1995).

Nevertheless, the effects of these policies on workers continue to be hotly debated.²⁵ There are indications that many such firms have responded to the threat of their greater dependence (on workers' attitudes) through new systems of control. The fact that 'greenfields' sites are being used and that unions are not being involved would seem to support this.

Thus, despite a more open political and institutional environment, an underlying current of distrust still remains. Part of this emanates from the uncertain situation many workers and unions face in the workplace and labour market but it is also because many of the old legal structures (governing unions) remain while at the same time legislators have now embraced a concept of 'flexibility'.²⁶ At the macro level, these developments have acted to further destabilise and divide the union movement. The following paragraphs briefly describe key aspects of the industrial relations model and labour movement situation which make up this context.

The state based development model and the very encompassing set of rules governing union and worker behaviour, which began in the 1930s, changed little up to the mid-1980s.²⁷ While applied to different degrees by subsequent regimes, the industrial relations model continued to be based on three 'pillars'. These were – the regulatory role of the Ministry of Labour, the Labour Code and related social welfare and labour court systems.

One of the effects of these codes and bodies was to determine, oversee and enforce a model of unionism which made unions non-workplace based, social welfare administrators. Various regulations governing union structures and finances and the normative powers of the labour courts to curtail strikes meant that unionism at all levels was largely controlled. While many basic statutory work benefits had been codified, workers were largely left to the whims of a very paternalistic and authoritarian employer class for the determination of their conditions.²⁸

Economic constraints and social and political pressure starting in the late 1970s

²⁵ See for a summary: Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch 2, pp 74 – 95.

²⁶ One of the more controversial of these is the possibility of firms introducing a 'banca das horas' – that is a system by which hours are averaged over the year. This makes HRM planning more flexible but, unless unions can negotiate differently, there is the loss of overtime.

²⁷ The features of the model (described below) are not disputed in the literature. See, for example, K. Erikson, *The Brazilian Corporative State and Working Class Politics* (Berkeley 1977) and M. Alves, 'Trade Unions in Brazil: A Search for Autonomy and Organisation' in *Labour Autonomy and the State in Latin America*, ed. E. Epstein, (Boston 1989), pp 39-45.

²⁸ See, for example, in terms of the military period, Alves, 'Trade Unions in Brazil...', pp 47-49.

led to a slow process of democratisation post-1985.²⁹ While the economy and economic policy oscillated considerably during the decade of the 1980s, in 1989 many of the constraints on union and worker action were relaxed.³⁰ However, the monopoly of representation of local unions was retained, as was the system of automatic union financing. Moreover, workplace representation rights (and other issues of importance to the ‘new union’ movement) remain uncertain and dependent on local bargaining. This has meant that unions can still survive without having to be active and representative, particularly at the workplace level.

On top of these enduring structures, during the 1990s the Government put into place a series of initiatives aimed at promoting quality, productivity and flexibility in Brazilian industry.³¹ Support programmes for workplace adjustment were introduced and the general legislative environment began to make it easier for employers to negotiate and adjust wages and conditions on a more decentralised level.³² While workers and unions have been offered some hope – for example, through the improved possibility of establishing work place committees - a continuing state of labour market slackness, job insecurity and employer flexibility to deploy labour within the workplace have kept such possibilities mainly in the theoretical realm.

Within such an ambiguous and divided environment, unions will have difficulty competing with the subtler, persuasive internal strategies of modernising employers. In addition, resource constraints may make it all the more difficult for a union to develop separate policies for different groups of workers within and between the factories in their ambit.³³ The institutional and workplace context for any local Brazilian union who wants to take on a militant and representative identity thus remains very slim – possibly more difficult than the past. As the following discussion of unionism at the macro level notes, past structures and recent developments have also constrained vertical and horizontal union coordination. This has limited the degree to which local unions might be able to rely on union structures in their efforts to gain from the modernisation process.

²⁹ See, M. Keck, ‘The New Unionism in the Brazilian Transition’ in: *Democratising Brazil: problems of transition and consolidation*, ed. A. Stepan, (London 1989).

³⁰ These issues are well discussed in – J. Morais, ‘New Unionism and Union Politics in Pernambuco (Brazil) in the 1980s’, (1992), Phd Thesis, LSE, University of London, pp 58-59.

³¹ See footnote 24.

³² See footnote 26.

³³ Modernisation practices plus the legislative changes noted earlier may make these developments more likely.

For example, during much of the 20C the formal rules of the industrial relations system did not allow for central union organisations.³⁴ Vertical industrial groupings up to the national level represented the coordinating form that was allowed by the formal rules of the model. In reality, various extra-legal groups evolved and these vied for political supremacy. However, their periodic involvement within a (often unstable) series of populist regimes plus their lack of any real workplace links meant that they were not as strong as they seemed and could be dismantled and disorganised relatively easily.³⁵

However, despite or because of economic and political problems, the 1970s saw the beginnings of a new, more representative union grouping ('new unionism').³⁶ This group seemed distinct as they put considerably more effort into workplace relations and due to the way they came to challenge the state. During the 1980s this group tried (but failed) to put together (what was still an illegal) parallel union central that encompassed most opposition union groupings. Yet in the end CUT (*Central Única das Trabalhadores*) was still formed and this organisation was the main force behind the creation of a labour party (the PT – *Partida Trabalhista*) based on similar principles of representation and accountability.³⁷

Between the 1980s and 1990s various competing union centrals continued to exist.³⁸ The prospect of horizontal union coordination became even more remote when one group took on a new leader, a new name (*Força Sindical*) and clearer but more conservative style. 'Unionism of results' and a more employer friendly approach to negotiated change became two of its key identifying features. Despite its non-political rhetoric the approach of this union echoed older values – political processes remained the key focus to the detriment of any substantive, critical involvement in workplace developments and labour rights.³⁹

³⁴ Well described in: K. Erickson, *The Brazilian Corporative State and Working Class Politics* (Berkeley 1977).

³⁵ See: H. Spalding, 'Labour and Populism: Argentina and Brazil' in: *Organized Labour in Latin America*, ed. H. Spalding (London 1977), pp. 185-189, and M. Bordin, 'The Brazilian Industrial Relations System (1930-64): Unionism or Corporatism?', *Labour and Society* (1986), 11, 1, pp.126-30 and Erickson, *Brazilian Corporative State*, ch. 6.

³⁶ See on these developments: E. Sader, *Quando novos personagens entraram em cena: experiências, falas e lutas dos trabalhadores da Grande São Paulo (1970-80)* (Rio de Janeiro 1988).

³⁷ See Pegler, 'Politics of Modernisation', ch. 2, pp. 52-54.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 69-71 – as paraphrased below.

³⁹ For a view on this group's programme and founding conference see, DIEESE, *Boletim DIEESE*, 4/91, p. 11 and M. Martins, *Sindicalismo e Relações Trabalhistas* (São Paulo 1991), p. 154.

The ambiguities for horizontal union coordination and stronger vertical structures (which might help local, independent unions) continued in other ways.⁴⁰ For instance, even the CUT supported the retention of the automatic deduction for union financing during the late 1980s. On the other hand, in the 1990s this group was most active in promoting a system of collective contracts and sector re-development packages. They also set up a series of training schools in which the study of critical perspectives on workplace change have been key parts.⁴¹ However, the further decentralisation of industrial relations has hampered collective concept developments as well the extension of sector agreements beyond certain areas and industries. *Força Sindical's* more explicit vocational focus for worker training (e.g. for computer and technical skills) is another example of how these two competing centrals continue to differ.

In summary, Brazilian unions continue to face difficulties which emanate from both the workplace and macro level. The intent behind employers' recent modernisation strategies remains in question, rules and regulations for industrial relations have become more flexible and decentralised (within a slack labour market) and union centrals are both divided and constrained in their ability to coordinate and assist the majority of local unions who are struggling to survive. At a general level, these are not conditions which would lead us to believe in an optimistic union outcome at the local level. The application of the union identity model to 'radical/political-militant', 'strategic-militant' and 'moderate' unions within the same industry allows this study to explore the optimistic and pessimistic union response hypotheses much more deeply. Prior to this analysis, however, the next section briefly summarises the nature of the firm level modernisation experiments to which these unions have been responding.

⁴⁰ Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', *Ibid.*

⁴¹ For example, between 1991-93 the CUT set up three regional union training schools. The sessions on labour process themes held at the schools echo the high importance these issues hold for the CUT. Articles on these themes form the core of publications such as - Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT), Revista da Secretaria Nacional de Formação- Forma e Conteúdo, no. 4, 9/91.; CUT, Plano Nacional de Formação da CUT 1992, April, 1992.; Confederação Nacional dos Metalúrgicos da CUT (CNM/CUT), Revista dos Metalúrgicos, ano 1, no.1, 12/93.

