

# Introduction

Anyone who has experienced paid work in Australia over the past fifteen years will have noticed dramatic changes have occurred in the organisations where they have been working. This book examines some of these changes and the impact that they are having on peoples' lives. We are interested in explaining why these changes occurred, how they came about and what their consequences have been. In the final chapter we outline our ideas on how things could be managed better in the future.

In exploring these issues we have drawn on nearly ten years of commissioned research undertaken by ACIRRT. ACIRRT (pronounced ay-sert) is an acronym for the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training. The Centre is based at the University of Sydney, and earns its way in the world largely through contract research and training. Over the last ten years our research has been far reaching and has dealt with issues like wages, shift work, bargaining arrangements and enterprise agreements, part-time work, new training arrangements, migrants in the labour market, long-term unemployment, mature age workers, the youth labour market, and redundancy practices. Our work has taken us into a range of organisations in industries such as manufacturing, finance, hospitality, construction, mining, public administration and retailing. Throughout this book we draw on this research to illuminate what is happening in the Australian economy and in workplaces. It's important to appreciate that many of the changes we examine have been widespread: there are few workplaces where working arrangements have not been dramatically altered over the last decade and a half.

ACIRRT's approach in making sense of workplace change draws on the experiences and training of researchers with backgrounds in economics, sociology, law, history, education and industrial relations. This multi-disciplinary approach enables us to examine complex phenomena without being locked into a single disciplinary mind-set and the assumptions which go with it. Similarly, many of the materials and data presented in this book have been gathered using a range of research methodologies: surveys, focus groups discussions, in-depth interviews and case studies of organisations and industries. One of our great assets is a solid collection of independent data sets, many of them produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (the ABS). In this book we have also made extensive use of the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys (AWIRS) carried out in 1990 and 1995. Finally, we have been fortunate in drawing on our own extensive database of registered enterprise agreements, known as ADAM (Agreement Database and Monitor).

It's obvious that any book which examines social and economic change will give more attention to some issues and ignore others. The choices will depend in part on the interests of the authors and the framework they use. In our case, we have focused on the period since 1983. We've done this because during these years Australia underwent a major re-regulation of working practices and the arrangements that go with them. The institutions which had traditionally made the rules for regulating workplaces underwent major changes

and the legislation which dealt with bargaining between management and workers was also dramatically overhauled. We call this period of change *re-regulation*, not *de-regulation* (Buchanan and Callus 1993). Even at the end of the 1990s, there are just as many rules regulating work as there have always been. What has changed is that the interests and the institutions which had traditionally played a dominant role in making the rules have been sidelined or significantly marginalised.

The so-called ‘external’ third parties to the management-worker relationship—trade unions and industrial tribunals—have seen their role and influence change over the last decade. Unions have emerged from this period of enterprise level bargaining in a weaker position than they were before. The Federal industrial tribunal—the Australian Industrial Relations Commission—has had its interventionist wings severely clipped, and a rival institution established to oversee the new workplace contracts. Management, on the other hand, has seen its decision-making power in the workplace grow considerably. Most of the workplace changes which have taken place have been at the behest of management: their agenda and their interests have led the way. The new ‘rules’ at work are largely their rules.

In this book we focus on this shifting power relationship as it has influenced workplace outcomes. We are interested in how the tussle over rule making powers has affected the industrial landscape and the lives of the workforce. In so doing we deliberately use the term ‘industrial relations’. Some people now view the term as dated or unfashionable. They think ‘industrial relations’ reflects a narrow institutionalised view of the relationships that arise out of work and that it places an undue emphasis on the bargaining that takes place between management and unions. We see things differently. At its heart, industrial relations has always been about the ‘contested terrain’ (Edwards 1979) of working conditions: how much people are paid for their labour, how much and how hard people should work, and the security of their employment. While these are also the core industrial issues over which unions and management have always bargained, they are at the heart of the work relationship between management and all its workers, either as individuals or collectives. How these core matters are determined and the outcomes which flow from this are the central themes of this book.

In concentrating on earnings, hours and job security and the way these are determined we have made the decision not to cover the field of industrial relations exhaustively. There are certainly other important industrial relations issues, such as occupational health and safety, equal employment opportunity, training, best practice, recruitment, strategic management, job design, worker participation or empowerment. We acknowledge the importance of these issues but our decision to concentrate on the ‘core’ has been based on the constraints of book-length, the desire not to deal superficially with issues, and the fact that many of these issues have received considerable attention by researchers, policy makers and practitioners during the period under study. In a similar vein we have also chosen not to deal with particular groups of workers as separate themes. Throughout the book we focus on the impact of workplace change on women, on migrants, on mature age workers and on the blue-collar workforce; and concerns with equity are at the forefront of our minds. But our book is a thematic study in which the central argument requires us to focus on the historical context, the bargaining process, and the core issues of earnings, hours and job security.

We emphasise these core issues because they play such a central role in people’s working lives and feature prominently in the judgments they make about the quality of those

lives. While people may choose to trade away some aspects of their working lives for other 'benefits', increasingly people are being asked to compromise more and more of the central aspects of their work life for objectives which are never met. The sacrifices are often significant but the rewards—if they come—are invariably unfairly distributed. Organisations have generally become more efficient and competitive, but amongst the workforce there are very definite winners and losers emerging. For many workers the outcomes of a decade of workplace change have not been fair ones. The notion of fairness, however much it may appear to be 'value laden' or imprecise, lies at the ethical heart of industrial relations. This book seeks to find alternative ways to ensure that fairness in outcomes ranks just as highly as efficiency when it comes to understanding and identifying new approaches to workplace change.

