



## Do unions benefit from workplace partnerships, asks study

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**Research by Professor John Geary, UCD, indicates that “unions stand to gain from their participation in partnership arrangements where it is seen to deliver real and substantial gains and particularly where unions are perceived to possess a strong and influential workplace presence”.**

In a paper published in the October 2008 edition of *Industrial Relations Journal*, October 2008, entitled ‘Do Unions Benefit from Working in Partnership with Employers? Evidence from Ireland’, Geary seeks to examine the consequences for unions of engaging with workplace partnership, using a survey of Irish employees’ views (the NCPP/ESRI/UCD Survey of Employees’ Attitudes and Expectations of the Workplace, 2003).

Prof Geary discusses the opposing views of those who advocate partnership “as a means for union renewal and enhanced power” and critics who argue that “partnership would weaken unions and ill-serve workers’ interests”.

Geary highlights the Irish context “as unique among Anglo-American countries in possessing a national architecture for the conduct of employment relations”. A number of recent national agreements, according to Geary, have “endeavoured to stimulate the adoption of workplace partnership arrangements”.

For Geary, the involvement of Irish unions in workplace partnership systems

can be seen as an “attempt to consolidate and deepen the social partnership process to ensure that, where unions had been granted recognition, their presence and influence could be more securely rooted”.

This strategy “represented a significant shift in union orientation; not only was it an attempt to install an “articulated” or “integrated” system of employee representation (from the national to the workplace level), but it was also an explicit acknowledgement that the principles underpinning the once dominant adversarial model of union voice may no longer be appropriate for the changed business circumstances and the challenges presented by employers’ actions”.

### PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEES – THE EVIDENCE

Overall, 23% of survey respondents in this research reported that “their employer had established a partnership committee in their workplace involving union representation”. Partnership committees were more prevalent in public services and industries where the public sector predominates.

54.6% of those in public administration and defence reported that their employer had established a partnership committee. In transport and communications this figure was 36.8%, in health 31.6% and education 30.5%. In the private sector the reported presence of partnership committees was much lower; 27.7% in manufacturing and industry, 19.7% in business services and 13.5% in wholesale and retail.

Geary found that “union members assessed the effects of partnership arrangements in a very positive light”. A majority (approximately 70%) “indicated that partnership had positive effects on employees’ pay and conditions, employment security and job satisfaction”.

However, the results indicate that “employee participation in partnership arrangements is not sufficient to engender greater union commitment, but neither has it had a negative influence”. Geary states that “it would seem that it is only when such partnership committees are perceived to deliver beneficial outcomes for employees that they can be said to engender greater commitment to unions”. According to Geary, “the climate of employment relations appears to be the critical factor in influencing attitudes toward the effectiveness of partnership and of unions”.

In terms of orientation towards workplace partnership systems, the results indicate that “rank-and-file union members who are not members of partnership committees are less likely to regard partnership to have been effective in advancing workers’ interests than are rank-and-file union members involved in partnership committees”. They were also found to be “less likely to endorse union effectiveness under partnership arrangements”.

### PARTICIPATION

Geary found that 69% of shop stewards in workplaces where partnership

committees had been established, participated in these partnership arrangements and that “shop stewards who participate in partnership arrangements are among the most positively disposed toward partnership and unions”. 21% of “rank-and-file members” also reported participation in partnership arrangements.

The principal findings of Geary’s research indicate that “union members considered partnership to be an effective means for advancing their interests”. The research also suggests that “partnership does play an important role in influencing union members’ perceptions of union effectiveness”, while employee participation and commitment to the union are important factors in this. Geary asserts that the findings are consistent with the claims of the advocates of partnership that, “for partnership to be effective and for unions to prosper under partnership arrangements, requires strong and effective union representation”.