3 FACTORY MODERNISATION, MANAGERIAL INTENT AND WORKERS' ATTITUDES

3.1 Modernisation and the New, Open Employer

Four comparable firms from within the previously unstudied 'white goods' industry were chosen as case studies. Two of these firms (three factories) produced refrigeration products and the other two washing products. Four of these factories (Brastemp-Rio Claro/Sao Bernardo and Consul I/II) are part of Whirlpool's operations in Brazil. As shown by the product specific Tables 3 and 4 in the appendix, for each product group there was a comprehensively modernised firm and (at least) one traditional firm. As discussed in detail elsewhere, the data on their policies, processes and outcomes suggest that many of the features of the optimistic argument were supported by these case studies.⁴²

For example, in terms of management style and structures, Brastemp-Rio Claro and Consul III promoted a mission statement and management strategy which reflects the quality, continuous improvement and human resources principles of TQM and HRM in a classical sense. This strategy went quite deep with each firm making significant reductions in reporting hierarchies as well as instigating new participative mechanisms, cells and training opportunities. These changes accompanied the integration of new process technologies and techniques such as JIT/Kanban and maintenance/quality procedures into the work of many labourers.

In terms of employee relations, management at the two comprehensively modernised firms introduced closer team relations, reduced overt supervision and created numerous opportunities to contribute. Here, the workers also benefited from a very clean, organised ambient and substantial new training opportunities. At Brastemp-Rio Claro workers also have a shorter working week and a career scheme, the ultimate level of which would make them a multiskilled, technical worker.

In terms of outcomes, many of these results also fit the optimistic model. For example, productivity was much higher at Brastemp-Rio Claro and Consul III. Labour turnover was also much lower there. This suggests that greater stability is evident, that

⁴² Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch 4. The following discussion is a summary much like that which appears in, 'Employer Dependence and Worker Allegiance within the Factory of the Future: Evidence from Brazil' in: *Revista Brasileira de Ciencias Sociais*, ANPOCS, 2002, vol 17/ no. 48, pp. 139-142.

employers can recoup much of their training costs and that workers may have been happier to remain at the firm. Finally, these statistics suggest that direct supervision has, in fact, been much lower at the comprehensively modernised firms.

However, there were a number of caveats to this picture.⁴³ These act to question the intent of management. For example, ‘greenfields’ (Brastemp –Rio Claro) or low wage location allowed them to offer wages which are low on industry standards but adequate for their local labour markets. Secondly, both of these firms use extensive selection criteria and training programmes which do not closely match cognitive abilities to perform tasks. Workers at each firm are intensively ‘trained’ and screened in relation to attitudes to the employer and industrial disputation, ‘what is quality’, the ‘importance of the firm’, etc.

At Brastemp-Rio Claro the qualitative nature of the labour use model is the most highly developed. For example, their career scheme awards skills, training and attitudes and workers are involved in the evaluation of their teammates. It is not hard to imagine that this would be difficult and divisive for workers while at the same time make it easier for the firm to relinquish some of its former direct supervision functions.⁴⁴

Supporting this greater internal control interpretation is the observation that, at Joinville Consul (and Whirlpool) went to great lengths to replace the combative local union with a passive one. Overall Brazilian Whirlpool production has been progressively moved away from Brastemp-São Bernardo (a key area of high wages and union militancy) to Brastemp-Rio Claro and Consul-Joinville (one a ‘greenfield’ site and the other with a passive union). It appears to be of no coincidence that Whirlpool’s purchase of Consul, Brastemp (and Embraco – the key input supplier company) has allowed the group to minimise unions, disputation and wages in this way.

Finally, Brastemp - São Bernardo has recently been closed and many of the other factories have made various organisational adjustments to their operations since this research. However, analysis continues to confirm that, while many aspects of work have improved, these comprehensively modernising firms have developed stronger internal control mechanisms and external barriers so that their dependence on the skills

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Even greater support for the degree of managerial prerogative involved can also be seen from the fact that the firm was easily able to put the career scheme on hold (due to their concerns about wage growth) in 1998 and reinstitute it in 2001.

and attitudes of their workers is minimised and, so that external threats to this are contained or avoided.⁴⁵ The following subsection summarises how this situation made workers feel about the employer vis-a-vis the union. This provides a clear lead into this paper's detailed analysis of how the unions have responded to workers' desires and to firm level and industrial relations developments in the years up to 2001.

3.2 The Axis of Allegiance – Workers' Attitudes to the Employer and Union

The history of Brazilian workplace relations, while often paternalistic, would appear to suggest that workers have good reasons not to have much trust in employers. The unrepresentative nature of many unions during much of the 20th century also suggests that most workers will have little faith in unions' desire or ability to improve their working lives. It was thus most instructive to note in our research that the firm had become a strong referent for workers and that the union remained of minimal interest to most workers.⁴⁶ However, as the following discussion notes, there are strong caveats to workers' belief in the modernising firm plus indications that particular union strategies would gain them much greater worker support.

In terms of the employer, the main results which emerged were as follows.⁴⁷ First, while part of this may be explained by regional wage comparisons, workers at the low wage Rio Claro site were happiest with their pay. More tellingly, workers at the two comprehensively modernised firms were significantly more happy with their conditions overall and took a more inward looking perspective in terms of their evaluation of their situation. These results suggested greater allegiance to the modernising firm.

However, many workers felt that they had not gained much whilst particular groups (the skilled) had high expectations. These qualifications were added to by the fact that many workers were sceptical about whether they would gain. Participation was focussed on firm issues, training had not made them more employable and most believed that they were only being given these benefits and expectations due to the firm's desire to increase profit. Once again, workers' responses at Brastemp- Rio Claro showed greater optimism. Yet this may no longer be the case as other comprehensively mod

⁴⁵ Pegler, 'Politics of Modernisation', ch 5. This is also the case for the 1995-2001 period as confirmed in company interviews (January, 2001).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁷ See: Pegler, 'Employer Dependence and Worker Allegiance', pp.142-145.

ernised firms (offering better terms and conditions) have recently arrived in this (previously 'greenfield') region.

More pessimistically, in respect to the important issue of career development and participation, workers at the two comprehensively modernised sites were against their evaluation systems whilst other workers were not. Despite their more open and participative schemes, these workers felt that they were biased to training and involved unreasonable peer pressure. Dissatisfaction of this type was also seen from the fact they were just as likely to leave their firm voluntarily as were workers at the more traditional, 'hire-and fire' firms.

Consequently, workers were seen to exhibit only instrumental or 'as if' attachment to the modernising firm. Similarly, workers' needs of their union were also quite instrumental.⁴⁸ Yet their views also had a strong relation to context and union strategy. Moreover, what they suggested for the future was that a particular style of unionism might offer these organisations greater hope of gaining worker support. While unionism varied considerably between sites, a consideration of all workers' views presents a most interesting picture for the ensuing analysis of union identity.

For example, across the sample most thought that unions and their policies were not good. The combination of a legacy of non-representative unions and firm level 'persuasion' and selection policies appears to be behind this. Yet it is particularly important to note that workers at the comprehensively modernised Consul III site were more against the passive, company union than their (more actively unionised) work-mates in the more traditional Consul II factory. Informal links were still strong with the older combative union at Consul II.

More tellingly, workers gave their union a more positive endorsement if it was seen to have active policies dealing with workplace change. In terms of the future, there was clear support for future active workplace policies as 60% felt that the union should be involved in such matters and as 55% of workers felt that their union was not, but should be, more involved in workplace developments on behalf of workers. This was a particular criticism of modernised Consul III workers of their passive union.

However, the views of workers at the other comprehensively modernised firm (Brastemp –Rio Claro) once again stood out. While in favour of unions in general, they

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-148.

had few wishes for their 'strategic-militant' union to have a specific role in their workplace. Nevertheless, the emergence of 'better' employers in the region (a number of whom have allowed union factory committees) may act to change this situation.⁴⁹

In summary, at the time of the original research, management at the ultra modern Brastemp-Rio Claro had achieved a workforce which, while often positive about unions in general, did not feel they needed a union at their particular site. While this may change, outside of such 'greenfields' situations it appears that if a union is both independent and actively involved in workplace matters they may not lose worker support. The responses of workers at the other sites (both traditional and highly modernised) suggested that there may even be a chance that workers will increase their attachment to, and support of, a union of this type. The next section of this paper looks at how the unions have responded and to which type of unionism has been most effective, successful and representative.

⁴⁹ This situation was observed and noted in union interviews in Limeira in January 2001. Whether the union has or will make use of these developments is another question.

