



ELEX - European Works Councils - learning from experience

EWCs in the UK - industrial relations background

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Comparing Bulgaria and UK

Trade unions	
Bulgaria	UK
<p>Around 20% of Bulgaria's employees are union members. There are two main union confederations. The larger of the two is KNSB, which emerged from the reformed official trade union movement of the communist period, while Podkrepa came out of the opposition movement. Despite this they now work together reasonably well, although there are real tensions with a third, much smaller confederation, Promyana.</p>	<p>At present something over a quarter (28%) of UK employees are union members, although union density is much higher in the public sector (59%) than the private sector (17%). There is only one union confederation in the UK, the TUC, and individual unions are fully independent. Around 60% of all UK trade unionists are in the three largest unions (Unite, Unison and the GMB), which have grown through mergers.</p>

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Comparing Bulgaria and UK

Collective bargaining	
Bulgaria	UK
Between 25% and 30% of employees are covered by collective bargaining in Bulgaria. Bargaining takes place at both industry and company level (municipal level for municipal employees) but company level bargaining has become more important.	Only a third (33.5%) of employees in the UK are covered by collective bargaining. In the private sector coverage is lower at around a fifth and the key bargaining level is the company or the workplace. In the public sector, where two-thirds of employees are covered, industry level bargaining is more important.

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Workplace representation	
Bulgaria	UK
<p>Employee representation in the workplace is essentially provided through the union. There is no other universal structure. Employees are able to elect other representatives for information and consultation at a general meeting but they can also choose to pass these rights to the existing union organisation.</p>	<p>There is no common structure for employee representation in the UK and in many workplaces it does not exist. Unions are the most common way that employees are represented and they can now legally compel the employer to deal with them, but only if they have sufficient support. Most non-union workplaces have no employee representation, and the regulations implementing the EU directive on information and consultation are unlikely to change this.</p>

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Comparing Bulgaria and UK

European-level representation	
Bulgaria	UK
<p>In most cases Bulgarian members of bodies linked to European Works Councils and the European Company are to be elected by a general assembly of the employees. But the general assembly can choose to transfer the choice either to the union or to existing employee representatives. In the case of employee representatives on a European Company board, the legislation is much less clear.</p>	<p>UK representatives on most of the bodies linked to European Works Council and the European Company are to be elected by the whole workforce, unless there is an existing body which has already been elected by the whole workforce, which then has appointment rights. But the UK government has chosen not to draw up specific rules on the choice of UK members of some of the European Company structures, leaving the choice to lower level representative bodies.</p>

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EWCs in the UK - the initial trade union position

- suspicion - no tradition of works councils - seen as non- or even anti-trade union bodies
- scepticism about what EWCs could achieve
- weakness in some sectors - so couldn't ensure trade union representation

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EWCs in the UK - the trade union response

- where unions were strong could ensure representation on EWCs - where weak could benefit from co-operation with more established trade unions from other countries
- scepticism was helpful in understanding limitations of what EWCs could deliver - more information and improved networking that could help at national level but very little real consultation
- importance of co-ordination through TUC - information exchange and training



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EWCs in the UK - the trade union response

Getting help from non-UK trade unions

French (Assurances Générales) and German (Deutsche Bank) trade unions on EWCs were able to insist that UK representation was result of trade union elections or nomination after management attempts to appoint their own people.

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EWCs in the UK - the trade union response

Limited view of potential outcomes:

Survey found that employees and union representatives saw only a marginal contribution to industrial relations as the impact was “not much” or “very little” or “not a lot”. However, no interviewee wished to disregard a forum since, in spite of limitations, they were worth retaining.

Most EWCs were considered to play a useful role as a source of information and networking, especially in single product businesses with a European management structure, it is suggested this is less the case where forums relate to conglomerates or are based in a non-unionised service sector.



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EWCs in the UK - the trade union response

Positive in terms of information:

"widened knowledge of the commercial strategic and political pressures which impact on the company - an understanding of the problems that British Steel faces in today's market place - better information on British Steel's financial situation, culture, strategy, organisation, ownership, production and markets."

"you can find out more from the EWC than from local management",
union rep at engineering company GKN



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Using information at national level:

At the UK media group Pearson, EWC members used their links to collect and exchange information between one another about childcare and pension schemes and this led to some concrete improvements.

At Unilever EWC delegates regularly circulate a brief questionnaire asking for key details on employment conditions and other developments the results of which they can then use in their own plants.