Abstract

Over the last decade a large decline in union membership and influence has been observed in many countries. This observation has prompted many researchers to consider the means by which individual unions are able to mitigate the effects of less favourable economic and political conditions on their functions as institutions designed to represent and defend worker interests. Such research suggests that unions can improve their labour market and political position through the reformulation of established union strategies. This paper contributes to this research agenda by developing a more robust construct of union strategy. It begins with a critical evaluation of the concept of ‘strategy’ and ‘strategic choice’ within the organisational studies and business strategy literatures, as well as its use in industrial relations theory. From there it develops a conceptual framework of union strategy. This framework posits that union strategies can be analysed in terms of four dimensions: objectives, methods, tactics and the level at which strategies are formulated and implemented. It also considers the nature of the strategy formulation process. This model, it is argued, could be operationalised in cross-national research on union strategy to investigate specific strategic patterns, the determinants of specific strategic patterns, and the relationship between different strategies and measures of union effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, the question “What do unions do?” formed the focus of debates over the role and functions of trade unions in market economies (Freeman and Medoff 1984). Traditionally, unions had (at least within the broad field of economics) been conceived of as mechanisms or organisations developed by workers to raise wages above the market rate through forming a monopoly labour supply to a given industry, occupation or trade. To the extent that unions were viewed as monopolies operating in a competitive labour market, their effects were seen to be perverse in that they were “pernicious” mechanisms designed to capture economic rents on behalf of unionised workers (Simons 1944). Unions were thus seen to operate for the benefit of their members and themselves as organisations, but to the detriment of society as whole. Although the proposition that unions act as a bulwark against the superior labour market power of firms in the market place (and against managers in the workplace) implies a dramatically different view of the effects of unions, it
does not alter the conception of unions as primarily analogous to a single firm which dominates a market as a monopoly supplier of labour.¹

It was with this question, of what do unions do other than increase wages and control labour supply, that research over the 1980s was primarily concerned with. Although this agenda was in many respects flawed, it had the ultimate consequence of challenging the standard monopoly view of union behaviour. The most important work in this debate was undertaken by Freeman and Medoff (Freeman 1976, 1980a, 1980b, Freeman and Medoff 1979 and 1984).² By questioning the assumptions made by economic models of union behaviour about the goals and influence of unions on labour market outcomes, Freeman and Medoff successfully established a portrait of unionism which has challenged half a century of accepted wisdom about the effects of unions on workplace productivity and society in general.³

Rather than simply representing unions as a pernicious source of monopoly power, Freeman and Medoff argued that unions were functional for workers and society. Through the provision of ‘voice’ and the revelation of collective preferences which would not be possible for workers to voice as individuals given the collective good nature of these preferences unions they argued, could promote efficient outcomes as well as equity and democracy. Thus, along with having a ‘monopoly face’, Freeman and Medoff contended that unions also had a ‘collective–voice face’. Where collective-voice effects dominate, this model predicted unions would have a positive influence on worker effort levels and other behaviours that enhance workplace productivity. While this research has proven to be important in shaping our understanding of unions and the nature of their effects on the economy and in the workplace, subsequent work raises a number of unanswered but crucial questions concerning the behaviour of unions. Most importantly, how do unions utilise their monopoly and collective voice roles? In short, the Freeman and Medoff literature leaves off where the concerns of this paper begin: the nature and effects of union strategy in pursuit of their goals.

---

¹ Under conditions of monopsony in the labour market where firms have power as buyers to influence the wage rate, then unions act as a countervailing force, increasing both wages and employment. Unions, in this context act as a welfare improving mechanism; yet they are still viewed as monopoly suppliers of labour. See for example Hirsch and Addison (1986: 22).
² This work drew heavily on the conceptual framework of responses to organizational decline developed by Hirschman (1971).
³ For an early statement of the traditional monopoly union model see Simons (1944).
This problem became particularly evident in subsequent research, which reveal contradictory empirical evidence about the relationship between unions and workplace productivity. Freeman and Medoff themselves foreshadowed some of these issues relating to this problem when they suggested:

*The effects of unionism are not universal constants but rather depend on specific industrial relations settings. An important, and yet incomplete task, it to determine the different impacts of various industrial relations practices on productivity and to discover, as far as possible, the reasons for these differing impacts (Freeman and Medoff 1979: 81, emphasis added).*

In an important critique of the Freeman and Medoff research, Turnbull (1991) suggested a proper understanding of the goals and effects of unions required researchers to reconsider the conceptual foundations of the original exit-voice model. Most importantly, Turnbull noted, was a generally poor understanding of *modes of union behaviour* and their objectives (also see Fiorito, Gramm and Hendricks 1991). Further, consistent with the view of Freeman and Medoff, Turnbull suggests union behaviour will be influenced by a range of factors: ‘the nature of the relationship between employer and employee, their interaction in the process of production, and the industrial relations *structures, processes, and procedures* which give rise to specific productivity outcomes’ (Turnbull 1991: 136, emphasis added). Similarly, in her treatise on the economic analysis of trade unionism, Booth (1995: 263) points to some of the problems which dominant theories have failed to address. Most importantly for our analysis is the question of where unions gain any monopoly power from, and how they are able to exercise it at the workplace, at the industry or occupational level, and nationally.

Both the Freeman and Medoff research and subsequent critiques of its findings point to the importance of a more complete understanding of *union strategies* as important determinants of the effects of union organisation on economic and industrial relations outcomes. Furthermore, they suggest the need for a better conceptualisation of how unions function *in particular environmental and institutional contexts*. This issue has more recently arisen in attempts to consider just how union themselves are able to contribute to their organisational effectiveness in a decidedly hostile economic and political environment (Delaney, Jarley and Fiorito 1996, and Fiorito, Jarley and Delaney 1995). This paper begins to address some of these questions which emerged out of the union research during the 1980s by developing a conceptual framework of the dimensions of
The paper will proceed in four further sections. Section 2 will survey theories of strategy in other disciplines, particularly organisational theory, which informs the model of union strategy developed in this paper. In section 3, a critical survey of how the concept of strategy has been utilised in industrial relations theory is undertaken, focusing on the important work of Kochan and others which has been significant in the development of the strategic choice framework in industrial relations theory. Then, section 4 reviews attempts to apply strategic choice theory to understand union behaviour, while section 5 outlines the construct of union strategy to be used in this study to analyse union behaviour in Australia.

2. THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGY

The concept of strategy in industrial relations theory has drawn heavily from developments in the related fields of organisational behaviour, sociology and economics. Indeed, since the early 1970s an increasing number of disciplines have utilised the concepts of strategy and strategic choice to explain the behaviour of agents or actors in exchange relationships; and a distinct field of strategy studies had emerged by the end of the 1970s (Rumelt, Schendel and Teece 1994). Within economics and political science, the concept of strategy has been most rigorously presented by game theory (Kreps 1990 and Axelrod 1984). Organisational behaviour has constructed a concept of strategy around the study of management (Bracker 1980). Sociology has also developed theories of strategic choice to analyse a diverse range of social behaviour from household strategies to strategies of the state (Crow 1989). In contrast, business historians have been concerned with strategy as a concept to explain the behaviour of the firm as a ‘nexus of contracts’ consisting of an amalgam of market transactions and bureaucratic resource allocation (Chandler 1977 and Williamson 1979). Some aspects of these approaches will be reviewed here as useful constructs for the development of a theory of union strategy.