4 UNION IDENTITY – A QUESTION OF MODERATION OR MILITANCY?

The case study union situations differed greatly (table 3).⁵⁰ For example, the São Bernardo metal workers situation contrasts with the other union contexts as they are a large, well-resourced, organised and influential organisation in the major industrial hub of Brazil. This union played a key role in the development of a more representative union movement, in the formation of the Workers' Party (the PT) and in the 1980s transition to democracy. However, the case study firm they represented (Brastemp-São Bernardo) was less modernised than many of the other firms within their ambit.

In stark contrast, the unions at the other three locations are small, regional entities in much less industrialised locations. The CUT and the PT are also very important to the union covering one of the comprehensively modernised locations (Brastemp-Rio Claro). Yet CUT/PT groups only share power with Communist groups at Enxuta's union. In addition, while the CUT is important to the Joinville *Mecânicos*, this union formally lost coverage for workers at the other comprehensively modernised site (Consul III) and the other partially modernised site (Consul II). The union that took over at these two sites (*Sinditherme*) claimed to take a neutral political stance. Yet there were indications that it had aligned itself with *Força Sindical*.

TABLE 1
Identifying features of the case study unions

Plant	Place	Union name	Broad Union Type	Union's political links	Union central links
BRASTEMP	São Bernardo	São Bernardo Metal Workers	Militant	Workers' Party	CUT
CONSUL	Joinville	(- 1989) Mecânicos	Militant	Workers' Party	CUT
		(1989 -) Sinditherme	Moderate	'none'	Close to FORÇA SIND.
BRASTEMP	Rio Claro	Limeira and Region Metal Workers	Militant	Workers' Party	CUT
ENXUTA	Caxias do Sul	Caxias Metal Workers	Militant	Workers' Party / PC do B	CUT/ CGT

Notes: Força Sind. = Força Sindical; CUT = Central Única dos Trabalhadores; CGT = Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores; PC do B = Communist Party of Brazil.

⁵⁰ Discussion here drawn from, Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch. 7, pp. 256-261.

The case studies also offered a vivid, but inconclusive, picture of union identity when looked at using unionisation statistics (table 2). For example, militant unionism at the two most advanced sites (Brastemp-Rio Claro, Consul III) and Consul II faced difficulties either due to ‘greenfield’ conditions or because of the installation of a moderate union. However, unionisation was much higher (50% vs 16%) at the firm (Consul) covered by the moderate union (*Sinditherme*). In comparison, while CUT and radical groups dominated the unions of the two least modernised factories, unionisation also differed significantly between them. Brastemp-São Bernardo had a unionisation rate of 79% and Enxuta 25%.

Thus, if unionisation is the sole measure used, it is clear that militant unionism is not enough to ensure the union has a large ‘electoral’ base. Yet, whether this means that moderate unionism does any better in reality also requires more in-depth analysis.

Table 2
Unionisation: population and sample 1994

UNIONISATION	POPULATION	SAMPLE
TOTAL:	46%	47%
FIRM:		
Brastemp-São Bernardo	79%	88%
Consul II	55%	53%
Consul III	45%	50%
Consul Total	50%	52%
Brastemp-Rio Claro	16%	16%
Enxuta	25%	30%

Source: Company and union records and interview data.

Through the application of an identity model to the case study unions (particularly at the highly modernised sites), the rest of this section provides a more detailed perspective on unions’ fortunes.

In this regard, figure 2 below stylises four possible scenarios for unions. This provides a convenient reference point for the analysis to follow. For example, quadrant ‘A1’ represents optimist’s preferred option wherein unions find a new role at the workplace and for worker relations. Quadrant ‘A2’ is the non-workplace, social movement option. Quadrant ‘B1’, on the other hand, represents the best option that could be achieved in the view of more sceptical commentators. They see the potential for management ‘abuse’ as far too likely (i.e. quadrant ‘B2’).

FIGURE 2
Union identity and potential union workplace outcomes

Moderate Identity	(A1)	(B2)
	Union finds a new, independent but collaborative role at the workplace	Union becomes essentially incorporated within the company
	(A2)	(B1)
Militant Identity	Union is marginalised from the workplace	Union finds new ways to actively counter the influence of modernisation policies

4.1 ‘Radical/Political - Militancy’ – Between Traditional Capital and the Mobile, ‘Global’ Firm

This section briefly analyses the identities of the two ‘militant’ unions at the sites where modernisation has been much slower and piecemeal. This provides a particularly interesting contrast to the subsequent discussion of all three union identity types at the two more highly modernised firms. However, what this section also highlights are the special problems that mobile, ‘global’ capital can cause for even the most representative and powerful union group.

The key CUT São Bernardo Metal workers union is well known for its political militancy but also for its policies and structures aimed at confronting the challenges of factory modernisation.⁵¹ Aside from focussing on the situation of factory workers, their interests have also spanned a wide variety of social issues and other groups in society. Their systems of representation and feedback, both outside and inside many factories in the region, have given them the influence to negotiate a more explicit and favourable bargain from the modernisation process than has been possible in most other locations. At the same time they have been at the forefront of important macro-political developments such as the sector development programmes (*câmaras setoriais*).

While the modernisation process was much slower and piecemeal at this factory (Brastemp-São Bernardo) than at others in the region or in this research, the union was

⁵¹ For a review see; 1) DIEESE, ‘The Brazilian Metalworkers and the New Factory’s Challenge: A Negotiated Change at Mercedes-Benz’, paper presented to the International IR/HR Network on Autos, IIRA 10th World Congress Washington D.C., May 1995; and 2) L. P. Bresciani, ‘Reestruturação Productiva e Luta Sindical - O Trabalho na Indústria Automobilística Brasileira - (1980-1995)’, paper prepared for the project ‘Estrategias de Lucha Sindical en America Latina’, Centro de Estudios Sociologicos, El Colegio de Mexico, 1995.

quick to act when the firm did start changing.⁵² Their agenda has challenged the use of new factory techniques, questioned the basis of new training initiatives and insisted that any new evaluation or occupational system must be fair and based on union input. Go-slow campaigns and selective stoppages are a number of the ways in which they have made their concerns felt. In terms of their interests, they have also put particular emphasis on health and safety issues, womens' rights and public service themes.

However, despite the influence and active role of the union overall, early attempts to integrate structures for greater participant involvement (via factory committees and safety representatives) in the Brastemp–São Bernardo workplace constantly came up against a very anti-union management stance. This confrontational situation was underlined by a factory invasion in 1990. This was also the time when the company gave the first clear sign (i.e. the establishment of Brastemp-Rio Claro) that the firm and Whirlpool were willing and able to move away from this high wage, unionised region.

Yet the situation still held ambiguities and opportunities. For example, the early to mid 1990s saw the firm launch their new HRM ‘Vision’,⁵³ a factory modernisation plan⁵⁴ and they agreed to a factory committee – one which was largely under the terms the union desired.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the union remained suspicious of what this strategy meant at a workplace level. Moreover, they continued to use their media resources to publicise an agenda and interests which went well beyond the workplace to a critique of the global intentions of Whirlpool in Brazil and other parts of Latin America.⁵⁶

Amidst improved macro conditions, between 1995-97 the company introduced many new changes at the factory level⁵⁷ and there were very few open disputes between management and the union.⁵⁸ Productive improvements such as transfer lines, ergo

⁵² The following analysis is based on a great deal of research. First, 12 intensive interviews were held with Brastemp–São Bernardo union directors and factory representatives. Secondly, senior union staff was interviewed on 4 occasions so as to put the Brastemp–São Bernardo situation within the broader metal worker and CUT context. Thirdly, the researcher was often based at the DIEESE office in São Bernardo. At these times numerous discussions were held and materials reviewed in relation to the union. Finally, an intensive analysis was carried out of the union's journals and leaflets (1-2 per week) between 1985-94. See for a more extensive treatment, Pegler, ‘Politics of Modernisation’, ch. 7, pp. 262-264.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Brastemp, *Regimento Interno da Comissão de Fabrica*, Unidade de São Bernardo do Campo, 1994.

⁵⁶ Noted in: Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de São Bernardo e Diadema, *Comissão de Fábrica dos Trabalhadores da Brastemp*, São Bernardo do Campo, no 2, 12/91.

⁵⁷ Based on a factory tour and interviews with Brastemp–São Bernardo personnel from Production and HRM, January 2001.

⁵⁸ Based on interviews with Brastemp workers at the São Bernardo Metal Workers Union, January 2001.

conomic posts and new injection systems did not, in themselves, cause the union to much concern. In addition, some relatively non-controversial changes such as technical training, supervisory reductions and improved health and safety benefits were also introduced.

However, as the decade progressed, economic conditions worsened (1998) and the factory again resorted to large-scale layoffs. In response the union claimed that, while they had been ‘promised stability if they worked harder’, all they were seeing was massive productivity growth via the rationalisation of operations and the elimination of posts (e.g. in testing/quality assurance).⁵⁹ Further moves by the company to simplify operations (via refrigeration system and small plastics outsourcing) and the product line (to two) only served to persuade the union to relaunch and sharpen their attacks on the company. Once again their agenda and interests encompassed both factory specific issues and broader political themes.

