1 Industrial Relations in Local Government

Introduction

Industrial relations in the public services has been a neglected field. Historically public service organisations have not been characterised by smouldering industrial discontent but by harmonious and well-ordered relations between employers and unions. This situation has now changed completely. In Britain ‘by 1980 it had become commonplace to consider the major source of instability in British industrial relations as lying in the relationship between governments and other public sector trade unions’.\(^1\) In a similar vein another commentator has described the British public sector unions as ‘the most dynamic section of British organised labour’.\(^2\) A similar growth in public service union militancy has been noted in other countries such as the United States and Australia.\(^3\)

This new militancy has found expression in rising levels of industrial action and disruption in local government. In Britain over the period from the early 1970s to the middle 1980s, industrial action by local government workers has become widespread. At the national level there have been major incidents of industrial action such as the famous ‘Winter of Discontent’ in 1978–79 which contributed to the fall of the Callaghan Labour Government; the 1978 firemen’s strike; the 1978–9 social workers strike; nationwide action by the National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO) in 1974 and London-wide action in 1979; and, most recently, the long teachers’ action running through 1985 and 1986.

This chapter introduces the major approaches to the study of industrial relations within the public services and local government context. Five different approaches are identified.\(^4\) Firstly the pluralist approach which sees the unions as a type of interest group and industrial relations as part of a pluralist political system.
Secondly the social action and Marxist approaches criticise the reformist assumptions of the pluralists and stress the function of unions as expressions of social interests rooted in deep social and economic inequalities. Thirdly, the corporatist approach maintains that these differences in social interest are capable of being regulated through the incorporation of the unions in government. Fourthly the fiscal crisis approach argues that under conditions of fiscal strain the relationship between the state and its employees is pushed into crisis as the former reduces expenditure under national and international economic pressures. The consequently worsening pay and conditions in the public services lead to employee protest and resistance, industrial relations become less consensual and the unions become channels for the expression of political disaffection and dissent.

Pluralism: the unions as interest groups

Pluralism began life as a political theory and has only recently been applied to industrial relations. Broadly pluralism conceives of the political system as an arena within which there are numerous competing interest groups all involved in attempts to influence the government machine which itself is assumed to be neutral. The unions, then, are seen as one type of sectional interest in competition with others for the attention of the policy makers and for resources. Meanwhile the governmental machine itself is controlled by elected politicians belonging to that political party that has won the most votes or seats at the last election. The prime task that pluralism gives to the ruling politicians is that of balancing the differing interests and arbitrating among the various claims and demands in accordance with their party manifestos and perceptions of likely electoral consequences. An important pluralist assumption is that all interest groups have some opportunity to express their views and that no group is entirely denied access to the policy makers. It is assumed as well that interest groups usually use proper or legitimate influence channels and seldom resort to threats or sanctions against their elected rulers. For the pluralist, then, conflict can be contained within the legitimate institutions of democratic government and,