The problem of distilling a coherent definition of strategy is, however, a crucial problem within the strategy literature. In other disciplines the concept of strategy is marked by divergence and ambiguity, and has been used to explain contrasting behavioural patterns (Zan and Zambon 1993). This clearly creates difficulties for a straightforward appropriation and application of this approach to the study of union behaviour. At least three fundamental problems can be identified. First, how the concept of strategy is defined
in the first place; second, how decision-making at different levels of the organisation form integrated strategies; and third, the development of a strategy construct which is capable of being operationalised in empirical research. Notwithstanding these problems, the contribution of the field of strategy does offer a helpful starting point for a theory of union behaviour, and is, therefore, reviewed briefly (Larouche and Audet 1993).

Defining Strategy

A strategy can be defined as a set of decision making and behavioural processes within organisations directed at securing objectives. Mintzberg, for example, defines strategy as ‘a pattern in a stream of decisions’; where ‘a decision is defined as a commitment to action, usually a commitment of resources’ (Mintzberg 1978). Further, strategic choice approach implies actors will have some capacity or discretion to make choices within constraints set by the environment in which organisations operate. The strategy literature has focused on how these environmental and organisational factors interact to influence strategic outcomes. Despite this deceivingly simple definition, the strategy literature is plagued with definitional problems and conceptual fuzziness (Thomas and Mark, 1993). It is widely accepted that three conceptualisations of strategy have been used to describe decision making and behaviour of organisations: explicit or planned strategy, implicit or emergent strategy, and interpretative or normative strategy (Chaffee 1985, Johnson and Scholes 1993, Hax and Majluf 1991 and Rumelt, et al. 1994).

Explicit strategy is best conceptualised and defined by game theory which views strategy as ‘a complete plan of action that describes what a player will do under all possible circumstances’ (Davis 1993). Thus all possible contingencies (that is, other players possible responses and the respective pay-offs of alternative actions) are explicitly established prior to agents’ making decisions and taking action (Kreps 1990). Strategy is distinguished from other decisions/actions in that strategic choices are made under conditions of uncertainty and interdependence between organisations (Camerer 1994). In organisational analysis, following the work of Chandler and others, explicit strategic decision making refers to decision making that is long term in nature and involves plans for purposive action within organisations. This long range planning and decision-making usually refers to explicit decisions or deliberate actions initiated at the corporate level of the organisation (Chandler 1962, Andrews 1980 and Hax and Majluf 1991).

This may be contrasted with an implicit or emergent strategies, which only become apparent or emerge over time, and after social actors’ behaviour has been observed
Implicit strategy is seen as incremental, and the result of adaptive learning as expectations change with experience. In contrast to explicit strategy models, empirical studies have found inconsistencies between long range planning decisions made within organisations (intended strategy) and actual or realised strategy, particularly given problems associated with limited individual actor volition in the context of organisational complexity, constrained organisational cognitive capacities, and uncertain and fluid environmental contexts in which organisations formulate strategies (Mintzberg 1973 and 1979 and Zan and Zambon 1993). Strategy was also often found to be the product of less conscious decision making and actions, and the outcome of political and opportunistic behaviour within organisations (Johnson and Scholes 1993, 38-39). This model, like the explicit strategy model, relies on a distinction between decisions and actions which are significant and those that are routine and consequential. Streeck, for example, defined implicit strategy when he differentiated strategic choices from routine decision making as decisions which resulted in fundamental change ‘in the identities, the structures of, and the institutionalised relations between, social actors’ (Streeck 1987, 283).

The third definition evident in the strategy literature is the concept of interpretative or normative strategy. Interpretative strategy relates to the role and functions which corporate culture and ‘symbolic management’ play in the creation of incentive mechanisms within organisations. Rather than focusing on actual behavioural outcomes, the interpretative strategy model concentrates on the role of normative symbols within organisations which form the basis for legitimising actions subsequently taken (Chaffee 1985 and Cauwenbergh and Cool 1982). To this extent, it is concerned with establishing what behaviour within organisations should be rather than actual behaviour, and with exploring how normative models are legitimised within the organisation.

Levels of Strategy and the Problem of Strategic Coherence.

The second problem faced in constructing a viable construct of strategy relates to the issue of the level at which decision making occurs and behaviour within organisations is observed. Organisational strategy models have been operationalised at three levels: the corporate level, the business level, and the operational (or functional) level, with higher level strategies being more global in orientation and informing more specific strategies formulated at lower levels of the organisation (Hofer and Schendel 1978 and Johnson and Scholes, 1993: 11-12). Thus, the corporate level acts as a forum for strategic planning,
while business and functional level strategies consist of operational mechanisms and tactics for strategic implementation (Hambrick 1980 and Galbraith and Schendel 1983).

The importance of identifying levels of strategy lies in the possibility of strategic ambiguity or inconsistencies between levels, and its role in contributing to strategic inertia within organisations. This also makes so-called generic strategies or coherence in an organisation’s strategy, difficult to identify in practice (Nath and Sudharshan 1994). In terms of our analysis of union strategy, similar levels may be identified as the national (or federal) branch, the bargaining (or functional) level, and workplace level strategies. This distinction between these levels of strategy and the problem of strategic coherence will be considered in more detail below in the discussion on the nature of union strategies.

**Dimensions of Strategy**

Strategy research has identified a number of components which make up what have been termed generic strategies (Hax and Majluf 1991: 83). While different models focus on different dimensions, a generic strategy can be seen to consist of three key dimensions in particular. First, strategies will be linked to goals or objectives of the organisation. ‘Strategic fits’ will necessarily be made contingent on the business objectives adopted by organisations. Such goals may take any one or a configuration of a set of objectives which include profit maximisation, sales maximisation, rate of growth, corporate citizenship, organisational stability, target product market, and so forth (Hax and Majluf 1991: 82). These goals are in turn pursued through a range of strategic options. Business strategy literature usually distinguishes between a range of cost minimisation and product differentiation strategies adopted by different types of organisation. Each of these will require differentiable strategic choices to be made from a given choice set (Hammond 1994: 122). Thus, a further dimension of strategic choices to be identified is the range of strategic options – or methods – employed in various functional aspects of an organisation’s activities. Third, strategic options will also consist of a configuration of tactics or sub-strategies used to perform specific tasks within organisations, such as solving incentive problems (agency problems), ensuring adequate and unbiased information flows, and limiting the scope for opportunistic behaviour by subordinates vested with authority and strategic implementation, and so forth (for example, Hammond 1994 and Hendry 1993: 36-37). Thus, three key dimensions of strategy are identifiable: goals, strategic options and tactics or sub-strategies. As will be evident from the following discussion, these three elements, along with identifying levels of strategy, have been
central to the development and operationalisation of the concept of strategy in industrial relations theory.

3. THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGY IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS THEORY

The concept of strategy is also familiar to industrial relation theory. The publication of Braverman’s *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1974) initiated a major industrial relations research agenda still evident today in labour process literature (see Bray and Littler 1988). As well as re-orienting attention away from the macro-institutions of job regulation to the organisation of work, it also spawned a new interest in management and union behaviour in the process of bargaining and workplace relations. The labour process literature attempted to establish as a universal proposition the view that management organised work and production to maximise the extraction of surplus value for the purpose of making profit and capital accumulation. This, he argued, was most effectively achieved through strategies associated with the division of labour and the continual deskilling of work. Researchers who followed Braverman have thus been primarily concerned with the study of management strategy at the workplace. While earlier labour process theorists had assumed management adopted explicit strategies in the workplace, revisions have seen the concept of management strategy develop into what is more appropriately associated with an implicit strategy approach in which strategy is seen as evolutionary in nature (see for example, Littler 1983 and Bray and Littler 1988).

From these more radical origins mainstream industrial relations scholars have also employed the concept of strategy to analyse fundamental changes in the employment relationship which emerged over the last decade or so. In this tradition the tendency has been to conceptualise strategy as consisting of both explicit and implicit strategy. This dominant approach has been most fully developed by Kochan, McKersie and Capelli (1984). Also see Kochan, Katz and McKersie 1986). Kochan et al. suggest that the use of the concept in other fields creates two problems for industrial relations. First, in other areas, notably management theory, the firm (or management) is seen as the exclusive agent of strategy. Whereas industrial relations, with its pluralistic assumptions, places equal emphasis on the role of other social actors (or groups of actors) within the industrial relations system as agents of strategy (unions and the state in particular), each being
interdependent on the other. That is, strategic choices are contingent on the expectations each of the actors holds about the strategic decisions of other actors involved in that exchange relationship.

A second concern raised by Kochan et al. is that most of this literature that defines strategy in other disciplines/fields of study:

*focuses on the processes of forming strategy rather than the actual contents or outcomes associated with strategies. While we are not uninterested in the process of strategy formulation, a complete industrial relations theory should be capable of relating both the process of and content of strategy making to the goal attainment of all the actors* (Kochan et al. 1984: 21, emphasis in original).

While it is not clear whether Kochan et al.’s objections to how the concept of strategy has been used elsewhere are sustainable (see for example Hax 1984), if more than one actor is able to make strategic choices, then it follows all possible choices need to be accommodated by the theory. Further, strategic formulation must be framed as a rational choice in that it is directly related to the aims that the strategic actors are attempting to realise. Notwithstanding the recognition of these problems, somewhat disappointingly, Kochan et al. fail to provide an unambiguous theory of strategic choice. Most significantly, they fail to consider the process of strategy formulation at all. In this context, Kochan and others have researched *outcomes* of strategic choices at the expense of a consideration of the strategy formulation process. Without regard to this process it is difficult to sustain the contention that much of what they consider strategy, is in fact strategic in nature at all (Lewin 1987). As Lewin maintains, unless all strategic alternatives and the process of strategy formulation are made explicit, then, the concept of strategy becomes vacuous as, *ex post* , any decisions and actions taken may be labeled as strategic (also see Hyman 1987). This may be said of strategies irrespective of whether they are explicit or implicit in nature.

Despite these problems, a closer look at the strategic choice model proposed by Kochan et al. suggest some important issues which parallel those explored in the previous section. Building on the work of Dunlop, they construct a model of strategy consisting of essentially three components: the external environment, the bargaining structure and

---

4 This notion of strategic interdependence is evident in management and organisational behaviour literature, but refers to strategic decisions being made in areas of corporate and business strategy. Thus the interdependency of decision making is inter-firm in nature (see Barney, 1994).
processes, and bargaining outcomes. This model is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1. The bargaining structure and process consists of relations between management/firm and union/worker at three levels: the strategic level, the bargaining level, and the workplace level. The strategic level consists of the decisions and actions made by both unions and management concerning ‘the strategies, values, structures, and other organisational features that influence collective bargaining and industrial relations’ (Kochan and Katz 1988). These are, therefore, decisions and actions which determine the basic or fundamental structure of relations between management and unions. The collective bargaining or functional level concerns the actual processes which make up the behaviour of bargaining and exchange between management and unions. These processes will usually revolve around the utilisation of tactical weapons such as negotiations, industrial actions, strikes and so forth. The workplace level, as the term suggests, consists of relations between employees, unions (often shop-floor representatives) and management in the workplace. Interactions at this level are often shaped by the constraints established at the strategic and bargaining levels. These include the administration of agreements, and the determination of what Edwards and Scullion (1982) term the ‘work-effort bargain’.

The external environment forms the context in which relations between management and unions at all three of these levels are determined, particularly the range of choices that are open to each of the parties in the pursuit of their respective organisational goals. These contextual variables include the state of the economy, the nature of industry and product markets, technological choices in production, and so forth. These variables will clearly affect employment relations at all three levels of the system. They will, for example, influence the priority given to particular goals pursued by each of the parties, which in turn influence the set of strategic choices open to them. Similarly these factors will affect the organisational structure of both unions and firms and be a major determinant of bargaining structures.

The third component relates to the bargaining outcomes and goal attainment of the parties. Kochan et al. begin from the assumption that goals and goal attainment drive the strategies of the parties. That is to say, the extent to which goals are attained will drive the decisions of either unions or firms to change the strategies employed in bargaining. The extent to
which goals are attained will act as a feedback mechanism to both the external environment and the bargaining structure and process. For example, where any of the parties are dissatisfied with outcomes, they will seek to influence the environment in which they make choices. The geographical shift in investment in new plant and technology from the north to the south, for example, is identified as a major source of change in US industrial relations by Kochan et al., and the result of employer dissatisfaction with bargaining outcomes (Kochan et al. 1986, 72-75).

