

Contemporary workplace occupations in Britain: motivations, stimuli, dynamics and outcomes

Abstract

Purpose.

Design/methodology/approach:

Findings:.

Practical implications: The method of occupation was not shown to be as effective as might have been thought in opposing redundancies.

Social implications: These concern union strategies and tactics for resistance to redundancy and restructuring.

Keywords: workplace conflict, industrial action, Britain

Type of paper: research paper

Go more on why none since etc – not that ECI etc boosted strikes

Still closures of manu, but now focus on public

Decline of France

Change headings so different

Introduction

Historically, workplace occupations are a significant, if infrequently used, tool in the armoury of workers. In Britain, the most widely known, if rather idiosyncratic, case was that of the UCS (Upper Clyde Shipbuilders) *work-in* of 1971-1972 in Scotland (Forster and Woolfson, 1986). The workers' action prevented the yards' closure and secured their jobs. This seemed to typify workers' ability in Britain in the early 1970s to not only struggle collectively and successfully but to do so in a way that challenged the prevailing social and political order. In its wake, many other workers facing redundancy took the example of UCS as both template and inspiration for their own actions (Darlington and Lyddon, 2001; Gold, 2004, p76), suggesting a positive demonstration effect. Some of these became minor cause celebres like the seven-month long Lee Jeans occupation in Greenock, Scotland, in 1981 (which the subject of a documentary in 2005 and had a 30-year commemoration at the Scottish Parliament) and the 103-day occupation of the Caterpillar plant in Uddingston, Scotland, in 1987. Subsequent to the UCS work-in, occupations were used for an additional array of mostly defensive purposes, ranging from resisting victimisation of union representatives and unilaterally imposed changes to working conditions to demanding higher pay. However, and as a result of recession and austerity in private and public sectors, the sense in which the occupation tactic may again have become a potentially powerful tool by which workers can collectively respond to and resist redundancy is palpable. Indeed, *Labour Research*, the monthly magazine of the Labour Research Department, in its 'Redundancy Watch' column has documented the continual and relentless extent of mass redundancies and workplaces closures since the onset of the global recession of late 2007 onwards. And yet, despite the occupation providing more leverage over an employer than a strike because workers maintain control of employer assets from inside the workplace (see Gall 2010a), Britain has witnessed very few examples of workers deploying this tactic - certainly far fewer than might have been expected given the depth and extent of this recession and retrenchment, and when compared with the recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s.¹ Indeed, in the period of the occupations studied, namely, from 2007 to 2010, 476 strikes were recorded involving 1.601m workers. And of these strikes, for example, in 2009, 17% concerned redundancy (Hale, 2010).

This paper seeks to study of those occupations that have taken place in order to understand their genesis, character, dynamics and outcomes in terms of the *micro*-social processes involved. From this, the paper seeks to develop a grounded series of factors and characteristics which can then provide the basis for a counter-factual explanation of a) why the worker occupations are used so sparingly by those who do deploy the tactic, and b) why more workers do not consider or engage in them when faced with comparable situations of redundancy and workplace closure to those that did use the occupation tactic. The contention is that by deploying this approach more purchase can be gained in explaining the relative balance of action *and* inaction than can be gained by, alternatively, looking at *macro*-level factors. The latter would mean examining factors like the overall declines in worker consciousness, union presence and worker combativity in an abstracted way and making at distant deductions from these. The consequence of this approach is that while useful in developing an understanding of the overall context of the salient social processes, it remains at too many steps removed from, and above, the level of the cognitive processes at which decisions on whether to act or not are taken. Indeed, the *macro*-level factors are interpreted by workers and shape - but do not determine - their actions or inactions, alongside many more mundane and practical concerns of mounting occupations (like providing food, bedding and entertainment). So the benefit of the *micro*-level approach is predicated on it being able to focus upon the more immediate and meaningful factors and processes – seen as specific conjunctural moments in time - which concern and affect workers in their decisions about whether to be active or passive in the face of redundancy, and which forms of activity should be pursued. This speaks to the appropriate research site – the site for investigation - for explaining the action and inaction being the psychology of the workers (individual, semi-collective and collective) at the point in time and space when they face redundancy, and understanding what factors influence this psychology. Here mobilisation theory on collective grievances and collective action is of use in identifying the salient factors in terms of workers making attributions, having the opportunity and resources to act and making cost/benefit calculations for their actions (see Kelly, 1998).