During their 1998 strike, representatives of their factory and safety committees again came under severe pressure.⁶⁰ While some degree of calm was restored in the year 2000, this was short-lived and may have masked an increasing degree of concern amongst workers and the union. Recent simplifications to the factory plus the closure of the Advanced Development Facility and the conversion of factory 1 into a super-market during the late 1990s seemed to add up to one thing.

Yet internal worker statistics and surveys displayed very low turnover rates and an unusual degree of worker contentment with the employer at this time.⁶¹ In this environment, it is also instructive to note a nuancing within the agenda and interests of this union. High wages, high levels of unionisation, political clout plus the articulation of an assertive set of workplace demands meant little in the face of the imminent closure and partial relocation of the factory to the Consul site in Joinville.

Moreover, a broader view was that this highly concentrated industrial region was starting to feel the effects of a process of de-industrialisation of which this may be another example. Hence the union mixed its broad political criticism of the global and regional policies of Whirlpool with a strongly local, developmental perspective.⁶² They

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Interview and data provided by Brastemp São Bernardo HRM department – ‘Acompanhamento da Pesquisa de Clima 1999 – Unidade São Bernardo de Campo’, Brastemp-São Bernardo, 2000.

⁶² Noted in discussions with DIEESE staff and the Union President and as illustrated in press releases sent to the ‘Diário do Grande ABC’, sent to author on 5/2/2001.

felt that a de-industrialisation process was neither necessary nor inevitable. The unions' attempt to involve Mondragon in a co-operative rescue package for the factory reflected this new emphasis within their identity.

This situation contrasts in many ways with the situation at Enxuta and for the local union there - the Caxias Metal workers. Compared to the largely workplace foundations of the São Bernardo union's identity, the Caxias Metal Workers attempted to translate a broad, critical, political perspective into a concrete agenda at the workplace.

However, what they did was too little and too late. The traditional high turnover approach and anti-union stance of the small group of dominant industrialists in this region merely added to the difficulties that this union faced. A brief review of this history illustrates the process of marginalisation which has occurred for this militant union.⁶³

The uneasy amalgam of communist, 'traditional' and CUT unionists who won control of the union in 1987 espoused a broad political agenda which included foreign debt non-payment, land reform and various measures for the re-distribution of income. Their agenda did include other initiatives such as the formation of a safety committee, anti-extra hours and young persons rights and their interests certainly extended to groups outside the industrial workforce. Similarly, they saw the need for dialogue and worker feedback and the importance of strategic actions around workplace themes. However, they did relatively little to set up workplace structures beyond the promotion of a safety committee.

The 1990s crash in the market made it even more difficult for the union to gain worker support, especially by predominantly non-factory means. Moreover, the company had already added to its anti-union, high turnover policy the implicit threat that if women (more than 50% of the workforce) pursued union agitation their transport and crèche rights would be withdrawn. Nevertheless, health and safety conditions, discrimination and onerous supervision conditions did act to promote a strike in 1990-91.

⁶³ The following summary is based on a great deal of research. First, 10 interviews were held with union operatives both before, during and after the 1993 intervention of the union. Research papers from the University of Caxias were also referenced in an effort to expand the questionnaire-based discussions. The other source developed by the researcher was a review of the union's pamphlets (1-2 per week) between 1985-94. A more detailed presentation of the following discussion can be found in, Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch 7, pp. 265-267.

Yet the end result of this was that nearly every unionist was sacked and only one safety committee member remained in employment there.

Consequently, since 1990 the union has mixed its radical rhetoric with a more pragmatic approach to negotiation. One of the reasons for this was that many other local employers had modernised. While Enxuta was slow and piecemeal in this regard, it seemed clear to the union directorate that new strategies were required. More practical proposals dealing with health and safety, workplace processes and worker-union information exchange began to be pursued from this time. The union's directorate (thus forms of dialogue) was also expanded (in 1994) so that greater focus could be put to pursuing factory level agreements within which workers would benefit from the modernisation process.

However, subsequent years also saw significant improvements to the factory's previously poor - quality, human resource and management methods.⁶⁴ In addition, steady growth in demand meant that the company was able to offer greater employment stability and improved training and health and safety conditions during the second half of the 1990s.⁶⁵ The lack of any real union role in the factory plus the firm's less aggressive industrial relations stance may even mean that workers are now more inclined to see the firm as a promoter of workers' rights.

In summary, this discussion has highlighted the very fragile and contingent nature of union identity. What appears to be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for union influence and success – an existing role in the factory – has taken a further blow in recent years at Enxuta (i.e. unionisation has fallen further to 18%).⁶⁶ The continuing local ownership and domestic orientation of Enxuta probably means that the union still has some chance of accessing this white goods factory – compared to the situation of capital flight from São Bernardo, that is. However, they still face an uphill battle to have any real role at an increasingly modernising Enxuta. Finally, while the two unions reviewed in this section have taken on different shades of militancy, the analysis suggests that combative unions could face even greater challenges at more modernised sites.

⁶⁴ In fact a 1990 assessment of Enxuta by the BNDES (Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Economico e Social) made it clear that these must change if Enxuta was to receive any financial assistance. Interviews held at the company in December, 2000, confirmed that further changes had been made since 1995.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* re company interviews.

⁶⁶ Interview with Union Secretary, Caxias Metal Workers, December 2000. Also mentioned at that interview was the unions concern about imminent introduction of further flexible work practices at the plant through use of the options recently opened up by recent changes to Brazilian labour legislation.

4.2 Comprehensive Modernisation and Union Diversity

Even before the identity model is applied to these two militant (the Limeira Union in Rio Claro and the *Mecânicos* in Joinville) and one moderate (*Sinditherme* in Joinville) unions, there are a number of structural indicators which are important to consider.⁶⁷ First, as in many other parts of Brazil, the two militant unions faced considerable opposition to even taking up the mandate they had won. The Limeira union faced a jurisdictional challenge which kept them out of office between 1984-86.⁶⁸ Yet after this they were able to raise their overall level of unionisation in the region quite quickly.⁶⁹

The *Mecânicos*, on the other hand, won their election with a very high unionisation rate (50%-60%)⁷⁰ but had total coverage of the Consul (and Embraco) workplaces removed from them a month before they were to take office in 1989. An application by the former training director of Consul for a new union was made (with the help of the company) and this was ratified at the state labour court.⁷¹ The *Mecânicos* then had to be content with a reduced role within the local metals sector and as an opposition force 'from the outside'. Yet it is ironic to note that it took the new union (*Sinditherme*) five years to raise unionisation at the case study company up to the level close to that achieved by the *Mecânicos* in 1989.⁷²

The statutes of these three unions show further differences between moderate and militant union forms. They suggest that the militant unions may have broader and more representative identities. For example, the statutes of the *Mecânicos* and the Limeira union specify regular elections, the importance of strong factory relations and

⁶⁷ As discussed in Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch. 7, pp.267-273.

⁶⁸ See, Oposição Sindical Metalúrgico de Limeira e Região, 7/84, and Oposição Sindical Metalúrgico de Limeira e Região, *Boletim*, no 1, 5-20/8/85.

⁶⁹ For example, they raised overall unionisation from 20% to 35% between 1987-92 – Union and company interviews and Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de Limeira e Região, *Boletim*, no 3, 1987; and Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos e Ourives de Limeira e Região, *Meta Luta*, no 137, 23/10/91.

⁷⁰ The unionisation figures used in this research come from both union records and company statistics. As the companies have to know the number of sócio members for whom deductions are made, their closeness to union figures serves to confirm the reliability of these figures.

⁷¹ The only aspect of this account which is disputed is who encouraged the original application for a new union. An interview with Evacir Meler, *Sinditherme* President, (5/93), suggested that worker pressure led to the establishment of the union and his presidency. The views of the *Mecânicos* and many Consul staff question this. Research into pay records at Consul (12/93) confirmed that Consul was still paying the *Sinditherme* president a (considerable) salary.