A number of important aspects concerning the nature of strategy are evident from the framework utilised by Kochan et al. First, the identification of goals, strategic choice (or options), and tactics as key aspects of strategy and strategy implementation. Second, the identification of levels at which strategic actions are evident, albeit different analytical levels to those identified in the organisational strategy literature reviewed above. Third, both explicit and implicit strategies are identified as evident in industrial relations. Explicit strategies are identified as consisting of strategic planning to relate goals and methods of goal attainment at the strategic level; and implicit strategies are identified through the influence of changes in goals and the extent of goal attainment on both bargaining and the external environment. These components can be appropriated to model union strategies.
However, the approach taken here will necessarily deviate from the approach taken by Kochan et al. in some respects. To begin with, a notable exclusion from their framework is an explicit inclusion of the role of institutions and institutional change on both the structures of organisations and their goals and strategic choices. This is despite the fact that government is identified as a key actor,\(^5\) and considerable effort is devoted to a discussion of the influence of government on goal formation and the strategic choices open to the parties (Kochan and Katz 1988: 455-74 and Kochan 1986: 13-18). Conceivably, government can be seen as having both a significant influence on the external environmental, and an actor which has its own goals and interests. This is a conception of the role of government developed explicitly in the theories of the state (see Crouch 1993). Given the centrality of institutions and institutional change to the issues explored in industrial relations research, as well as the prominence of the state as an actor within the Australian system, this will need to be developed more explicitly. A second problem with the framework developed by Kochan et al. is that it relates primarily to bargaining strategies at the functional level. This is a problem evident in other approaches employed to model industrial relations (and union) strategy (Clegg 1976, Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfield and McKersie 1994 and Walton and McKersie 1991). The analysis of strategy within the human resource management paradigm is also considered to be deficient for the purposes of this study given their focus on management strategy at the functional level of organisations, and almost complete failure to analyse the role of unions in determining the structure and outcomes of workplace and employment relations (see, for example Blyton and Turnbull 1992: 1-15). The approached adopted here will be more consistent with the approach of Crouch who explores strategic options other than bargaining (Crouch 1979: 159-188, 1982: 75-119 and 1993: 23-49).

While this brief survey points to a failure of industrial relations theory to construct an adequate theory of strategy, in doing so it also points to three essential issues which need to be addressed in a model of union strategy: first, the nature of a strategy itself; second, the dimensions of strategic alternatives open to unions to voice and realise their objectives; and third, the nature of the strategy formulation and implementation process.

---

\(^5\) See Kochan and Katz (1988, p. 1). Government is defined by Kochan and Katz as encompassing ‘(1) the local, state and federal political processes, (2) the government agencies responsible for passing and enforcing public policies that affect industrial relations, and (3) the government as the representative of the public interest.’ (p. 4).
4. THE NATURE OF UNION STRATEGIES

The concept of strategy in behavioural theories of unions does not have a long tradition. However, to suggest that early theorist of the labour movement ignored this aspect of unionism would be an inaccurate description of union theory as it has developed over the last century and more. The Webbs for instance, in their foundation study of British unions were vitally interested in identifying characteristic modes of behaviour pursued by unions. They identified three key methods which unions utilised in the pursuit of their objectives: union rule or unilateral regulation, collective bargaining (which included arbitration), and legal enactment (Webb and Webb (1902 and 1911[1894]). In the US, the so-called Wisconsin School undertook extensive case study research on what Commons termed union ‘practice’, ‘policy’ and ‘activities’, most evident in the trade or collective agreement (Commons 1967[1905]). Other similar studies of specific union campaigns or goals can also be identified from the same period (for example, Hardman 1949[1928]). Later, labour movement theorists such as Hoxie and Tannenbaum were interested in how unions transformed collective interests into collective benefits through bargaining and related tactics (Hoxie 1919 and Tannenbaum 1947). 

Turner’s classic study of the English cotton industry unions investigated the relationship between union structure and policy (Turner 1962). However, these theorist, perhaps with the exception of the Webbs and Turner, made only limited attempts to develop any theoretical constructs to analyse union strategies and the processes by which such policies were developed. At best, they remained unsophisticated and partial.

However, having suggested that many of these earlier studies were incomplete and limited, the use of the term ‘strategy’ in union theory does not represent the beginnings of a rigorous analysis and conceptualisation of union activities. A number of studies can be cited which consider in detail many of the issues now considered under the rubric of strategy. For example, studies by Boraston, Clegg and Rimmer (1975) and Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel (1978), which explore workplace union and shop steward behaviour in the UK, represent important analyses of union strategy at the workplace level that were

6 ‘The world of union activity ... has remained curiously opaque in the theoretical literature’ (see Gardner, 1989, p. 49).

7 Indeed, Tannenbaum can be seen as providing an early expression of the exit-voice hypothesis developed more fully by Freeman and Medoff almost forty years later: ‘The trade union leader not merely symbolizes the existence of a group already forged but also expresses its grievances derived from the common experience’, and: ‘Monopoly is the child of competition. monopoly, or a persistent tendency toward monopoly, is the logical consequence of a free market, either in industry or labour... Trade unionism is often monopolistic, restrictive, arbitrary, often at war with itself, costly, and in contradiction of all the theories of a free and unrestricted market.’ See Tannenbaum (1947, 170 and 176 respectively).
both conceptual and empirical in orientation. An earlier US study by Barbash (1956) provides a thorough investigation of ‘the practice of unionism’ at various levels of union organisation, which include conscious pattern-bargaining strategies adopted by many US unions.

More recent research which uses an explicit model of union strategy have generally developed in response to the decline in union influence on industrial relations outcomes. This analysis of unions has been specifically concerned with the decline in union membership and an apparent strategic inertia, or inability of many unions to change their strategic orientation in the face of unfavorable changes in the environment in which they function. Thus, the primary concern of these studies has been to explore how unions can orchestrate shifts in their activities to restore their position in labour markets and in the workplace through the sue of strategic planning (Heckscher 1988, Jacobs 1994, Lawler 1990, Murray and Reshef 1988 and Weil 1994). These theories have generally been concerned with linking four aspects of union decisions making and activities: union goals, methods and tactics, and the level at which strategy is formulated and implemented. Where this has not been the case, and a range of other dimensions have been included, it will be argued here that these can be reduced to these four factors. The discussion will proceed by considering three questions. First, identifying ideal-type union strategies. Second, what are the dimensions of strategy posited by alternative researchers? Third, how are these conceptualisations of union strategy inadequate?

**What Type of Strategy: Explicit or Emergent?**

In the formulation of their functional activities unions will, like business organisations, face choices concerning modes of action aimed at realising their objectives. Gardner defines a union strategy as ‘a plan of action or a method of achieving particular goals, ... characteristic means by which a union attempts to implement policy and achieve its goals.’ (Gardner 1989: 52-55. Also see Gardner 1986). Union strategies, she asserts, are unlikely to be ‘consciously articulated or explicitly selected.’. Rather, a union strategy:

> is an unconscious accumulation of decisions about tactics and methods which gradually consolidates into a consistent and regular way of putting programs and policies into effect ... [It] will be, in general, the result of accretion of experience; an unconscious but customary practice .... [U]nions satisfice, maintaining a strategy as

---

8 For an exception to this observation see Child, Loveridge and Warner (1973), Donaldson and Warner (1974) and Warner (1975).
long as it provides some degree of success or stability (Gardner 1989: 52-55, emphasis added).