The paper begins by providing biographical descriptions of each occupation, focusing upon their geneses. From here, identification of key characteristics of motivation and stimuli is made. Using this framework, a grounded explanation is developed. With this done, the paper then examines the salience of a number of macro-factors in explaining the impetus to occupy, and the outcomes of the occupations. The paper draws upon an array of media reporting in print and online forms of the contemporary occupations with the same accompanying strengths and weaknesses outlined by Cullinane and Dundon (this issue). The reports which are particularly useful were those which provided accounts given by the occupiers themselves about how the occupations began. The paper is reliant upon these various sources because the author was not present as the occupations occurred – this arguably being the key juncture by which to witness and understand the moves to occupy - for reasons of timing and the location of the occupations. Moreover, given the limited number of cases available to be studied and the often limited proportion of the workforces involved in taking action, some caution has to be taken in reaching anything approaching definite conclusions. Thus, there are limitations placed on the extent to which the paper can explore the internal dynamics of the occupations.² As a consequence, the findings and conclusions of the research should be treated as preliminary and requiring confirmation and further interrogation through research which is more contemporaneous to such occupations. An example of the kind of detailed research required was that carried out by Fantasia (1989) in explaining why walkouts occur.

Contemporary cases

Since late 2007, the number of occupations has comprised, in chronological order, Simclar, Calcast, Prisme, Visteon (two instances), Vestas, Orchard Lodge care home, and Links care home. These workplaces and employers were all located in manufacturing rather than in public services or in private business services save for the latter two, indicating the greater availability of resources like machinery and stock which has a more valuable and manifestly physical nature and lends itself more to capture than information and data which is not necessarily physically embedded in a single workplace. Since the last occupation in January 2010, no further workplace occupations had occurred by mid-2011.

Simclar

The Simclar workforce of over four hundred in two Ayrshire electronics plants in Scotland was made redundant with immediate notice. The night shift was informed while at work and the day shift was informed when it turned up to work, finding the factory gates locked. Negotiations with the workers' union, Community, had been going on during the statutory ninety-day notice period over the number of redundancies and the terms for this. A month before the end of this period, the company went into administration and workers were informed redundancy pay was to be at the statutory minimum.³ Pickets were organised to try to prevent removal of assets to sister companies (but without success) and at one plant the following weekend workers forced their way in and staged an overnight occupation. Further demonstrations were then also held outside the plants in Ayrshire and at sister plants in Fife. Some six months later a minimum of eight weeks redundancy pay was awarded to the sacked workers following application to an employment tribunal.⁴

Calcast

The closure of the Derry car component factory involved some 90 redundancies and the transfer of the remaining twelve workers to another plant. This meant the employer was not bound by domestic law to engage in a ninety-day consultation exercise over redundancy and closure which is obligatory when more than one hundred workers are made redundant. Instead, the employer imposed a thirty-day consultation period and offered the statutory minimum redundancy payments. Notice of closure was given some weeks earlier but the redundancies and terms of these were not announced at that point. Subsequent to these being announced, a three-day occupation led to the employer conceding to the ninety-day notice period and improved redundancy terms. Dockers at Belfast had pledged not to load any finished components from the factory onto awaiting ships.

Prisme

Twelve non-union workers at the cardboard packaging factory in Dundee were given notice of immediate redundancy by their employer after an order fell through. Seven workers refused to leave upon being told this and began a seven-week occupation to secure unpaid wages, holiday pay and redundancy payments. They withstood an eviction attempt from the building's owner (who was not their employer) and established a cooperative to provide themselves with jobs in the same line of work. However, they were unsuccessful in obtaining monies owed from their employer.

Visteon

Sold off by Ford in 2000, the three Visteon plants (Belfast, Basildon and Enfield) comprised some 600 heavily unionised workers. Simultaneously at mass meetings, management gave the workers six minutes

notice of immediate redundancy following company bankruptcy. The terms of redundancy were less than the workforce believed they were entitled to for upon transfer from Ford to Visteon for they were told that their terms and conditions would remain unchanged. At the mass meeting in Belfast, when the workers were asked to leave, some workers shouted out that they would not. From here the occupation started. By contrast, at each of the other factories, workers left and en masse went to a bar to discuss their fate. Upon hearing of their Belfast colleagues' action, workers at the other two factories attempted to re-enter their workplaces in order to occupy them. At only the Enfield factory was this successful, with the workers there occupying the roof, for the company has secured the entrances to the buildings. The Belfast occupation lasted 37 days while the Enfield one lasted seven days. The occupations, allied to an information campaign and threats of picketing out several Ford factories in Britain, were successful in securing redundancy pay-offs equivalent to those of Ford workers but the payment of pensions *per se* and pensions commensurate with those of Ford workers remained unresolved (and, thus, an issue which the members' union, Unite, sought to lobby and litigate on afterwards). The fight for these was continuing some two years after the occupations through the means of parliamentary lobbying.