⁷² See footnote 70.

principles such as solidarity and democracy within and beyond the union sphere.⁷³ This represents a stark contrast to *Sinditherme's* statute.⁷⁴

This union's statute includes a service based, non-political orientation, less regular elections, more stringent rules governing voting and it makes no formal provision for factory representation. A *Sinditherme* member must be an employee of one of the firms for over two years and a much greater proportion of members are needed to call an assembly or force a vote. If workers miss a specified number of assemblies their voting rights are removed and the statute also contains a very controversial clause which states that if one of the directorate leaves, dies or retires, the mandate of all other directors starts again for another five years. This clause has been used on a number of occasions.⁷⁵

However, while this situation paints quite a stark picture there are still ambiguities which need to be explored. For instance, despite their success across their region, the Limeira union has not been able to raise unionisation at the case study site (Bras-temp-Rio Claro) beyond a very low 16%. Secondly, despite statements otherwise, service provision continues to play a central role for all unions in Brazil. Thirdly, in spite of theoretically more open voting structures, the two militant unions have also been able to solidify their hold on power relative to opposition groups.⁷⁶ It is not possible to say what relation this has to representation based on this information alone. Starting with the Limeira union, the following discussion attempts to shed more light on the identity dynamics behind these issues and situations for these three unions.

4.2.1 'Strategic Militancy' and the New 'Family' of the Firm

By the mid-1990s the Limeira union had developed a clear, consistent and broad identity that included a quite sophisticated and strategic approach to the internal policies of the modernising firm. Their policies for countering the new 'family' of the firm

⁷³ See: Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias e Oficinas Mecânicas de Joinville (the Mecânicos), 'Estatuto', Joinville, 1991; and Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias Metalúrgicas, Mecânicas e Ourives de Limeira e Região, (the Limeira Metals Union) 'Estatuto', Limeira, 1993.

⁷⁴ See: O Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias de Refrigeração, Aquecimento e Tratamento de Ar, Indústrias de Compressores Herméticos para Refrigeração e Indústrias de Artigos e Equipamentos Odontológicos, Médicos e Hospitalares de Joinville (*Sinditherme*), 'Estatutos', Joinville, 1/8/92 and as revised 1/3/93.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mecânicos lawyer, Joinville, 11/94.

⁷⁶ Situations highlighted through reference to Sindicato dos Metalúrgicas de Limeira e Região (Limeira Metals Union), *Boletim*, nos. 57, 61, Limeira, 1989 and as reported in *A Notícia*, Joinville, 26/1/92 p11 and 4/2/92 p.5.

met with considerable success in all but the most modernised firm(s). The commencement of their tenure during quite buoyant economic times (1986) may have helped them yet there were other periods (such as the market crashes of 1989 and 1992) when they had to find ways to adjust their approach to more difficult circumstances whilst not losing sight of their core agenda, interests and forms of participant representation. A brief review of these developments demonstrates the process by which this occurred.⁷⁷

Up to 1986 this former group of church based and CUT supporters took a broad, radical political stance.⁷⁸ As with the Caxias union they emphasised agrarian reform, foreign debt non-repayment and income distribution disparities. Possibly due to their underlying commitment to CUT principles, they did confront local employer practices and argued against 'extra hours'. Yet they had few specific workplace policies or mechanisms and their interest group did not expand beyond the consideration of industrial workers.

However, as their tenure progressed a clear regularisation and local focus could be seen in their identity.⁷⁹ Circumstances suggested that they must focus on services and wage campaigns.⁸⁰ Moreover, they began to take a less categorically negative attitude to the role of the state in defining the framework within which they worked.⁸¹ They also began to believe that it was necessary to increase their local focus both within and outside the workplace.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw these changes become more distinct. For example, in a major strike in 1989 they focussed more clearly on local issues and they began to develop new vehicles for representation. From this time they made a point of giving the state union tax back to workers who were paid up voluntary members.⁸² Their 1992 conference focussed more on the links between national themes and local employers⁸³ and their policies on health and safety linked their policies and services to

⁷⁷ The pre-1995 situation is described in detail in, Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch. 7, pp. 273-277 and 281-285. The following, while still drawing on key primary data, is a precise of the union's identity in this period.

⁷⁸ This is shown in union bulletins between 1984-86 (*Oposição Sindical Metalúrgica de Limeira e Região, Boletim*, 7/84 - 10/86, Limeira).

⁷⁹ See: Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', pp. 273-275.

⁸⁰ E.g. unionist education courses were expanded. See: Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de Limeira e Região (hereafter the Limeira Metals Union), *Boletim*, 20/10/86.

⁸¹ See: *Ibid.*, nos. 9 and 10, 1987. However, the union also argued that workers must push for the expansion of Constitutional benefits, *Ibid.*, no. 24, 1988.

⁸² See: *Ibid.*, nos. 59 and 60, 1989, for a summary of IS devolution between 1987-89.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, no. 41, 1989.

the identification of these problems on a company basis.⁸⁴ While the union expanded their service function, they also used workplace questionnaires on a more regular basis and their range of interests broadened considerably so that their policies and initiatives came to focus on issues such as women workers, the poor and local service themes.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, this expansion in their identity was not without complications and this was particularly the case in modernising firms who were portraying themselves as ‘the family in which workers could show allegiance’. The union was able to openly criticise and counter these claims in instances where firms used a mix of modernisation and ‘old style’ sackings and labour rights abuses.⁸⁶ However, comprehensive modernisation (at this time virtually only Brastemp-Rio Claro) made it hard for the union to develop a clear and consistent approach.⁸⁷

For instance, when asked about their wages compared to Brastemp- São Bernardo the union found it difficult to criticise a situation where wages were high compared to the regional average. Secondly, Brastemp- Rio Claro workers already worked fewer hours than the union’s campaign target. Thirdly, this factory offered model conditions in terms of safety and cleanliness and they had a career scheme – an issue that the union could not be seen to openly criticise. Moreover, the scheme and its related training and evaluative component were acting to divide the worker base. This added complications to the unions already delicate policy balance between ‘professional’ wage adjustments and the pay of the less skilled. Finally, the transparency of the firm’s new workplace model and rigor of its selection process made it easy for management to keep unionists out of this workplace.⁸⁸

Even still the union worked through the political and economic ups- and- downs of the early to mid-1990s with a clear and broad identity. Their preoccupation with internal employer policies grew, they continued to improve the relevance (i.e. the macro-micro links) of their campaign structure and they introduced campaigns such as ‘the union as body and soul’ to counter suggestions that the firm was worker’s new ‘fam

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, nos. 58 and 59, 1989.

⁸⁵ See: *Ibid.*, no 36, 1988, for example.

⁸⁶ See as an example: *Ibid.*, (Special Edition - Varga), 2/90.

⁸⁷ Examples below noted in interview with Adilson Cesar da Silva, Union Officer-Rio Claro, Limeira Metals Union, 17/3/93 but also see Limeira Metals Union, *Boletim* (Special Edition - Brastemp-Rio Claro), 2/90.

⁸⁸ A point made by the union and by many of the worker interviewees.

ily'.⁸⁹ For example, as an assertion of workers' rights within modernisation they launched a campaign entitled 'there can be no quality of production without quality of life'.⁹⁰

In terms of representation and the importance of the factory floor, they launched the campaign 'the place of a unionist is on the factory floor' for which they received significant support from Brasilia and the ILO.⁹¹ In terms of health and safety, their 'my hands are the only ones I have' campaign involved doctors, labour court endorsed factory inspections and feedback from worker and public meetings.⁹² This integration of concepts, local examples, local networks and discussion was also applied to other interests they had taken on - such as in respect to teachers/education and the poor/poverty alleviation.⁹³ At the same time, their use of questionnaires continued to grow, their conference became more local in emphasis, the formal union tax continued to be devolved and (as part of their 'body and soul' campaign) many new forums, training sessions and social occasions were established for workers and their families.⁹⁴

This approach worked well with most workers from the majority of the firms in their ambit and was reflected in an average unionisation rate around 50%. However, Brastemp-Rio Claro workers were conspicuous in their absence from the union's conference and the union continued to have difficulties criticising themes such as wages and the career scheme. A broad campaign challenging employers to improve workers' rights within the modernising firm plus a cry for workers to trust them (and not the employer) continued.⁹⁵ The relation of macro themes (e.g. globalisation and workers rights) to local examples (e.g. Whirlpool) were also pushed.⁹⁶ Yet despite this inclusive, representative and militant (but local and strategic) identity they did not appear to

⁸⁹ This concise terminology was used in 1993, e.g. Limeira Metals Union, *Boletim Especial* - 'A Alma e o Corpo do Sindicato', Limeira, (9/93). However, the approach can also be gleaned from the union's actions post-1991.

⁹⁰ See: Limeira Metals Union, *Boletim Especifico aos Trabalhadores da Varga*, 19/8/91.

⁹¹ See: Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de Limeira e Região, *Dossier - Contra Demissões e Afastamentos de Sindicalista* (São Paulo 1991). On the campaign and the support it received see, Limeira Metals Union, *Meta Luta*, no. 132, 1991.

⁹² *Ibid.*, (Special - Accidents), 8/92.

⁹³ Limeira Metals Union, *Meta Luta*, nos. 193, 193 207, 208, 209, 211 (1993) and Special bulletin - 10/93 ('body and soul theme'; education).