This view has previously been advanced by Crouch, who characterises union strategy as the product of conflicts over the priority of different goals, uncertainty, and lack of knowledge about the environment in which they operate:

*Union goal-seeking is typically... cautious, unadventurous, occasionally taking an aggressive plunge forward where it seems that something can safely be achieved. And it is an approach which suits the logic of workers' situation: many of the factors are unknown to them; much has to be taken on trust; their position is, always, one of subordination to capital and fear of bumping against a rigorous demand curve for labour (Crouch 1982: 138).*

To the extent that unions have adopted a strategic approach, evident in active long range planning, this found this to be a relatively recent phenomena, dating to the long range planning model adopted in 1987 by the ACTU in Australia (ACTU 1987); a view consistent with the observations made of union movements elsewhere. (See, for example, Lawler 1990, Murray and Reshef 1990 and Weil 1994). In this respect, Lawler’s (1990: 21) conceptualisation of union strategy as a ‘latent construct’ is a useful perspective. However, previous studies point to the existence of longer range or conscious strategic planning prior to this period. For example, Quinlan and Lever-Tracy’s (1990) analysis of early union strategies towards immigration and immigrant workers in Australia suggests union strategy did in part reflect conscious decisions relating to control of labour supply. Studies in the US and the UK similarly suggest a tendency for some degree of longer range planning at the workplace and bargaining level. Notwithstanding these examples, Gardner’s observations do, on the whole, reflect the vast majority of union experience with strategy formulation and implementation. At best, strategy can be seen as falling to some degree between these two extremes, a possibility that is likewise suggested in the management strategy literature discussed previously. To the extent that emergent strategies are more descriptive of the strategic orientation of most unions, strategies will be expected to be more evident in actual behaviour rather than explicit pronouncements by unions at the national level for implementation at the bargaining and workplace levels.

**Models of Union Strategy.**

---

9 For the US see Barbash (1956) and for the UK see Boraston, Clegg and Rimmer (1975).
Gardner (1989: 52-53) has argued a union’s strategy ‘is the sum of a series of decisions’ concerning ‘a consistent and regular way of putting programs and policies into effect.’ This view of the concept of strategy has been typical of most theories of union strategy. Although it is possible to distinguish between union types on the basis of these decisions, Child et al. (1973: 74) has argued that the degree of variation which is likely to be observed within these classifications provide ‘a strong argument for moving towards a framework of analysis in which union characteristics are treated as dimensions’ (emphasis added). Here, the models of union strategy proposed by Gardner, and Quinlan and Lever-Tracy will be discussed, each adopting its own set of dimensions of union strategy. However, as will become evident, each has shortcomings and require reconsideration. This issue has already been foreshadowed by two observations. First, it was previously suggested the approach taken here will be to view unions strategy as consisting of four main elements: union goals, methods, and tactics, and the level at which strategies are formulated and implemented. This conceptualisation is sympathetic with the literature drawn from organisational behaviour and the field of strategy. Second, it was anticipated that where strategy was viewed as incorporating alternative dimensions, these approaches could effectively be reduced to these four elements.

In a study of union bargaining campaigns conducted by two unions with predominantly female membership, Gardner (1989) develops a model of union strategy which consists of eight discrete decisions or dimensions: (i) the sphere in which union action is concentrated: political versus industrial; (ii) the level of negotiations: centralised or decentralised; (iii) the nature of membership and leadership involvement: active or passive; (iv) the nature of union methods; unilateral job regulation, bilateral regulation (collective bargaining), arbitral regulation, and political action; (v) the range of industrial tactics used (‘the common proxy for union militancy’): broad to narrow; (vi) the relationship of union strategies with those of other unions: isolated/cooperative and conflictual/integrated; (vii) the position of a union in union campaigns: follower or leader; and (viii) the nature of union values: autonomous leadership action, united leadership and rank and file action, or autonomous rank and file action. This typology of decisions is shown in Figure 2.

---

10 While Gardner’s model reflects the institutional specifics of the Australia case from which she draws, the critique of her model focuses on the conceptual foundations. It is noted here that institutional arrangements will be reflected in the costs and benefits, and therefore the incentives, associated with certain strategic choices.
However, this approach to analysing strategy is inadequate for two reasons. The first relates to whether each of these decisions are in fact discrete. This argument can be put forward in a number of respects. To begin with, the choice of policy arena and union method could be viewed as the same decision, with unilateral regulation, collective bargaining, and arbitration being three subtypes of a policy in the industrial arena, while the political arena consisting of political action. In other words, the choice of method is also a simultaneous choice of policy arena; they are the in effect the same decision and cannot be seen as analytically distinct. It can also be argued that an overlap between the choice of union values and the choice of leadership and membership involvement creates a similar problem. Autonomous rank and file action for instance, will imply a more diffused strategy involvement by rank and file members rather than concentrated leadership control over strategy implementation. Again, these two decisions are in effect one and the same dimension.

FIGURE 2: Gardner’s Model of Union Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DECISION</th>
<th>OPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i.  Policy Arena</td>
<td>Industrial ←------------------------→ Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Level of Negotiations</td>
<td>Centralised ←----------------→ Decentralised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii Membership &amp; Leadership Involvement</td>
<td>Concentrated ←----------------→ Diffused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Union Method</td>
<td>Autonomous ←→ Collective ←→ Arbitration ←→ Political Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Range of Tactics Used</td>
<td>Narrow ←------------------------→ Broad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi. Relationship to Other Unions</td>
<td>Isolated-Integrated ←----------------→ Conflictual-Cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii Sequence of Activities</td>
<td>Follower ←------------------------→ Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii Union Values</td>
<td>Leadership ←→ United Action ←→ Autonomous Action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The second criticism relates to whether all of these dimensions can be viewed as ‘decisions’ or choices which are made in any real sense by a union. In other words, can a union be said to exercise any discretionary control over all of these dimensions, or are they
determined by factors beyond union control? This issue may be illustrated by reference to two examples. First, the decision of whether a union is a leader or a follower cannot be said to be a decision or choice made by union leaders. Rather it is a consequence of a range of factors beyond the control of union decision makers, including strategic position within a production process, numerical strength, economic factors and so forth. Second, union values are likewise not subject to discretionary choice; values are more appropriately viewed as the product of both a response to environmental factors and composition of membership. This view is shown in Hoxie’s (1924) typology of trade union behaviour based on the ‘consciousness of the work group.’ Union values, he contended, are rooted in work group consciousness created by the nature of the job or industry from which a union draws its members. His study has been reinforced by others which explore the relationship between a union as organisation and its members as individuals (Barling, Fullagar and Kelloway 1992). Thus, while Gardner’s typology points to useful ways of modelling the dimensions of strategy by focusing on the range of methods and tactics to be used, it cannot be said to be satisfactory given the significance of the criticisms that have been made here. When these criticisms are taken into account, this typology by and large collapses into two of the three dimensions posited above: methods and tactics; as well as the level at which strategy is formulated and implemented.

An alternative model of union strategy has been advanced by Quinlan and Lever-Tracy. They analyse the strategic responses of four Australian unions to the effects of immigration on established union strategies. They suggest:

*The notion of industrial strategy used here refers to different modes of bargaining. The concept of union strategy used here hinges on the distinction between centralised methods and decentralised methods. The former gives high priority to arbitral or other centralised dealings with employers, sees strikes and mass meetings largely in terms of ritual protests, accords a strong role to union leadership and advocacy, and is generally associated with a centralised union government with strict limitations being placed upon the independence of the shop stewards. In contrast the decentralised syndrome emphasises local bargaining (often in the context of broader campaigns), sees autonomous strike action as a useful sanction, endorses strike action in the context of arbitration (which is regarded no more that a basis for further claims) and sees rank and file solidarity rather than advocacy skills.*
of union leaders as the real source of union power. It is typically associated with a less centralised form of union government (Quinlan and Lever-Tracy 1988: 31).