Vestas

A 19-day occupation was undertaken by about 5% of the 500 Vestas workers on the Isle of Wight in south-east England. The bargaining tool was control of finished and unfinished turbines. The announcement of closure of the two factories was made in June 2009 to much surprise and was made operational two months later. A month into this timetable, and after discussions with Visteon workers and members of some leftwing political groups, a collective will to act amongst a small minority of the workers emerged. The precise time of the act of occupying the main factory was forced upon the workers as management became aware of their intentions. The numbers of occupiers was not supplemented by further Vestas workers as the factory was sealed off by police. Those workers who did subsequently support the occupation were confined to providing external support. Although there was a very small degree of existing unionisation with the Unite union, a greater but still relatively small degree of unionisation took place through the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union as the occupation developed. This was because the latter union was more supportive than the former. Those occupiers who were identified by the company were sacked while the timetable for closure was extended thus giving the rest of the workforce a further period of paid employment (although they were not required to turn up for work). Following the granting of a legal order to Vestas for repossession of its factory, the occupation was ended as the remaining workers were not prepared to resist arrest. An external picket was then mounted which unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the removal of the remaining turbine blades from the factory.⁵

Orchard Lodge

Some forty-five staff (65% of the total) at the only secure children's home in London occupied the premises after being made redundant and given less than two hours' notice to collect their belongings and leave. The home had been earmarked for closure five months previously but the failure of a legal challenge to stop this gave the green light for closure to proceed. The occupation lasted for one night and was ended after the (private-sector) employer agreed to come in person to explain the closure and negotiate with the occupiers' union over redundancy pay and unpaid wages. The motivation of the staff in trying to resist closure equally concerned the impact upon themselves and their jobs as it did the effect upon the children and their care.

Links Home

Five care workers at a private care home in Coventry, which was in the process of being closed down with the loss of all jobs, occupied the premises for a day after not receiving their wages due and money in lieu of annual holiday entitlement. Despite assurances from their employer that the monies owed would shortly be paid, the workers continued the occupation until they were received, thus continuing to disrupt the transferral of residents to another home. Payment was gained but payment to the other workers, who did not engage in occupation, was not made, and they were left to chase up their monies owed on a separate basis thereafter.

Aspects of genesis

Given the focus upon the decision to engage in the act of occupation rather than on those by which occupations are sustained and then ended, it is important to further explore issues of genesis. In all cases, there was a distinct sense that the decision and act to occupy were specific and delimited moments in time, representing a particular configuration of people, place and pressure. Thus, it appeared that if the decision was not made quickly and the act not engaged in promptly, the moment of opportunity and possibility would be lost because the workers believed that their grievance was perishable in two ways. The first was in terms of their relationship with their employer, where the workers were on the cusp of no longer being employees of the employer so that a link in the chain would be removed. The second was that their anger could dissipate and turn into resignation and fatalism. Whether the decision to occupy was of a more planned (Calcast, Simclar, Vestas, Visteon Enfield) or spontaneous (Links Home, Orchard Lodge, Prisme, Visteon Belfast) nature, this remains true for the workers showed that they had engaged in some strategic thinking and discussion with each other. These various aspects can be highlighted with the following examples.

In the case of Prisme, with the company being without assets to meet its outstanding liabilities, the workers – in the words of one – decided: ‘After receiving these [redundancy] letters we were told to leave and come back at half nine in the morning but we decided we're not leaving until we receive what we're entitled to. We're not giving them the opportunity to lock the doors while we're out so we end up with nothing’. The workers recognised that keeping control of the machinery gave them some leverage, either because it had a resale value or because it was necessary for the establishment of a new company elsewhere by the owner. Meanwhile, in case of the Vestas, the process of deciding upon occupation was a long-drawn out and complex one. Thus, despite misgivings from the relevant local union about generating a positive turnout, a number of left-wing activists called a public meeting about the closure. Although well-attended by a hundred people, no collective decision was made about what the attendees at the meeting should then do. Indeed, when the idea of an occupation was raised by some (including a former Visteon convenor) in the meeting, it was dismissed by a number of local opinion leaders. Outside of the meeting, a number of young Vestas workers showed support for an occupation but as one worker commented to the left-wing activists: ‘I'm up for it, but no one else will do anything, [so] it's not possible’. The left-wing activists then organised meetings of these small numbers of mostly young Vestas workers which had small entitlements to redundancy payments and, therefore, had a greater disposition to occupy – all other things being equal – because they had less to lose financially. Other workers viewed the situation as being ‘too late’ to do anything about closure or were glad no longer to have to work under the Vestas regime and just wanted to take their redundancy money and go. While the redundancy pay offered was twice the statutory minimum, it, nonetheless, amounted to low sums for the Vestas factories had only been in existence for nine years. The specific impetus to

occupy was that it became known that management had got wind of the idea-cum-plan to occupy and were in the process of tightening up security to prevent this. This compelled the concerned workers to occupy before they were ready in a 'now or never' situation. The case of Visteon is more akin to the situation of Prisme. Thus, workers were called to hastily convened mass meetings, where in the case of Belfast, they were told: 'I am John Hanson from KPMG administrators. Our company has been drawn by Visteon UK and as of now Visteon UK is liquidated.' When questioned about the responsibility of Ford, the administrator denied any knowledge of Ford. In the words of one of the Belfast occupiers:

We said we were Ford employees, but he said 'I know nothing about that'. That's when the debate started. We said 'We're not moving until we get this sorted out'. Then he said 'My colleagues at the back have paperwork for you as you are leaving, take a sheet each and you can read it and get back to us if you need any answers'. Somebody said 'We're not leaving'. People thought maybe that's not a bad idea. [The union convener] called for a meeting. He said to the managers 'Can you leave us to talk between ourselves and get things sorted'. ... We all talked between ourselves and decided that's it, we can't leave. We'll be too weak if we leave. Our strength is staying here. Everybody agreed.