⁹⁴ See: Limeira Metals Union, *Informativo - O Metalúrgico em Casa*, ano 1, no. 1, 5/92; *Ibid.*, nos. 116, 123 and 122, (1991), (on the IS); and Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de Limeira e Região, *Resoluções - 2nd Congresso*, Limeira, 15-17/3/91.

⁹⁵ This criticism included the 'Brazilian Skilled Worker' contest - Limeira Metals Union, *Meta Luta*, no. 210, 1993.

⁹⁶ Limeira Metals Union, *Meta Luta*, no. 173, 1992.

have found a way to enter ‘the hearts and minds’ of Brastemp-Rio Claro workers. Just over 15% unionisation seemed the best they could achieve at this firm up to the mid-1990s.

Despite some difficulties containing rising labour turnover⁹⁷ the firm made significant ‘advances’ in their strategic approach and model of workplace relations during the later half of the 1990s.⁹⁸ Along with Consul (and Embraco), Joinville, the firm has become the centre-piece in Whirlpool’s Brazilian and Latin American operations. Process technologies continue to be the most advanced and their product developments have even closer ties to the regional and export plans of the TNC which now totally controls this facility.⁹⁹

Most significantly, in terms of employee conditions and attitudes, there have been new and more sophisticated advances in HRM practices for shopfloor workers.¹⁰⁰ For example, a variety of new participation schemes (including one based on profit sharing for hourly workers) and discussion and development groups have been introduced. Based on participation rates in QCCs (90%) these appear to have been more successful than the past. Secondly, while formal, basic education provision has been stopped, training hours per worker have increased to around 40 per worker p.a. and this training is more advanced than in the past. Most importantly, (while put on hold between 1997-98) the career scheme continues to represent an important avenue of development, particularly for the lower skilled.

These developments on the earlier model have allowed the firm to achieve even higher levels of productivity.¹⁰¹ Along with late 1990s economic difficulties, the changes to participation, training and re-introduction of the career plan are probably behind the return to low turnover levels of the early 1990s (i.e. 2-3%).¹⁰² Moreover, the fact that the firm has maintained steadily rising blue collar employment levels ever since its inception is probably a strong indication to workers that (with what is still a model, local employer) they can achieve a good deal of employment security and con

⁹⁷ Due to economic growth, the effect of their earlier policy to employ younger, more educated workers and, perhaps, worker dissatisfaction.

⁹⁸ As discussed at an interview with the plant manager and during a factory tour – Brastemp-Rio Claro, January 2001.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Below details given to author in an interview with the Brastemp-Rio Claro HRM manager, January 2001.

¹⁰¹ Products per day per worker have risen from just over 3 to just over 5 between 1995-2001.

¹⁰² Footnote 100.

tinuity.¹⁰³ Yet this does not mean that there have not been issues upon which the union has or could not launch rigorous campaigns along the lines of the past.

During this more recent period the union has not let up on its political orientation, broad interest group focus, innovative thematic/local campaigns (e.g. on health and safety) or their policy to use the devolution of the union tax to promote more active unionism.¹⁰⁴ The requirement that issues such as flexible hours, the spreading of hours (thus the issue of overtime diminution) and use of temporary workers must receive workplace approval has given them other themes on which to try and engage workers at this and other factories¹⁰⁵ Moreover, it is not inconceivable that the existence of massive levels of RSI¹⁰⁶, inconsistencies within the career scheme plus the arrival of other such firms with higher wages and factory committees in the region, could not be made more of.¹⁰⁷ However, up until 2001, a combination of factory conditions and (albeit more subtle) anti-unionism continue to keep this union a very minor player at this firm. Unionisation has fallen to 6%.

4.2.2 'Radical/Political Militancy' vs the 'Moderate Identity': New Realism – Old Realities?

Compared to the Limeira union's genesis during the boom of 1986, just when the *Mecânicos* should have been celebrating they found themselves (in 1989) in the midst of an economic crisis and without coverage of the three most important metals firms in their ambit. This left them in a dilemma – modernisation was not an issue in the smaller firms they now covered and workers were showing even less empathy to broad political campaigns against capitalist processes than in the past. It looked like this situation would destroy them. Yet they continued with their defiant political approach.

¹⁰³ Verified in *Ibid.* (500-600 blue collar employees) - for past see: Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', ch. 4., table 4.3, p.130.

¹⁰⁴ As discussed in interview with Limeira union officers in January 2001. Also evident from, Limeira Metals Union, *Metaluta*, no. 284, 1997 and no. 311, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ As noted by: *Ibid.*, 301, 1998, and for Brastemp (*Ibid.*, March, 1998) and for the region in *Jornal Unificado* (Metalworkers of Limeira and Campinas), March, 1998.

¹⁰⁶ Noted in Brastemp-Rio Claro HRM interview and by factory observation, January 2001.

¹⁰⁷ That is, as noted from 2001 interviews, worker dissatisfaction increases when many reach the top of the career ladder. Company attempts to slow their progress/put the scheme on hold, have added to these inconsistencies.

In their bulletins they vigorously condemned *Sinditherme* and the government which allowed its creation.¹⁰⁸ They even believed that a 1990 stoppage by Consul and Embraco had been actively used by the companies to sack union sympathisers and older skilled workers (who seemed to be keen *Mecânico* supporters) so that they could employ and train younger, less skilled workers.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, even though their calls for political support on such a major local theme brought little response, their approach remained a broad political critique of inequality and foreign debt plus a call for agrarian reform and class solidarity.¹¹⁰

While they put more focus on wage issues and their poorly used services, their identity minimised any possible ambiguities.¹¹¹ Their ‘electorate’ was industrial workers and, even though they were clearly aware of the issue, they had no desire to focus on the nuances involved in the factory modernisation debate. Moreover, while their agenda was broad and political they steered away from the potential problems that might emerge through the support of national CUT policies such as – ‘no extra hours’ and ‘professional’ wage policies.¹¹² They would not accept any possible trade off between extra hours and employment and they felt that support for ‘professional’ wages would conflict with their desire to help the lowliest paid workers.¹¹³

Prior to the crises of 1992 this approach allowed them to survive. As long as they made some (theoretically) good gains on the wages and overtime fronts they did not have to look for innovative campaigns which linked services, factory issues and other actors (for example). They made no move to devolve the union tax¹¹⁴ and looked instead at the possibility of forging new links with other regional unions. They were aiming to regroup and fight on more ‘traditional’ ground.¹¹⁵

Yet the 1992 crisis severely weakened their most successful tool. In response, they made more vigorous calls for worker assemblies but turnout rates fell even fur

¹⁰⁸ E.g.: Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias e Oficinas Mecânicas de Joinville (hereafter *Mecânicos*), *Boletim Informativo - Sindicato Forte*, ‘Trabalhadores da Consul, Embraco e Kavô do Brasil’, no. 12, 1990.

¹⁰⁹ As claimed by Wilson Vieira, President, *Mecânicos*, Joinville, (5/93).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6/90.

¹¹¹ The following points emerged from interviews with Wilson Viera, President, *Mecânicos*, particularly in 5/93. The union did, however, try to infiltrate CIPAs.

¹¹² *Ibid.*.

¹¹³ See: *Mecânicos*, *Boletim Informativo - Sindicato Forte*, 11/90.

¹¹⁴ *Mecânicos*, *Tribuna*, no.5, 1991.

¹¹⁵ Well illustrated in their 1991 publication, *Mecânicos*, ‘*A Grev*’ (the strike). See also *Mecânicos*, *Tribuna*, no. 6, 1992; and, *Mecânicos*, Special leaflet on industrial action - 1989-92 (untitled), 1992.

ther.¹¹⁶ In contrast and possibly in response to this, the years 1993-95 saw them make significant changes to their identity.¹¹⁷

During these years, they continued to put considerable energy into forging links with regional metals unions and the local plastics union (who itself was making quite a focussed critique of factory modernisation.¹¹⁸ However, they also became involved in regional level training courses in respect to factory modernisation and they expanded their range of campaigns and union structures to include a broader range of interest groups.¹¹⁹ In terms of negotiation, the state was seen more as a potential ally than an agent of capital¹²⁰ and they opened up greater dialogue with firms on issues such as re-training and a better model for the 'division of responsibilities' for worker services.¹²¹ They were now also against 'extra hours' The question was: Was this also too little too late?¹²²

The *Sinditherme* experience provides a massive contrast with this situation. Up to the mid- 1990s they produced very few bulletins for their members and when they did these included numerous advertisements for the company's products. Most importantly, in their first bulletin they laid out a clear blueprint of their moderate identity.¹²³

For example, they argued that quality and productivity were positive themes which workers should embrace – a common interest they had with employers.¹²⁴ Similarly, stability was an individual rather than a statutory issue which workers would achieve if they co-operated and trained hard.¹²⁵ Likewise, workers' health and safety concerns could be solved via discussion and suggestions - not by agitation.¹²⁶ In the area of wage negotiations, the problem was inflation not the government. Finally, it

¹¹⁶ A point well illustrated by the language of, *Ibid.*, no. 6, 1992.

