

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s the British offshore oil industry underwent a profound change of direction. This shift irrevocably altered the character of the production regime on the United Kingdom Continental Shelf (UKCS), and with that, transformed the investment strategies of two of Britain's biggest multinational companies, Shell and BP. In terms of corporate policy, the change of direction marked a new drive for market dominance by the UK oil majors within the European Union and a switch of investment priorities back towards the traditional overseas oil production bases that had been their staple prior to the 1970s. These changes were not limited in their impact to the oil industry itself. Because of the size of the industry and its linkages to the rest of the economy – over the past two decades the UKCS had absorbed between 10 and 20 per cent of all UK industrial investment – this transformation was of significance for the orientation of economic policy at governmental level.

This book investigates the crisis of industrial relations within the UKCS which precipitated these changes. This industrial relations crisis erupted after the world's worst offshore disaster, Piper Alpha in 1988, in which 167 oil workers died. The strikes which followed in 1989 and, more comprehensively, in 1990, were of a very special type. They did not immediately seek direct material gain. Rather, they questioned the totality of assumptions upon which the system of offshore production had been based: most fundamentally managerial authority and legitimacy in the area of health and safety.

By 1990 the overall death toll of the offshore industry since its inception had reached over 400. This made it the most dangerous industry in the UK. Piper Alpha exemplified one of the most unpalatable aspects of industrial production: the real human price to be paid for oil extraction. In the aftermath of Piper Alpha, many of the workforce mounted a challenge which rejected this price as having become unacceptably high.

The importance of this challenge was twofold. First, it demonstrated the circumstances in which a hitherto largely unorganized workforce in a non-union industry could become powerfully mobilized. Secondly, it revealed that even in such adverse circumstances labour has the potential to determine the course of events.