Motivations and Stimuli

The foundations for occupation are aspects of consciousness, primarily, anger and organisation within the framework of anger>hope>action, whereby collective anger leads to the collective hope of resolution through collective action. Anger existed amongst the affected workers that undertook occupations at being at the 'end of the line' with 'nowhere to go' and wanting to do something to remedy this grievous situation. Existing social organisation – like a union - allows something collectively to be done about this. This contrasts with other facets of worker consciousness such as a fatalism and resignation that nothing can be done, and that the workers themselves have no power of remedy (even with the social organisation of a union or group that represents workers' interests). But this is insufficient to explain action compared to inaction in regard of occupations because there are many situations where workers are angry and organised but take no such action (nor any other like a strike or mounting a political campaign) and the line between 'creative' anger which leads to action and the resentful fatalism which leads to inaction is not a clearly defined and immutable 'Chinese Wall'. So, to try to flesh out the issues, the main characteristics of the stimuli to occupy are now identified. Taking these in turn, we can observe the following in the form of contentions.

Collectivised nature of redundancy: the collectivised experience of compulsory redundancy – as opposed to voluntary and/or selective redundancy - helped create a critical mass of aggrieved workers where there was a sense that they were 'in all this together' and that they could then make a united stand together. This can be contrasted with a situation where only part of the workforce was made redundant (whether compulsorily or voluntarily) and a divergence of likely interests, thus, opened up within the workforce.

Immediate and unforeseen nature of redundancy: the immediate and unforeseen nature of the announcement of redundancy coupled with redundancies being effective from the time of announcement provided for no consultation or dialogue with the employer about measures for amelioration or alternative work. Thus, a greater shock to the 'system' of the workers was meted out and, thus, potentially the greater was the workers' anger. By contrast, significant prior notice was likely to lessen anger as workers accommodated to the new situation they find themselves in.

Loss of deferred wages and compensation: the grave sense of procedural injustice was heightened by the substantial injustice of no redundancy or severance compensation from the employer and loss of pension entitlements (as deferred wages and through worker contributions). This arose because the employer either became bankrupt, or went into administration with many creditors lined up to seek redress, putting the redundant workers in the position of being only one party amongst many seeking financial redress.

Pre-existing collectivisation: already unionised workers displayed a higher ability – all other things being equal – to collectively resist the redundancies because they did not have to overcome the additional hurdle of forming a collective association of workers at the same time as staging the act of resistance through occupation. Existing collective organisation, relations and consciousness, thus, placed them in a better position to act here.

Positive demonstration effect: with occupations being relatively infrequent, workers were in a better position to occupy where there were other recent examples of workers occupations against closure and redundancy. In other words, the occupation tactic pricked their consciousnesses, becoming a slightly more realisable form of collective resistance.

Overview of Characteristics

The salience of the characteristics, expressed as contentions, lies in their explanatory power, specifically concerning workers' willingness to act and the ability to act in terms of launching an occupation. However, it is evident that these contentions provide only limited purchase for not all the occupations had all these features or even a majority of them as Table 1 makes clear.

Table 1 Presence of Key Characteristics

Condition/ Occupation	Simclar	Calcast	Prisme	Visteon Belfast	Visteon Enfield	Vestas	Orchard Lodge	Links Home
Collectivised nature of redundancy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Immediate and unforeseen redundancies	Yes & no	Yes & no	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes & no	Yes & no	No
Loss of deferred wages & compensation	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Pre-existing collectivisation	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes & no	Yes	No
Positive demonstration effect	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Note: In the case of 'Yes & no', the impending redundancies were known of but not their exact timing and nor their immediate effect.

Before discussing the presence or absence of these characteristics, it is worth noting that an aspect of the characteristics (when present) is their potential interaction with each other where the whole can be then greater than the sum of the parts. For example, redundancies made *en masse* and without notice provides a sense that those affected can feel that they are forced into a situation of 'their backs being

against the wall' (especially where there are no alternative employment opportunities). This sense of 'backs against the wall' may be further heightened by loss of wages due and the like. In these circumstances, workers may feel that they have little option but to fight back against their employer (although that does not presuppose they would necessarily choose the tactic of occupation). This side of the equation constitutes the components that Kelly (1998) stipulated *vis-a-vis* grievances and attribution while the other side of the equation – namely, the opportunity and resources to act – can be found in regard of pre-existing collectivisation and union and community support.