¹¹⁷ See: Pegler, 'The Politics of Modernisation', pp. 285 – 288, for an enlarged discussion of what is summarised here.

¹¹⁸ The Plásticos were well versed on modernisation issues. See for example: Sindicato dos Plásticos de Joinville, *Boletim de Circulação Nacional*, 'Modernidade Pra Quem' (Modernity for who?), 1992, Joinville.

¹¹⁹ An exploratory course was held for 36 union officers and workers between 2-4 of June 1992 - Mecânicos, 'Relatório da 1a Tapa de Curso para Dirigentes', 2-4 June, 1992.

¹²⁰ Increasingly, these issues dominated the union's bulletins, e.g. *Ibid.*, nos. 5, 6 and 10, 1993.

¹²¹ Mecânicos, *Tribuna*, no 4 and 6, 1993.

¹²² See: Sindicatos dos Trabalhadores Mecânicas e Plásticos de Joinville, *Portão de Fábrica*, ano 1, no 1, 11/93.

¹²³ *Sinditherme, Jornal*, ano 1, no. 1, 11/91.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

was clear that services would be the union's main preoccupation.¹²⁷ However, they claimed that they were the independent conduit for channeling workers' concerns.¹²⁸

Sinditherme's actions confirmed this moderate and conservative image. For example, very few assemblies have ever been called by their white collar, 'so-called' factory representatives and the union did not seek workers views on issues such as the union tax or wage campaign options.¹²⁹ In similar fashion, the union actively helped to limit anticipated wage rises at Embraco in the early 1990s 'due to liquidity problems the company was facing'.¹³⁰ While this was also the year that Embraco (thus Whirlpool) purchased a compressor facility in Italy, the union supported its approach with claims that everyone must make sacrifices, that this decision would not be appealed and that it was an across-the-board percentage rise.¹³¹

A clearly narrow, employer friendly, inactive identity had been established. In terms of its agenda, the union was positive about employer defined moderation¹³², accepting of the market and against what it called 'political unionism'.¹³³ In terms of its interests, these were narrow – confined not just to workers but to workers in these three firms. Groups such as women and the poor received no mention and, while they were not aggressive on wage growth, its approach on wage differentials clearly favoured the most skilled. While the union claimed that it took an interest in workplace change, the union made no efforts to promote new vehicles for participant representation on this or, in fact, on any other issue.¹³⁴

Nevertheless, in 1993 the union secured a salary deal which is virtually unheard of in Brazil. This was for significant base level adjustments and immediate, full inflationary salary adjustments for all.¹³⁵ The union had also managed to put in place a range of health and recreation services for members which would be the envy of any

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹²⁹ I.e. records of only a few assemblies could be found for the 1989-93 period.

¹³⁰ Confirmed at interview with, Evacir Meler, President, *Sinditherme*, 5/93. The unions first journal (*Sinditherme, Jornal*, no. 1, p1) also underlines the union's view that workers' objective should be to improve company efficiency.

¹³¹ *Sinditherme, Jornal*, ano 1, no.4, 10/92, p. 4.

¹³² *Ibid.*, no 3, p. 4. and via an interview, Evacir Melor, *Sinditherme* President, 5/93.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, no. 4, 1992, p. 2.

¹³⁴ As claimed in an interview with Evacir Melor, Union President, *Sinditherme*, 5/93, their job was to motivate workers not to be involved in factory level change or 'political discussions'.

¹³⁵ As shown in: *Sinditherme, Jornal*, ano II, no.4, 5/93; and listed in, 'Mecânicos', *Tribuna*, *Sinditherme* - Consul/Embraco/ Kavo - 'Declaração', 9/12/93.

organisation.¹³⁶ The high level of unionisation it achieved by the mid-1990s suggested that, while it had started with a low unionisation rate, a significant and growing number of workers had become interested in an association with the union.¹³⁷

However, there are other developments which suggest that its strategy was not exactly what its members believed it was or wanted and that focussing on unionisation rates alone can be very misleading. First, despite professing an a-political orientation, in 1993 the union proposed that the Regional Metals Federation should affiliate with *Força Sindical*.¹³⁸ Secondly, after nearly five years as the formal representative of workers at the three firms, *Sinditherme* decided that 1994 would be the year for the union to start conducting questionnaires at a factory level to find out what workers' views and demands were.¹³⁹

This was the situation which emerged by the mid -1990s. While there were major differences in the identities of these two unions, both sought strength through political affiliation (of some sort) and neither had any real desire to confront the challenges of factory modernisation. The growing importance of Consul and Embraco within the Whirlpool and global white goods market plus the growing flexibility of the Brazilian industrial relations environment are two key factors which acted to further expose the weakness of both these union types during the later half of the 1990s.

The late 1990s saw Consul become the key part of Whirlpool's Latin American refrigeration operations. Embraco was the launching pad for Whirlpool's global compressor network. In terms of the Consul factory, this period also witnessed the streamlining and 'improvement' of their workplace modernisation model.¹⁴⁰ Products became further simplified and their marketing more coordinated - by Whirlpool. Process technologies were improved by further transfer lines, electronics and cell structures. Outsourcing was taken to a new level. The firm removed itself from a direct role in small products and services and, most significantly, in the more high skilled tooling function. Moreover, while many white collar personnel still work in the company's offices most of these actually work for independent firms.

¹³⁶ Interview: Evacir Meler, Sinditherme, (5/93). He suggested that the union's doctors saw 80 workers (or their family members) per day.

¹³⁷ That is, about 50% compared to 40% (Mecânicos- their firms) and the Limeira Metals Union (only 16% at Brastemp-Rio Claro).

¹³⁸ Interview: José Negerherbow, Secretary, Sinditherme, Joinville, 11/93.

¹³⁹ Interview: Evacir Melor, President, Sinditherme, Joinville, 5/93.

¹⁴⁰ The following points were made during interviews with HRM staff and during a factory tour in December, 2000.

Of more specific relevance to the issue of worker conditions and union responses is the fact that the company's HRM policies have continued to 'progress'.¹⁴¹ Like at Brastemp-Rio Claro, while general education has been curtailed much more training in advanced techniques and electronics are on offer. Quality programmes, group and individual discussions and evaluations are now more frequent and the physical working environment is claimed to be much better. It is also very interesting to note that the firm has now moved much closer to the explicit career plan structure being employed at Brastemp- Rio Claro.

Such developments make workers skills and attitudes of even greater importance to the firm.¹⁴² Thus, along with low turnover rates (1%) and rising productivity, the firm seems pleased that most indicators of workplace and individual satisfaction are high. However, for the 1997-2000 period it is instructive to note that many workers felt that their 'level of remuneration' and 'opportunities to grow' were relatively low.¹⁴³ Moreover, indicators of 'factory relations', 'ambient', 'confidence in the employer' and 'liberty at work' all fell in the three years up to 2000.¹⁴⁴ Yet, as with the technical adjustments note above, the question is: What role has either union played in this situation?

Between 1985 and 2000 *Sinditherme* appears to have done little to change from its previous service orientated, employer supportive but inactive workplace role.¹⁴⁵ While its attempts to find regional political partners have continued, its closed and unrepresentative features have been instrumental in allowing Consul to introduce a variety of industrial relations changes at the firm. In contrast to the present situation at Brastemp-Rio Claro and pre-closure situation at Brastemp-São Bernardo, this company is now making use of temporary workers, regular flexible hour schemes and a '*banca das horas*' (the spreading of yearly hours to get over seasonal demand thus reduction in overtime) scheme.¹⁴⁶ The only irony is that while the company now has these options, the *Mecânicos* long legal battle to regain coverage of Consul and Embraco workers has

¹⁴¹ Those noted below were discussed in interviews with Consul HRM staff in December, 2000.

¹⁴² Now between 5-7 products per worker per day – factory discussion, Consul, December 2000.

¹⁴³ As shown in: *Pesquisa de Clima Organizacional*, Multibras-Unidade Joinville, 2000 and in internal statistical tables supplied by HRM staff – December, 2000.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Based on discussions with Joinville Metal Workers, December, 2000.

¹⁴⁶ Verified in discussions with Consul, HRM staff, December, 2000.

resulted (October, 2000) in coverage of Consul workers going back to the more militant union (the *Mecânicos*).¹⁴⁷

However, while this situation would appear to give the *Mecânicos* some hope for the future, it appears that they have also done very little to improve their role as a representative union in the intervening years.¹⁴⁸ Strike campaigns and associated attempts to raise union dues have resulted in divisions and the loss of many members. Their attempts to combine with the Plastics union did not work but they continue to battle for stronger political linkages at the regional level. Similarly, they continue to push a broad political agenda yet in reality they have had to put most day- to- day emphasis on service provision. Their aversion to link their policies and strategies with national CUT policy themes or workplace developments are other enduring characteristics of this union.

