7 The Unions and the Management of Discontent

Introduction

The problems of change are far from being solely a management concern. Union leaders have also to cope with the problems arising from the fiscal crisis. Now that the earlier corporatist type relationship is breaking down, they have to search for a middle way between too much confrontation and too much collaboration with the employer (see Chapter 3). This search involves the major tasks both of responding effectively to management policies and strategies and also of managing discontent within the local union organisation. The focus of this chapter is on these tasks. The first section examines the tasks and problems of responding to policy change in the forms both of retrenchment and of policy innovation; in particular it considers the spreading rejection of employer collaboration by the unions. The second section considers the complications that management differentiation and fragmentation introduces into the management-union relationship. While the third section looks at the changing problems of union leadership in terms of the management of discontent.

Responding to change

Retrenchment

The decision to retrench takes different forms open to varying interpretations by the unions. As was stressed in the last chapter employers may anticipate opposition and modify their intentions accordingly. In any case the transitional period from growth to retrenchment, as in Conborahough, typically takes the form of a ‘phoney war’. The threat of cutbacks appears to unions and staff as rhetorical rather than real as early cuts are in future plans and
organisational slack. Union leaders have to interpret both the words and the actions of the employer to anticipate the moment when retrenchment will become a real threat. Once they have established the employer’s intention to retrench, the choices facing local union leaderships can be understood as being among confrontation, collaboration or conciliation.

In many authorities the unions have continued to collaborate with the management rather than adopt a more adversarial stance. In part this continuing attachment to collaboration reflects the timing of cutbacks. Councils as employers are aware of the importance of timing expenditure cuts. Union leaders and members are more likely to perceive a sudden switch in council policy from growth to retrenchment as threatening (especially following a change in political control), than a more gradual transition to retrenchment. Sudden cutbacks, as occurred in Conborough, are usually seen as provocative by the unions. Another significant factor is the mobilisation of bias favouring collaboration that builds up over the years in an authority and precludes the emergence of a more adversarial view of the relationship. Such a bias appears particularly characteristic of authorities in rural or outer suburban areas where workforces remain less militant than their counterparts in urban areas.

During retrenchment employers try to reinforce any such organisational bias. Union leaders are subject to strong management pressures to accept cutbacks as an inevitable adjustment to outside financial pressures and, moreover, an adjustment sanctioned by their electoral mandate. Of course the general climate of public sector stringency created by central government eases the task of persuasion. Union leaders in many authorities have indeed accepted the inevitability of retrenchment. Such an acceptance may be simply pragmatic – the union has no choice but to cooperate – or as normative – reflecting the leaders’ willingness to accept the employer’s definition of the situation. Normative acceptance is more likely where the employer is trusted to maintain at least existing jobs. Many Labour authorities have reduced their expenditure with the cooperation of local unions, ironically the organisational and ideological affinities between a ruling Labour Party and the unions can enhance trust and so facilitate union acceptance of the employers’ definitions.

In contrast unions are more likely to resort to confrontation