

Editorial

Welcome to *The Economics and Labour Relations Review* 18(1). This issue comes out in the weeks following the change of government in Australia in late November 2007. It consists of seven double-blind refereed articles that, taken together, provide a statement of record and an opportunity to take stock of several economic and industrial relations issues that have emerged in the past eleven and a half years, framed within a historical and international perspective. Among the issues facing the incoming government are the need to mobilise retirements savings in the face of demographic change, the need to repudiate xenophobic tendencies in public discourse, and the need to address labour market issues such as the skills shortage and industrial relations reform. These themes are pursued here through three 'mini-symposia'.

The first two articles have been worked up from papers given in July 2007 at a colloquium of superannuation researchers. They evaluate equity issues arising from twenty years of national retirement income and savings policies, and their tax treatment, in Australia and New Zealand. Parr, Ferris and Mahuteau jolt us into a recognition of the recency of superannuation access in Australia for many workers, and the serious ongoing disadvantage of women with family responsibilities, in terms of adequacy of retirement income. New Zealand has historically had a more adequate and gender-neutral non-contributory pension system, topped up by voluntary retirement savings schemes. St. John outlines a twenty-year experiment in that country, with a tax-neutral approach to superannuation and other forms of savings, and provides a critical assessment of the equity impacts of the 2007 retreat from tax neutrality.

The second 'mini-symposium' deals with union responses to the use of off-shore and migrant labour, both now and historically. In the first of the two articles, Penfold provides an international overview of how unions in Australia and overseas are currently grappling with the creation of global labour markets. Focusing particularly on the off-shoring of work involving information and communication technology, she argues that despite the difficulties of cross-border organising, some unions in the USA, Europe, Australia and India (as well as international organisations) are managing to build a global and inclusive approach to defending labour standards. The second article, by Gregson, argues that it is a mistake to see cross-ethnic solidarity as a recent development in the Australian labour movement. Gregson provides evidence from Western Australia, that in the period 1914–1934, there was a growing consciousness amongst mining industry workers (including returned soldiers) of the need to withstand attempts to foment racist exclusion of German and Southern European workers. The articles show unions (both now and then) as by no means free of xenophobia, but provide a nuanced account of past and present efforts within the labour movement to avoid 'divide and rule' management strategies.

In the context of the December 2007 re-integration of the Australian education and employment relations portfolios, the next three articles provide a benchmark against which to measure the task facing the incoming Australian government. In relation to skills shortages, Montague and Bessant argue that the Howard government was late in recognising the severity of the problem. Analysing the measures in the 2006 *Skills for the Future* package, they argue that these measures were at best 'too little too late' and at worst misdirected. In the industrial relations field, the incoming government has stated that it will phase out Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) but allow existing agreements to run their course. Amidst reports of a last-ditch effort by some employers to encourage individuals to take up AWAs before the new legislation comes into force, Sheldon and Kohn show how limited are the choices of employees in the bargaining of these agreements. Sheldon and Kohn use negotiation theory to pinpoint, and give novel concreteness to, the sources of power imbalance in bargaining between employers and individual employees. Firstly, they argue that the replacement of industrial awards by weak minimum legislative protections effectively weakens individuals' BATNA (best alternative to the negotiated agreement) and thereby erodes a precondition for effective bargaining. Secondly, by analysing the Howard government's web advice to individual workers on how to negotiate an AWA, the authors show that this advice set individuals up to negotiate against their own interests, through a systematic 'framing' of the context in terms of integrative (rather than distributive) bargaining. Finally, Fieldes overviews evidence of a growing power imbalance between employers and employees by analysing the findings of fourteen empirical studies undertaken since the 2005 WorkChoices legislation. Fieldes argues that WorkChoices was not ideologically driven, but had a material basis as an expression of employers' need to maintain profits through work intensification, flexible work times and long hours.

If this is so, there will be an ongoing and undiminished need for the *Australian Charter of Employment Rights*, edited by Bromberg and Irving, and reviewed here by Dabscheck.

Anne Junor
For the Editors