
Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining

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Introduction

In a volume of studies honouring Professor Russell Lansbury, readers might well be drawn to ponder changes in industrial relations over the 40 years that Russell has been writing and teaching in the field. In Australia, as with most market economies, this period has seen fundamental shifts in paid work, industry structure and the political-economy and gender orders in which employment relations had been set. The apparently endless economic boom after World War II proved to be more problematical than it seemed in the 1950s and 1960s, and the stable regimes of union-based collective bargaining proved to be less enduring than many had thought.

As part of these secular changes there was a remarkable transformation in bargaining and representation at work, and the influence of trade unions over those processes. In Australia, for most of the 20th century, collective bargaining or, more generally, the setting of minimum conditions through union-won 'awards' for particular industries and occupations, had been central to any understanding of the nature of the academic discipline, and to the social practice, of industrial relations. In few countries did the state act as radically to re-work the forms of labour market regulation as in Australia between 1996 and 2005. The century-old framework of labour regulation was transformed by a government intent on reducing union and arbitral intervention in favour of non-union and individualised agreement making.

In this chapter, we explore trade unionism and collective bargaining in the light of this general context. However, the immediate environment in which we are interested is a rather different one from that which has driven much industrial relations research in the last few years. This is because of the revamping of regulation by a Labor Party government from 2007. Here we reflect upon this current period, examining the ways in which the election of the federal Labor government and its *Fair Work Act 2009* have affected indus-

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that Australian unions have a greater residual capacity after years of difficulty than do their counterparts in comparable countries.

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