Quinlan and Lever-Tracy model union strategy using five dimensions: (i) the centrality of arbitration or bargaining; (ii) attitudes to semi-autonomous strikes; (iii) the role of union leadership: rank and file representatives or leaders; (iv) the role of shop stewards and shop committees (independent or dependent); and (v) the centrality of union government. This is shown in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3 The Quinlan and Lever-Tracy Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>OPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Centrality of Arbitration &amp; Negotiations</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Attitudes to Semi-Autonomous Strikes</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. The Role of Leadership</td>
<td>Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. The Role of Shop Stewards &amp; Committees</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Centrality of Union Government</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Constructed from Quinlan and Lever-Tracy (1988).

This model, which is based on a dichotomy between centralised and decentralised modes of bargaining, points to some important aspects of a strategy. The first of these concerns the level at which a strategy is to be employed. This is indicated by rank and file and leadership involvement, relative shop-floor inactivity *vis-à-vis* independent action, and reliance on strong central union government with the locus of industrial activity at the national level. Again, however, some problems with these strategic dimensions are apparent. First, the relationship hypothesised between arbitration and centralism (and its associated workplace level characteristics) may not be so clear cut. For example, a union could conceivably adopt an arbitral strategy pursued at a centralised level along with strong shop-floor activity. Second, and consistent with the preceding observation, this simple dichotomy ignores the possibility of a union pursuing a multi-level bargaining strategy. Thus the dichotomy between centralised and decentralised syndromes creates an inaccurate picture of strategic possibilities and outcomes, and hides sources of strategic variation between unions. Third and finally, Quinlan and Lever-Tracy were concerned exclusively with *industrial* strategies, whereas both political and industrial options from which unions choose need to be incorporated in a broader understanding of union strategic choices. However, it must be recognised that the purposes of their model was to analyse union strategies in response to increasing migrant employment. To this extent, the final
criticism relates to the broader purposes of this study which, therefore, require a broader conception of union strategy.

5. DIMENSIONS OF UNION STRATEGY
Having reviewed the major studies in industrial relations and union theory which have adopted a strategy framework, and noted their respective strengths and weaknesses, this section will develop a model of union strategy. A key problem previously identified concerned the ambiguity which surrounds the dimensions of union strategy. While the above discussion has criticised all of the major contributions that have constructed working definitions of union strategy, it was nevertheless suggested they cannot be dispensed with completely. Each model highlights important dimensions of union behaviour which need to be incorporated into a general model of union strategy. More specifically, these theories suggest union methods and tactics will need to be incorporated as basic dimensions of union strategy. This view is supported by the strategy literature reviewed in Section 3. Further, the level at which strategy is formulated and implemented was also identified as an important aspect of strategic choice.

A further dimension suggested as important in the strategy and organisational behaviour literature was that of goals or objectives. However, Gardner (1989: 55) concludes: ‘the notion of a strategy formulated to achieve a particular set of goals is untenable’, as the empirical evidence of her research ‘indicated that the unions’ strategies remained unchanged for decades and were applied in a variety of campaigns from equal pay to standard award matters and staffing issues.... Union strategy is a way of implementing unions’ policies largely irrespective of the particular objective being pursued’.

This study will, notwithstanding Gardner’s conclusions, incorporate aims as a dimension of union strategy. It is argued that there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to do so. To begin with, objectives were included as an important aspect of the strategic choice model developed by Kochan et al. Similarly Quinlan and Lever-Tracy (1990) found that a union’s strategic orientation altered as union re-prioritised their goals in the face of the changing composition of membership. Indeed, a strategic fit between methods employed and goals will clearly be contingent on the nature of the goals that a union will attempt to pursue, and will influence the effectiveness of any strategy utilised (see Fiorito et al. 1991: 103-138). Consistent with the hypotheses and findings of business and organisational research, the goal or set of goals that are to be achieved will act as a constraint on the set of
alternative strategic choices available to individual unions. This is not, however, inconsistent with the observation that union behaviour display some strategic inertia, a characteristic of union strategy which was noted by other researchers discussed previously. This view also recognises that a union’s goals are not only many and various, but do not represent a stable configuration through time: as new issues gain prominence, old issues fall by the wayside, or aims that appear constant through time may be subject to a changing set of union priorities and composition of membership. Thus, consistent with the strategy literature, aims will be included as an important dimension of union strategy. The remainder of this section will consider each of the three dimensions in turn, as well as the dimension of levels of strategy.

Union Aims
Union aims are defined as the set of objectives or goals which a union seeks to realise. Theoretical perspectives on just what it is that unions attempt to achieve vary dramatically. In economic models, unions are usually assumed to act as monopolists, setting the wage rate unilaterally to ‘maximise the expected or total utility of its members, and allowing the employer complete discretion over employment’; or that unions and firms ‘bargain over wages and employment and reach an outcome efficient for them both’ (McDonald and Solow 1981: 896). This view, however, represents an untenable construction of union objectives for our purposes for a number of reasons. To begin with, while these simplifying assumptions may be useful or necessary for economic models, they cannot be viewed as consistent with the empirical evidence on the range of objectives that a union will be likely to pursue. Pencavel (1985: 223) argues that the pervasive use in economics of assumptions about a union objective function has:

\[\textit{not arisen because of persuasive evidence of the empirical relevance of these modeling assumptions, but because of the theoretical convenience of certain simplifying assumptions and because of their conformity with analogous assumptions in other areas of economics... In other words, it is ideology and the social aspect of economic inquiry – not science – that accounts for the similarity in much of the work on behavioral models of unionism.}\]

Indeed, Crouch (1982) has noted ‘a bewildering variety if union goals’ can be identified between which unions must at various times make either explicit or implicit choices:
For example, should a union try to increase its members’ scope for doing overtime work at premium rates, or should it press for the same work to be done by the employment of a larger number of workers? Should a union accept increases in managerial control and a reduction in manning levels in exchange for higher rates of pay... Even more frequently, an implicit choice has to be made: an increase in wages may be pursued even though it will lead to unemployment for some workers’ concerned; or an improvement in working conditions may mean that less is available for higher wages (Crouch 1982: 139).

Moreover, as well as the diversity of objectives, it has already been suggested above that a union’s objectives and preferences are likely to be intransitive over time. Therefore, a far more open ended consideration is required to develop an analysis of the behavioral dynamics of a given union, rather than a partial analysis that simply considers their impact on such things as economic outcomes. That is, it is necessary to look inside what Lewin and Feuille (1983: 345) refer to as the ‘black box’ of unionism and the range of union activities.

