

More spin on Australia's new workforce



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For most of the 1990s, labour market rhetoric was dominated by the words 'flexibility' and 'deregulation'. But behind these buzz words, a contest raged about their meaning.

Talk to one side and the new world of work would feature innovative new workplace practices, win-win outcomes, higher wages and booming productivity. Listen to the other and demoralised workers would be forced into low-wage individual contracts and long working hours, regular unpaid overtime would become the norm, and job satisfaction, worker commitment and loyalty would collapse.

Which picture we accepted as accurate depended very much on our own particular experiences, and perhaps equally on our political perspectives. Despite the torrent of statistics on wage outcomes, on the quality of people's work and personal lives, and on the performance of industrial organisations, we are no closer to agreeing on what the workplace upheavals of the past decade were actually designed to produce. As ever, the view we get depends hugely on the place from which we look.

As we begin a new decade, a new variation on this theme seems to be emerging. After years of arguing over what labour market deregulation should be about, we are now seeing a major dichotomy in descriptions of the new workforce that has been spawned by it. Are the new Australian workers of the 21st century strong assertive people who are driving a hard bargain and forcing employers to concede generous rewards and job conditions? Or are they overworked, stressed individuals so anxious to keep their jobs that they will do virtually anything the employer asks, even at great cost to their own wellbeing? It all depends on what you read and whom you talk to.

One recent study sees it this way: 'in managing their own careers, workers are changing the dynamic of the employment relationship. Where they are prepared to keep moving, the demands on employers to provide both the income and the opportunities necessary to secure trusted labour have never been higher. Just as employers can shed workers, so workers can now shed employers' (Peter Lewis, *Tales from the new shop floor*, Pluto Press, 2000).

Others could not disagree more: 'people are being squeezed for time and they don't like it. Most workers seldom have a free choice about how many hours they work: it is dictated by employers or financial circumstances. The

good jobs are full-time, long-hours jobs and the part-time jobs are low paid and insecure with no benefits and poor working conditions.' (Sharon Beder, *Selling the work ethic: from puritan pulpit to corporate PR*, Scribe Publications, 2000).

What is going on here? Which view is right? Well, surprisingly, it may be that both are accurate. But the critical issue is: which of these competing pictures describes the workforce in general? A new breed of employee, prospering on the back of technological change and securing early promotion to senior, high-skill jobs, may be emerging in some parts of the economy. But all the evidence indicates that these are the exceptions that prove the general rule. Most employees are working much harder. Wages are becoming far more polarised with a small and declining high-wage core group outnumbered by an ever-growing cohort of low-paid, insecure employees and a new army of contractors and casuals who work sporadically. Many ALIA members will recognise this reality.

The danger is that a small minority of prospering 'knowledge workers' will become a vehicle for renewed argument that the new insecure labour market is advantageous for both employers and employees. It will be used as justification for still more attacks on any regulation of employment conditions. Already, this story is appearing in superficial newspaper and magazine labour market analysis. Expect more of it.

Ten years ago, an assault on centralised wage fixing, arbitration and the award system was justified by assertions of a new world of co-operative industrial relations. For a fortunate few, this has occurred in the new deregulated system. For the vast majority, however, harder work, longer hours and much greater insecurity have been the result. But propaganda still presents the few as proof that removal of all government intervention benefits the many.

Three years ago, the French Government was ridiculed when it canvassed intervention to regulate working hours. Now legislation is in place and appears to be working very effectively. Clearly, there is a place for sensible regulation to curb the excesses of corporatism and to prevent a completely laissez-faire economy. And those who believe that complete market freedom is the answer to all our problems might remember that it was no less a person than their own hero, Adam Smith, who argued vehemently in his *Wealth of nations* for state intervention to prevent workforce exploitation. ■

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