Turning to examine the characteristics, the first was only just common to all for in the case of Calcast although not all workers were being made redundant this was a technical ruse to get around legal requirements and the workplace was being closed. Meantime, at Simclar, limited transferral to other of the employer's plants some hundred and fifty miles away was offered but as this was impractical and costly for workers the situation facing them was *de facto* mass redundancy. Moreover, the second characteristic was quite common but again not universal. Some examples of this tendency toward partiality was that in a number of cases workers became unionised in the process of an occupation so that social organisation preceded unionisation (such as at Prisme or Vestas to a large extent); cases exist where redundancy payments were to be made but these were felt to be insufficient (such as Calcast and Visteon); and that a majority of the occupations took place without there being recent examples to have the benefit of. Furthermore, and just as importantly, there were many cases where all or most of the features were present but no occupations were engaged in, suggesting that other factors, and workers' assessments thereof, were at play. It is now worth understanding where and how some of the five factors laid out above did operate and did so together.

Thus, in the case of the Visteon occupations in Britain in early 2009, it was not just the simultaneously delivered six minutes notice of immediate redundancy given to each of the three factories' workforces with loss of pension entitlements and no redundancy pay (thereby reneging on the pledge to match the Ford terms and conditions after the sell off from Ford) while the employer's other businesses remained in profitable operation that led to the occupation. This is apparent because the Belfast Visteon workers responded by immediate occupation whereas the Enfield and Basildon Visteon workers left their workplaces, adjourning to the pub to discuss their fate. It was only after hearing of the Belfast occupation through phonecalls between the workers in Belfast and Enfield/Basildon that workers at the latter two plants re-appraised their reactions and tried to emulate their Belfast colleagues. By contrast, the Vestas occupation in its pre-figurative and initial stages was heavily influenced by the Visteon example, where Visteon workers went to the Isle of Wight factory to talk to the Vestas workers. This intimate and manifest direct link was buttressed by the gains made as a result of the occupation by the Belfast Visteon workers. From this, it could be ventured that the high-profile media attention given to occupations, aided by support from various unions, helped the tactic enter the lexicon of workers, substantiating the notion of a positive 'demonstration effect'.

Yet, this does not seem to have occurred in Britain for despite the media attention given to both Visteon and Vestas occupations, only two very small and short occupations occurred since, and despite continued mass redundancies and workplace closures. In this sense, it cannot be said that the Visteon and Vestas occupations were 'inspirational' (*cf.* Darlington 2010:132) in any widespread sense, and the only tangible direct case of 'inspiration' took place in regard of the Visteon workers' occupation upon the Vestas workers' occupation. This further emphasises the point that the transfer of knowledge between workers may be seen as a facilitator rather than a creator or instigator, where it helps add to an existing set of factors that may favour staging an occupation. But it also serves to emphasise that the

means of transfer are as important as the nature of the transfer. In the case of the influence of the Visteon Belfast occupation, the means were intimate and personalised. By contrast, and in the absence of these means, any demonstration effect would have to take place through the impersonal force of the media and this would seem to undermine the possibility. Moreover, it is testament to the shrunken influence and implantation of the radical left groups (like the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers' Party) amongst organised workers that, although they proselytised vociferously for occupation on the basis of the most widely known occupations of the time (Visteon and Vestas), they had almost no impact in achieving such outcome elsewhere.

Whilst the issue of no redundancy pay was a salient issue so too was the value of redundancy payments, and workers' assessments of their worth. Here, the Linamar car parts factory in Swansea is an interesting case in point. Formerly, a Visteon - and before that a Ford - factory, its workers were given notice of closure and compulsory redundancy for late 2010 in mid-2010. Despite urging to the contrary from the union convenor, who was well-respected and a member of the Socialist Party, this was accepted without resistance because of enhanced severance payments, and stood somewhat paradoxically alongside the victory through industrial action, and its threat, to resist the sacking of this union convenor and the diminution of terms and conditions just a year earlier. The significance of the value of severance payments was also highlighted in the Vestas and Visteon cases. In the former, a majority of workers - who were also longstanding employees - opted not to engage in the occupation, primarily because their redundancy entitlements were seen by them as sufficiently significant owing to these being linked to length of service. Meanwhile in the Visteon case, the workforce was more unified and, in this sense, participative in the occupation because of homogeneity of interests over the worth of severance payments. In other words, the Visteon workers had a commonality of interests that was not stratified due variations in severance pay as a result of length of service.