Finally, what the *Mecânicos* are banking on is their ability to develop strong relations with Consul workers. They believe that their strong links with skilled workers at Embraco will also help them win back that factory. The sad fact is that, beyond a desire to build stronger, independent locally based unionism, they are still doing very little to prepare themselves for the ambiguities that Consuls wave of factory modernisation appears to have created.¹⁴⁹ Yet they may have to build new structures of representation/ engagement at the workplace to have any real impact at this factory. Consequently, while these unions differ in many ways, they both seem to represent the continuation of ‘traditional’ Brazilian unionism.

¹⁴⁷ Noted in interview with *Mecânicos* and Regional Metals representatives, Joinville, December, 2000.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* These lengthy discussions highlighted the below points plus clear conflicts within the *Mecânicos* group and between them and the Regional (CUT) representatives – in spite of the fact that the *Mecânicos* now had the chance of a ‘new life’ through their recently regained coverage of Consul workers.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

5 CONCLUSION: UNION IDENTITY AND MODERNISATION – THEMES AND AMBIGUITIES

A prominent view in the recent literature is that factory modernisation will be a key force for changes in union identity. Optimists suggest that unions will be able to recapture their relevance to changed conditions by embracing more moderate identities. There are two optimistic ideal types to how this moderation may evolve. First, unions may become more service orientated, company specific and narrow in their focus. Alternatively, union agendas and interests may broaden but lose a workplace focus. In contrast to optimists, this chapter's analysis of union identity has suggested that more pessimistic incorporation and marginalisation outcomes are more likely in the typical Brazilian context.

There were two levels to this chapter's interest in the union identity-modernisation debate. These were, how have unions adjusted and have they become effective and successful representatives at the workplace. Secondly, have unions' political aims become more difficult to sustain as a result of a growth in the importance of workplace change. These questions were addressed through the application of a model of union identity to the unions' experiences, especially those unions at the most modernised locations where both moderate and militant unions are involved. However, the experience of the unions at the least modernised sites provided a vision of the difficulties faced by combative unions of any complexion and at any site, particularly if the union has little workplace role and in situations where capital is quite mobile.

The detailed review of union identity at the most modernised sites confirmed that a wide variety of union identities can emerge. Overall, the two CUT unions (the Limeira metal workers and the *Mecânicos*) stand out in stark contrast to *Sinditherme*. Their agendas are broader, their interests encompass other groups and both appear to have clear desires to create active participant relations with workers. However, there are some important differences between the two CUT unions.

After winning control of their union, the Limeira group began to moderate their focus away from radical political-economic themes. Their agenda became more regularised, co-ordinated and focused on practical day-to-day issues. A greater reliance on state structures and decisions also emerged. Yet this did not stop them from developing a broad range of industrial claims, from actively pushing the limits of state regulation or from continuing to promote links to the CUT.

On the other hand, the *Mecânicos* were far more reluctant to moderate their approach. They continued to push a broad, political agenda but narrow range of interests up to the point where circumstances almost forced them to cease to exist. At this later date they started to think more seriously about modernisation issues. They also began to take a less categorical view of wage-employment tradeoffs and the ‘need’ for regulation, negotiation and compromise. However, horizontal union re-grouping has continued to be of primary importance to their (regional) strategy.

Both these unions were facing difficult and contradictory decisions as a result of modernisation strategies in their regions. Nonetheless, the practical demonstration of the Limeira union's credentials (e.g. their health and safety campaigns, the devolution of the IS and their clearer attempt to confront modernisation issues) distinguishes them from the *Mecânicos*. A similar concerted and broad approach can be seen in their range of interests compared to the *Mecânicos*.

Sinditherme also had a policy on modernisation and at the end of the period their services were quite extensive compared to the other two unions. Unionisation for them was also much higher - overall (50%) and for their case study firm (50%). However, the analysis highlighted a number of serious formal and informally based caveats to the conclusion that they have been as representative as the other two unions. Their identity can best be summed up as active in its omission. Compared to the CUT unions, they do not wish to become involved in the workplace and feel that unions and workers should place less emphasis on the state and statutory regulation. Conciliatory relations with employers and a focus on the individual come through strongly in their policies and ‘actions’.

Furthermore, there are aspects of *Sinditherme* which call into question the notion of ‘modernity’ and its relation to the Brazilian industrial relations context. For example, *Sinditherme* considers itself to be a progressive union and it does engage in modernisation terminology. However, its inaction, service focus and inclination to accept employer policy illustrate that even workplace modernisation does not necessarily produce qualitatively distinct breaks from past industrial relations habits. These past habits are also far from democratic.

Another point which highlights the difficulty of the Brazilian context is that all three unions stress the difficulty they have engaging workers on any topic, particularly in relation to the most micro workplace issue and the most macro political theme. The *Sinditherme* identity stands out as it drives a wedge between a workplace and an overtly political orientation, concentrating on the traditional areas of services and wage conciliation.

This may be a sensible strategy in view of employers' attitudes and as workers put a lot of weight on pay and union services. However, it does not mean that *Sinditherme* is representative, particularly in view of the picture of modernisation and workers' attitudes given in this paper.

Nevertheless, the worrying issue for groups such as the Limeira metal workers is that, despite their innovative attempts to meld workplace, local and national themes within a much more representative identity, this has had little effect at Brastemp-Rio Claro. It is sour consolation to the union that the application of more sophisticated modernisation strategies at a 'greenfields' site have helped ensure a virtually non-union factory in the midst of a region with rising union sympathies. Metal workers in Joinville seem more radical than the (unrepresentative) union they had up to 2001. However, at the Brastemp-Rio Claro site it doesn't appear to matter whether the union moderates its approach or not, workers still don't appear very interested.

Finally, a few points about the specific policy dilemmas created for unions (by modernisation) in other contexts need to be made. First, it would appear that the continuing evolution of more representative and effective unions requires detailed policies for particular skill groups and workplace issues, in addition to the articulation of general union principles. While a policy stance of this nature will be difficult, these will be the types of issues the *Mecânicos* will now have to deal with. On the other hand, if global capital is becoming increasingly mobile, unions may have to confront this through coordination and international action.

The above point about union coordination serves to highlight another problem for labour movements. Vertical union structures are important for the articulation of policies on issues such as Government regulation and on broader economic-political concerns. However, firm specific modernisation practices may render the standardisation of anything beyond the most general of issues increasingly irrelevant. State regulation, political unionism and vertical union structures may become even more meaningless than they already are as modernisation progresses. The situation at Brastemp-Rio Claro may represent an early example of this dilemma.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1
Factory typologies and outcomes - refrigeration

Indicator / Factory	Brastemp São Bernardo	Consul – II	Consul – III
Management style and structures	Relatively hierarchical and closed	Some reduction in hierarchies; more participative	Flat structures, open relations, quite participative
Technology, techniques and layout	Older and not integrated	Mixed / not integrated	New and integrated
Workplace and human resources policies	Mainly a wage based relation / recent changes	Some new tasks / training	New tasks, training and workplace ambient
Supervision	Old / overt	Newer style	New and open
OUTCOMES:			
Productivity = products per worker per day	1.7	1.2	2.6
Turnover = % per annum	8.4 %	6.0 %	1.5 %
Wages = US \$ per month; skill weighted	US \$ 430	US \$ 344	US \$ 365
Supervision = % of factory employment	6.3 %	2.1 %	1.4 %
Skill level:			
- % skilled	13 %	9 %	10 %
- % semiskilled	12 %	11 %	30 %
- % unskilled	75 %	80 %	60 %

Sources: Factory data, interviews and observation

TABLE 2
Factory typologies and outcomes – washing products

Indicator / Factory	Brastemp – Rio Claro	Enxuta
Management style and structures	Open and participative	Closed, hierarchical – paternal / recent changes
Technology, techniques and layout	New, automated and integrated	Older / less automated / not integrated
Workplace and human resources policies	New tasks, benefits and opportunities	Few concerns for work pressure or conditions
Supervision	Open / less overt	Old style / overt
OUTCOMES*:		
Productivity	3.1	1.5
Turnover	2.4 % - 12.5 %	61.2 %
Wages	US \$ 253	US \$ 292
Supervision	1.7 %	3.8 %
Skill level:		
- % skilled	7 %	11 %
- % semiskilled	3 %	10 %
- % unskilled	90 %	79 %

Sources: Factory data, interviews and observation

* Outcome measures as shown in table 2

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