



“New Actors and Institutions in Australian and New Zealand Industrial Relations” Conference

Why is there a need to examine “new actor and institutions” in Australia and New Zealand?

It hardly needs to be said that the Australian labour market and its various legal and employment institutions have experienced significant change, and this is set to continue in 2006 with recent changes announced by the Howard Coalition government (WorkChoices). Industrial relations in New Zealand has also undergone profound change in recent years. While much of this change has been driven by wider global forces, there remains an important mix of localised ideological, political, economic and social factors to consider with respect to how industrial relations has been evolving in both countries. The purpose of this conference is to explore such developments and examine the various actors and institutions that are now playing or beginning to play an important role in the employment relationship.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that many studies in the field continue to focus on the traditional actors and institutions such as trade unions although they, along with employer associations and industrial/arbitral tribunals, appear to be somewhat in decline. While these actors and institutions remain important, what we continue to know relatively little about are the new actors and institutions that have emerged (and are emerging) as important players in the regulation of work. This remains an important oversight in the field of industrial relations. For example, what actors and institutions might now be occupying the ‘space’ once filled by trade unions, employer associations and arbitral bodies? The conference seeks to identify who these new actors and institutions are, explain the reasons for their emergence as well as highlight their specific role in regulating work and the employment relationship. To what extent these new actors and institutions have impacted (and are impacted by) the strategies of the traditional actors and institutions in industrial relations will also be explored.

The convenors are interested in attracting empirical papers from scholars in Australia and New Zealand that address such developments in terms of: (1) those that are genuinely ‘new’ actors/institutions in the region (e.g. non-union law firms, management consultants, Office of the Employment Advocate, the International Labour Organisation); as well as (2) actors and institutions hitherto neglected from traditional industrial relations analysis (e.g. occupational health and safety inspectors, agents in the sport, entertainment and recruitment industries, alternative dispute resolution processes, employee assistance programs, customers).

It is apparent that there will be cases both of new actors/institutions that are the result of legislative change (which suggests that some actors and institutions might assume a more ephemeral quality), and those of a more enduring nature such as community/network-type organisations and financial markets. The convenors will seek to strike a balance between these cases as well as between the genuinely new actors and institutions in the field and those that have existed for some time in the regulation of work but largely neglected by industrial relations scholars.