While the preceding discussion focused upon what can be termed as objective or material conditions (even accepting that these are subject to psychological perception and interpretation), it is clear that they are unable to fully explain on their why action or inaction prevailed. Thus, the phenomenon of conscious human agency which can frame issues in ways conducive of action and its inter-relationship with the objective factors comes into play in terms of mobilisation theory (see Kelly 1998). But it is far too simple to say that the representatives of human agency, exemplified in union activists, active union members, workplace leaders and opinion formers, are the necessary missing link. This is not least because the material basis on which the occupations took place varied (see Table 1) and because there are quantitative and qualitative issues involved in regard of the activists and the workplace group, two of the most important of these being the degrees of credibility and authority of activist leadership (as opposed to merely coming up with the suggestion to occupy), and the configuration of these with the material factors. Yet, it still remains that putting these array of factors together does not provide a fully holistic explanation for ostensibly similar situations which, especially in regard of these human factors, did not produce similar outcomes.

In the Vestas case, unlike the other cases, a more overtly political dimension existed in the workers' motivation. Many had been attracted to work there because of the desire to produce 'green' technologies for producing 'green' energy. The stated reason for the closure by Vestas was that the wind turbine market in Britain was not sufficiently large to justify continued production even though the then 'new' Labour government had committed itself to vastly expand the production of 'green' energy through such means. In this context, the occupation served to highlight the demand for nationalisation of this productive facility (see below). As one of the leaders of the occupation recalled: 'Nobody had

ever done anything like that before but we all felt passionately enough to throw caution to the wind to say 'look this isn't fair the government say they are creating all these green jobs and you're kicking us out of our jobs'.

Aims and Outcomes

It is plausible to characterise the contemporary occupations as 'radical' or 'militant' means for 'moderate' ends. Seldom was there any sense amongst large number of the workers involved that stopping the redundancies and closure were overt aims or credible expectations (never mind attempts to establish workers' control and the like). Thus, in tandem with the shrunken extent of workers' collective industrial and political influence, none of the occupations were successful in preventing the employers from making the redundancies, either their intended number or *per se*. Neither were the occupations successful in preventing the employer from instituting the closure of the workplaces. Moreover, redeployment was not conceded either. These are sobering points, confirming that occupations should not be seen as a 'magic bullet' in the fight against redundancies, and that the occupations lasting for much longer and with much greater workforce participation would not seem to drastically reconfigure this. Rather, the occupations in practice have concerned themselves with contesting the procedural and substantive terms for closure not the closure itself.⁶ A period of raised worker struggle and consciousness may change this configuration although it would have to overturn the tendency for unions to have become socialised and institutionalised into negotiating over the terms for the cessation of work as the result of the rise in the regulation of matters of redundancy over the last forty years. The one partial exception to 'militant' means for 'moderate' ends was the Vestas occupation where the key demand was for the government to nationalise, that is, take into state ownership, the factories in order for the government to meet its targets on the production of 'green' energy.

Overall, this then turns the focus onto whether, and to what extent, occupations provide leverage over employers to determine the process by which redundancy and closure are instituted and the terms on which they are instituted. In this sense, the procedural and substantive issues involved are very much akin to those of other forms of attempted leverage (like strikes) over employers. It is clear that some of the occupations like Simclar and Orchard Lodge were more intended to allow the aggrieved workers to express their anger, to kickback against the employer and to draw attention to their plight than to act as means of gaining leverage over their employers. By contrast, those at Calcast, Prisme, Visteon and Vestas were more strategically calculated occupations which were determined efforts to exercise leverage. Nonetheless, the leverage that was created – along with the ensuing sensitivity to damage to employer brand and reputation – did often facilitate redundancy payments or enhancements of these, lawful periods of notice of redundancy implemented, extension of periods leading to shutdown, back payment of due wages, and the guarantee of pension entitlements to differing degrees. Not only would this not have happened without action, it appears that occupation was more productive than the use of striking in comparable situations. The outcomes of occupations have not varied a great deal in relation to the proportion of the workforce involved in the occupations. This is because to conduct an occupation which prevents employer access to his or her premises does not require all or even a majority of the workers involved (*cf.* effective picketing). Rather, there are minimum numbers of workers required in terms of preventing employer (or police) entry relative to the sizes of the occupied buildings, particularly in regard of strategic parts of buildings and the number of entrances to buildings. While superficially it appears to be the case that their duration and the extent of solidarity support raised for the occupiers do not have a direct bearing on the attainment of the occupiers' aims, those

occupations which lasted the longest and generated the greatest amounts of solidarity were attempting to gain ambitious demands and in more difficult circumstances. Thus, Vestas workers sought to keep the factories open by forcing a government to intervene while Visteon workers sought vastly superior terms than they were offered by forcing Ford to intervene. By contrast, the occupations in the care homes were more about seeking payment of wages due. So the limited effectiveness of the occupation tactic in the contemporary period may be taken to suggest that it is best suited to relatively moderate aims, including but not restricted to bargaining over the terms and method of severance, rather than more ambitious aims like stopping redundancy and closure. This would seem a reasonable inference for the occupation tactic – particularly as part of a collective bargaining process over perishable issues and where redundancy and closure have not been in prospect – has been used for other ends such as attempting to stop victimisation of union representatives or changes to shifts.

