The literature on collective bargaining has traditionally focused on the role of the trade unions rather than employers on the assumption that unions are the moving party in the process. However, in the past ten years we find increasing attention being given to management’s role in negotiations. For example, Kochan, Katz and McKersie [1986] have found that many American employers have been much more aggressive in bargaining with their unions than was the case prior to the late 1970s. Papers presented at the Second European Congress in Industrial Relations in Israel in December 1987 showed that employers in five different western industrial nations were taking a more active role in setting the bargaining agenda in response to increasing economic pressures domestically and internationally.

Keith Sisson, Director of the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick University in England, is one of the latest writers on the subject of management’s role in bargaining. He takes an international perspective by comparing the experience of British management with their counterparts in six other industrial countries. While the United States and Japan are included in the survey, primary attention is given to four Western European nations (Italy, France, Sweden and West Germany).

The author is particularly interested in determining why multi-employer bargaining, which continues to be strongly favored in the other four Western European countries, has been in decline in Britain. Sisson relies on two sources of information to answer the question. First, he read the limited secondary source literature available on the subject. Second, he carried out systematic interviews with the following management officials: national employer confederation officials; employer association staff in five industries (metalworking, chemicals, clothing, construction and printing); officers of some regional and branch employer bodies; and individual employer labor relations staff.

The book consists of eight chapters and an appendix that provides more detailed information about the various employer confederations and their member organizations. Chapter 1 identifies the aims and approach of the study. The author summarizes the limited literature, primarily British, on historical arguments for multi-employer bargaining in each of the five Western European countries. He concludes the review by suggesting that multi-employer bargaining has clearly benefitted the employers in the other four countries, but has been less beneficial in Britain. The situations in the U.S. and Japan are seen to constitute clear exceptions to employer preferences for bargaining together.
Chapter 2 provides a historical development of multi-employer bargaining in the five Western European nations. The author concludes that the literature does not tell the full story of why such bargaining is in decline in much of the British manufacturing industry. The following chapter provides an anatomy of the five major employers’ confederations (CBI, CNPF, Confindustria, SAF and BDA) and their branch organizations in the five industries that Sisson studied. He compares the organizations on the basis of structure, membership density, legal status, cost of membership, range of activities, and role of government in each of the countries. The author finds few differences between Britain and the other four countries on these dimensions.

Next Sisson addresses the issue of centralized vs. decentralized bargaining. His analysis shows that the level of bargaining varies among the five countries, but that continued interest in multi-employer bargaining is based on the self-interest of employers, whether they instigated it or acceded to trade union or government demands and pressures. Thus, the author argues for a contingent or tactical explanation of employers’ behavior. Chapter 5 develops and explains Alan Flander’s thesis that what most differentiates Britain from the other four countries is the parties’ preference for “common law” rather than statutory law, and the use of voluntary “gentlemen’s agreements” rather than required collective bargaining and legally enforceable contracts.

In Chapter 6 Sisson presents the thesis that multi-employer bargaining maximized the bargaining power of employers while making it possible to meet the demand of unions for wide geographical coverage of substantive issues. Furthermore, he argues that such bargaining established a floor under wages competition while excluding, or at least marginalizing, the trade union role at the workplace. The decline in multi-employer bargaining in Britain in recent years, Sisson believes, is due to the inability of such employers to neutralize the workplace from trade union activity.

The next-to-last chapter is given over to the author’s discussion of the exception of the United States and Japan in preferring single employer to multiemployer bargaining. Sisson argues that after collective action by employers broke trade unions in the early part of this century (U.S.), and kept them from forming independent unions (Japan), the growth of very large companies in both countries later led employers to prefer single-employer bargaining as the lesser of the two evils for institutionalizing industrial conflict.

The final chapter reviews the major findings discussed elsewhere in the book. A number of these points have already been mentioned. Some of the most important additional insights include: employer motivation to engage in collective bargaining in the five countries was centered more on maintaining managerial control than market regulation; employers affected bargaining structure, but were also subject to trade union pressure; and bargaining structure is important in influencing the behavior of both employers and trade unions.