Various industrial relations and union theorists have distinguished between a range of types of union goals. Lange, Ross and Vanicelli (1982: 219-220) for example, have argued that unions are involved in a series of exchange relationships in the market and political arenas, with their members, employers and managers, the state, and political parties. The central exchange relationship being that between a union and its members or potential members. Lange et al. identify four types of goods or incentives, which unions offer to members in return for membership and support. First, material goods provided selectively by a union which include, amongst other things, shorter hours, work load or work intensity, other working conditions, as well non-pecuniary goods associated with grievance procedures and the provision of voice. Second, purposive, or ‘suprapersonal goals’, which are social in character but form part of the utility functions of individual members who deem the union at least one of the possible agents to promote these goals. While purposive goods may be subject to free-rider constraints given their social or non-rivalrous nature, Lange et al. suggest that they will form a significant component in the incentive system of unions, particularly where they are pursued in combination with other incentives. A third category of goods identified by Lange et al. are identity goods, which relate to the ability of individuals to ‘identify and to be identified with the set of principles and rights’ for which unions are constituted for, often expressed in a broader commitment to unionism itself. Fourth and final are sociability goods, or the ‘intangible rewards created by the act
of associating’ and the interpersonal social bonds which come from feeling part of a relatively small and defined group. To other actors in the system, unions also provide goods, such as compliance of membership, and additional mediational goods in the provision of voice and collective goods associated with bargaining. The capacity to provide such goods to actors within the system, other than members or potential members, are reciprocated by recognition and capacity to achieve goods demanded by members (Lange et al. 1982: 221-228 and Crouch 1982: 138-139).

This exchange model suggests unions also pursue a range of goals which extend well beyond the demands of membership. In terms of their exchanges with firms and the state, these goals may in fact be aimed at limiting the expression of certain goals on behalf of members. Crouch (1979: 124) notes that close state – union relations in particular are often predicated on the ability of unions to ensure wage restraint, and membership compliance and industrial peace. Further, exchanges with firms and the state will be aimed at the furtherance of organisational goals which are distinct from those of membership.

This dichotomy between membership and organisational goals has been a common theme in union theories. An influential attempt to locate unions within organisational theory by Child et al. (1973) distinguishes between administrative and representational rationality in the process of goal formation within unions. Representational rationality refers to the ideal of membership involvement in a union’s activities as a means of articulating their interests and providing adequate controls on bureaucratic and oligarchic tendencies. In contrast, administrative rationality is concerned with organisational efficiency in the process of goal implementation and the internal functioning of the union as an organisation. This rationality, which concerns decision-making within union bureaucracy and measures aimed at ensuring organisational survival and security, will at times be in conflict with representational rationality. Child et al. suggest such conflicting rationales will be reflected in contradictions ambiguities between union goals (Child et al. 1973: 77-79). However, the extent of conflict between these two organisational logics will be also subject to change and ambiguity. For example, strong organisation predicated on administrative rationality will clearly contribute to a union’s capacity to pursue goals which derive from its representational rationality. Thus, it is clear that, over time, concerns about goals will be subject to changing priorities and emphasis. The range of objectives that unions are potentially involved in is given in Figure 4. They range from organisational
objectives to broader concerns about social change, such as the distribution of wealth and opportunity, and include both procedural and substantive goals.

**Union Methods**

Crouch (1982: 139) contends: ‘A choice of strategy is not just a choice between goals, but a choice between goals set in the context of the means to secure them’ (emphasis in original). These means can be viewed as characteristic ways or methods of pursuing goals. The usual distinction is made between bargaining and political methods (Barbash 1956, Crouch 1977, Muller-Jentsch 1988), although Batstone and Gourlay (1986) have viewed corporatism as a ‘mixed strategy’, which incorporates both bargaining and political involvement. More recently Murray and Reshef (1988: 616-618) distinguish between two organisational paradigms of ‘values and action’ within unions: political and economic paradigms. The political paradigm ‘refers to actions aimed primarily at influencing national policy and legislation’ (p. 616), while the economic paradigm refers to efforts by unions to pursue the objectives through direct pressure on employers.

The dichotomy between these two methods describes the broad gamut of methods adopted by twentieth century union in industrialised countries. However, these broader paradigmatic views obscures two alternate union methods in a number of ways. First, they do not adequately describe the methods adopted by nineteenth century unions, particularly craft unions who tended to limit their use of both political actions and bargaining opting instead for the enforcement of union rules on employers unilaterally. This method has been most clearly described by the Webbs. Second, no paradigmatic distinction is made between bargaining and arbitration. In a number of national contexts (particularly Australia and New Zealand) arbitration has been central to the modus operandi of many unions, and will also need to be included. Traditionally, arbitration has been viewed by industrial relations and union theorists as a variant of bargaining (for example see Webb and Webb 1902 and Clegg 1979). However, the approach taken here will follow that of Brams (1990: 64-65), with collective bargaining and arbitration being viewed as distinct methods as: ‘Arbitration always forces a settlement’, irrespective of the decision rules or procedures adopted in arbitration.’

Following the Webbs and others, four archetypal union methods are identified as means of achieving objectives: unilateral regulation, bilateral regulation (collective bargaining), arbitration and political action. The use of unilateral regulation, which involves the imposition of union rules on firms, has already been identified as an important strategy for
nineteenth century unions, particularly craft unions (Boyer 1988), although few cases are
evident in more contemporary cases. *Bilateral regulation* or *collective bargaining* has
been identified as the natural method utilised by most twentieth century trade union
movements. As noted above, *arbitration*, (given its compulsory nature) must be viewed as
a separate and distinct mode of interest articulation and dispute settlement or method.
Variation in its usage and importance has been noted by a number of writers. Gardner
(1989), for instance, points out that unions will use arbitration at different stages of dispute
resolution: while some unions will in the first instance rely on arbitration with little
concern for extensive negotiations or bargaining (due to chilling and narcotic effects – for
a formal discussion see Farber and Katz 1979), other unions will favor the utilisation of
bargaining with arbitration as a last resort, or a means to resolve outstanding matters.11
The last method available to unions is that of *political action*, captured in its most pure
sense by Murray and Reshef (1988) in what they termed the political paradigm of union
values and action. Again, however, this may take a number of forms and be utilised to
varying degrees of intensity, ranging from irregular lobbying of politicians to more
structured and formal political exchange through corporatist arrangements.

**Union Tactics**

Union *tactics* – or what Fiorito et al. (1991) call *substrategies* – can be defined as
instruments for enforcing a given method, usually involving the imposition of some cost on
firms (or at least the credible threat of being able to do so) or the provision of some
incentive for firms and other agents to accede to union demands. Without some effective
threat of enforcing some preferred method, union ability to achieve objectives is clearly
limited. In this sense the imposition (or a threat of imposition) serves the function of
influencing each parties’ perceived utilities of choosing a particular method as a means of
realising its objectives (Crouch 1982: 75-86, Walton and McKersie 1991: 58 and Walton et
al. 1994: 257). A number of tactics are usually associated with union activities, such as
strikes and work bans, which are often viewed as an index of union militancy. However, a
much broader range of possible tactics can be identified, with certain tactics strongly
associated with particular methods: unilateral regulation is associated with instruments to
control the supply of labour and ensure that members adhere to union rules; collective
bargaining is associated with strike action; arbitration is associated with short strikes which
act as a signal to other parties, as well as advocacy and legal tactics rather than the relative
distribution of power between industrial combatants; and political action is associated with

---

11 This will depend on the nature of arbitration in place and the rules which govern its usage.
lobbying and political interest articulation, as well as demonstrations, and public meetings. Again, the range of tactics available to unions is set out in Figure 4.