Collective memory and external variables

In a piece entitled 'Why sit-ins are still so 1970s', the *Financial Times* (7 April 2009), in relation to the Visteon action, remarked: 'Occupying a factory can be effective: visibility is high and you deny an employer access to plant, machinery and offices' while in a piece commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Lee Jeans sit-in, a shop steward of the time recounted: 'If we'd just went out on the street [on strike], the company would have just moved everything out overnight' (*Scottish Television News* 10 March 2011).⁷ However, it seems self-evident that either this lesson has been lost or forgotten in terms of unionised workers' consciousness and collective memory and/or that the organisational capacity by which to actualise the lesson has been significantly eroded. Both the loss of memory and organisational capacity speak to the decline of workers' combativity. In 2009 and 2010, the number of strikes fell below the one hundred mark for the first time since record began in 1981 and over the last twenty years only four years saw more than one million days not worked. Yet, intriguingly occupations have continued to be used by student, community and environmental activists as a means of stopping closures and drawing attention to their actions. The existence of this usage hints that there is a barrier to the notion of a spill-over effect.

Recalling the aforementioned contention of the limited purchase of macro-level factors, it is now appropriate, nonetheless, to discuss some of these. Those such as labour market (primarily unemployment) and union strength (primarily union membership and industrial action), and their regional dimensions, were examined previously (see Gall 2010a). Notwithstanding that the very small number of occupations means that no statistical significance can be attributed to any correlations, on these indices, no tight relationship was found between higher levels of unemployment, union membership and industrial action activity by region and the location of the occupations. The same was true in regard of union consciousness and oppositional politics where previous studies (Darlington 1994, Gall 2005, Gold 2004) have highlighted the supportive and conducive nature of political networks and communities of collectivism in constructing and mobilising actions. On this basis, one would expect to have witnessed occupations in the Glasgow/Strathclyde, Liverpool/Merseyside and Newcastle/Tyneside metropolitan areas. Yet this has not been the case, so again there would seem to be a null hypothesis and no identifiable relationship between such political networks of any kind and the impulse to occupy (except in the case of Vestas but these activists were from outside the locale).

Three other aspects of macro-factor influence are potentially salient. Firstly, state traditions and activity at local, regional and national levels. In contrast to the relative ambiguity and ambivalence towards occupations by the police and judiciary in France, there is nothing comparable in Britain and no variation

here on a regional basis. Indeed, the obverse is true in as much as employers' property and managerial rights are still held to be sacrosanct. There is a similar picture in regard of state policy towards cooperatives, for there is no parallel to the supportive role played by different levels of the state in Spain (Mondragon) and Italy despite formal and tokenistic political support from the main political parties in Britain. The pertinence of this is that there are no stimuli to the form of occupation which can then transmogrify into a cooperative in order to sustain employment in the enterprise. Secondly, historically speaking, there is no clear and successful example of an occupation that is widely known and which could act as a template for and spur to action. The case of the UCS work-in, for example, is - as it were - from a distant past that seems like a foreign country. Thus, to use a popular expression, for workers there does not seem to be any 'proof in the pudding' to the idea or assertion that occupations have a special and important purchase (see also Gall, 2010b). Again, there is no regional variation in this aspect. Moreover, the contemporary demonstration effect (see above) does not necessarily seem capable of altering this calculation. In this context, just as likely a pro-active collective response from workers facing redundancy was to put forward alternative corporate plans (such as at Johnny Walker whisky in Kilmarnock or the Corus Llanwern steel works) in a feint echo of those of the 1970s (see Gold, 2004). But even more likely have been forms of concession bargaining where short-time working, pay freezes and pay cuts have been instituted in cooperation with workers' unions. Here, the overwhelmingly sense has been that cooperation, not conflict, with has been the preferred means by which to protect job security. Thirdly, the decentralised structures of collective bargaining - where these still exist - on the one hand, facilitate that workers in individual enterprises can choose to respond such individual ways (such as through occupation or productivity alliances). But, on the other hand, the absence of manifest links between workers in different enterprises as the company-level bargaining impoverishes the resource base that that workers can rely on and use for such actions as occupations. Such aspects can be seen to come together to form a 'common-sense' through an understanding of how hegemonic discourses close off and dismiss certain ideas and actions while promoting and encouraging others. Thus, the neo-liberal discourse closes off and makes illegitimate such notions and expectations are the right to work and the right to security of employment (see Gall, 2010b).

More widely, the decline in the manufacturing base of the British economy and the rise in the (private) service sector have closed off some potential for occupations to take place upon. Thus, the already vastly shrunken terrain of plants with relatively more immobile machinery would appear - alongside the unionisation of those plants - logically to have reduced the scope for occupation. By contrast, the service sector organisations are generally less immobile, largely for reasons of the form of the service they provide and reliance upon knowledge and information technology (rather than plant and machinery). Yet, this is not as wholly a convincing an explanation as its first appears for the occupation tactic was used in the service sector in both Britain and Eire (see Cullinane and Dundon, this issue). However, when allied to other factors, this explanatory variable may have some purchase. Among these other factors would be the rise in 'vulnerable' and 'insecure' workers, often characterised by low pay, agency work, subcontracting, and migrant status. The salient point here is not so much the material immiseration and degradation but the low expectations of rights and entitlement, whereby the latter are needed to provide the basis of anger existing and moving from it to hope and action. Indeed, the inter-relationship between the worth of the menu of extant rights, knowledge of those rights and the expectations they engender is particularly important here.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a grounded explanation of the phenomenon and incidence of worker occupations against collective redundancy and closure. Notwithstanding the caveats outlined earlier concerning the limitations of the research methods, the argument has been that by both starting with, and concentrating upon, a series of micro-factors, a more concrete purchase can be gained in explaining why they took place and, by implication, why there have been so few elsewhere. That said the micro-factors are necessary but not fully sufficient to explain why occupations took place, and here there is a major challenge to mobilisation theory as per Kelly (1998) to explain action and inaction for, *inter alia*, the missing ingredient has not been lack of grievance or activists as such. Indeed, the sense of entitlement to grievance is one avenue worthy of further exploration. Thus, emphasis was put on the need to understand the complexity and specificity of the contingent social processes involving worker agency as well as the material foundations of concrete circumstances and how the two interact. The complexity relates to workers' varying assessments of their situation and their expectations about whether occupation will bring useful leverage over their employer in terms of a basic cost/benefit calculation. The contingency and specificity relate to a series of micro-level factors which can help explain in general terms – albeit in a retrospective way - why occupations took place (as opposed to predicting whether, where and when they will take place). An analysis of these factors was then related to macro-level factors in order to appreciate how wider societal process can impact upon and influence them. But the accent was always put on these providing a foundation in non-determinate and non-mechanical ways. This accent is all the more important for, particularly as a result of the nature of the research methods, there remains a gap in data and, thus, also in understanding for definite and definitive conclusions cannot be reached as yet in explaining the inaction which is found elsewhere. Indeed, towards this end, studies are needed of the situations and processes where using the occupation tactic was considered but either rejected or not acted upon⁸ (as opposed to understanding why it was never consciously or explicitly considered which requires considerable use of counter- or alter-factual techniques). The rationale here would to open up the issue by developing an overall counterpoint as well as matched pairs. However, again this would require something of a crystal ball or being in intimate contact with workers to be in the right place at the right time to witness the contemporaneous discussions. Such research would help to explain why the expectation of the far left in Britain, represented by the Socialist Party (Chaffey, 2010) and the Socialist Workers' Party (Kimber, 2009) was so mistaken in believing that a clutch of industrial disputes in 2009, which included Visteon and Vestas, heralded a new dawn in collective workplace resistance.

Acknowledgement

My thanks are to the two reviewers of an earlier version of this paper.

Notes

¹Moreover, a similar number of occupations have taken place in Eire (Dundon and Cullinane, this issue) in the same period of time as in Britain even though the size of the workforce is 1.5m compared to 28m in Britain. That said, in a number of other economies in Europe, the frequency of occupations against redundancy and workplace has been equally sparse as in Britain or Ireland with the exception of France.

² For a fuller discussion of the merits and demerits of using this material, see Gall (2010a).

³ National employment legislation governs what the statutory minimum redundancy entitlement and in cases where the employer has no assets to pay this, the state provides this from receipts from general taxation. Nonetheless, the statutory minimum entitlement is set at a low level of financial worth.

⁴ Three years later, in 2010, one of the mothballed former Simclar factories in Ayrshire was bought over by Barony Universal Products to manufacture canisters, employing some 100 workers in this venture .

⁵ Just over a year, later a small core of the occupiers, in alliance with a conventional company and with the help of the RMT, launched Sureblades which began manufacturing wind turbine blades and granted union recognition to the RMT.

⁶ The experience of occupations – so-called ‘recovered factories’ - in Argentina has parallels with this (Lavaca Collective, 2007).

⁷ A fuller discussion of the purchase of the occupation tactic is found in Gall (2010a).

⁸ For example, Gold (2004, p75) argued that there were a number of reasons why the GEC occupation against redundancies in 1969 did not take place despite being planned. These concerned inter-site differences between workers in terms of their motivation and organisation, widespread opposition from employers, MPs and media, and splits amongst the shop stewards and workers over using the tactic.

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