The above outline of union strategic choices suggests the existence of four generic strategies, each of which is based on a given method. However, it is worth noting two limitations of this typology. First, considerable variation within each generic strategy emerges in terms of the level at which it is executed. For example, collective bargaining can be pursued at the workplace, industry or national level. Second, what may be termed ‘mixed strategies’ will clearly be more likely that ‘pure strategies’ which reflect the generic types. As was noted above, union have been ready to pursue a strategic mix dominated by one of the generic types, but which included use of each of the other types. In this respect, it is more useful to speak of patterns of strategy which are pursued by individual unions.

**Strategic Levels**

The fourth important aspect of strategy is identifying strategic levels. Paralleling the corporate, business and functional levels suggested by organisational strategy literature, Kochan *et al.* (1988) identified three levels of industrial relations strategy: strategic or corporate level, the functional or bargaining level, and the workplace level. Similar levels can be identified in the union strategy formulation and implementation process: the national branch level, the bargaining or functional level, and the workplace level. The first of these can be identified most clearly with recent attempts by unions to engage in corporate planning. It is at this level that goal priorities (to the extent that these are...
explicitly determined) and dominant patterns of strategy are developed. As has already been suggested, strategy considerations at the national level may be more accurately seen as implicit or emergent patterns rather than explicit in nature. The bargaining and workplace levels are the levels at which unions interact with firms and other organisations, with more diffused modes of operation and tactics being employed at the workplace. Furthermore, all three levels will be seen as important to some unions with strategy formulation and implementation distributed across all three levels.

The Nature of Unions Strategy Formulation

Having outlined the four dimensions of strategy to be incorporated into this model of union strategy, two points concerning the assumptions made in the following analysis remain to be discussed. The first concerns the status of identifiable generic strategies. From the above discussion, and the literature surveyed thus far, it is clear that four generic or ideal type union strategies can be identified, each associated with the four methods that a union may employ. However, it is assumed that in the process of empirical investigation, these four generic types will not always be evident as mutually exclusive strategic options. It is also expected that depending on the configuration of aims, methods and tactics, considerable variation in strategy will also be evident.

These observations suggest unions are more likely adopt ‘mixed strategies’ whereby a mix of these generic types are used. What will be identifiable, however, are dominant strategies or dominant patterns of strategy. Dominant strategies in this respect can be seen as analogous to what Murray and Reshef (1988) identified as organisational paradigms; while they suggest two, this model countenances the possibility of at least four. Furthermore, to the extent such approximations can be identified, it is anticipated that some variation will be evident. For example, while early white collar unions were often ready to engage in collective bargaining they were less willing to utilise strike tactics. Similarly, the dominant strategy associated with arbitration will not necessarily preclude the possibility of strike action. This observation does not, however, diminish the usefulness of the dimensions outlined above. As Child et al. (1973: 74) have noted the notion of dimensions implies some variation not suggested by static characteristics.

A second assumption concerns the rationality of union strategy and behaviour, an aspect which is either largely ignored or dealt with in an unsatisfactory manner by previous union theories. In economic theories, where rational behaviour forms an important foundation
for the study of behaviour, rationality is defined in terms of what Golden (1990: 8) has referred to as:

‘proper’ relationship between means and ends... [T]his means that actors engage in expected utility maximisation: in other words, given certain established preferences (“utilities”), they choose the course of action (or strategy) that they believe (thus “expected”) will give them the maximum degree of satisfaction. In this view, rationality is instrumental, formal, and procedural, not substantive (emphasis added).

This is to say with a given set of goals rational behaviour assumes agents will pursue strategies which maximise the realisation of these goals: strategy formulation and implementation would, therefore, be assumed to be rational. Nothing is assumed about the rationality associated with the goals pursued or priorities between goals. The rational behaviour assumption has been considered by both Lange et al. and Gardner in their analyses of union strategies.

In their study of divergent strategies taken by French and Italian unions after decades of parallel choices, Lange et al. cast the choice between possible strategies taken by unions as a cost – benefit analysis by leadership. In other words, they explained divergence in strategies between unions and union movements as the result of divergent costs and benefits associated with each strategic option. Gardner (1989: 53), on the other hand, objected to this view and contends this approach is flawed in that it ‘leads to an unnecessary post hoc attribution of ‘rationality’ and planning to union activity.’ Arguably it is this very process that Gardner implicitly finds, however, when she notes that union strategy develops as ‘an unconscious but customary practice’ (p. 53). Union strategies become customary as, in past experience, when unions utilised certain strategies on an ad hoc basis, they provided net benefits or goal attainment within acceptable cost limits. In other words, a union’s repeated use of a strategy arises because they become tried and proven to yield net benefits. Gardner identifies this as ‘satisficing behaviour’, which Simon (1991) has referred to as maximising behaviour within information constraints and cognitive limitations. Given the usual constraints of information, cognitive limitations of organisations and so forth, it is assumed here that unions behave rationally in the sense that strategies are employed for maximum effect.

12 For a exhaustive discussion of the use of the concept of ‘rationality’ in the social sciences see Lane (1992).
6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has developed a model of union strategy. It began with an exploration of its use in organisation analysis and industrial relations theory. From this critical evaluation, this paper developed a conceptual framework for analysing union strategy. The construct of union strategy outlined proposed consisted of three dimensions: aims, methods and tactics; and it was hypothesised that strategic choices were potentially developed at three levels: the national level, the bargaining or function level, and the workplace level. These dimensions allowed for the identification of four ideal type strategies. However, it was noted that a key strength of the model is the recognition in variations in the use of various tactics and methods. This, it was argued, generates identifiable strategic patterns or mixed strategies.

It was also argued that the nature of the union strategy formulation and implementation process has been viewed by some researchers as inconsistent with a rationale choice approach. This view was rejected. It was argued that the strategy formulation process is most appropriately modelled as consistent with models of rational behaviour, most notably models of constrained rationality in which unions employ an implicit cost-benefits approach to assess the efficacy of alternative strategies.

Although it has not been explored here, the conceptual framework should prove a useful construct for investigating a number of aspects of union strategy. The framework provides the basis on which specific patterns of union strategy can be identified, and for establishing the determinants of variation in strategies between individual unions. The conceptual framework developed here could also be employed for assessing the relationship between differing union strategies and union effectiveness, as well as exploring the relationship between union behaviour and workplace practices and outcomes.
References


WEBB, Sidney and Beatrice (1911[1894]) The History of Trade Unionism. London: Longman, Green and Co.