



Crossing Borders:
**Employment, Work, Markets and
Social Justice Across Time, Discipline
and Place**

AIRAANZ 2001
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Contents

<i>Crossing Borders: Industrial Relations across time, place and discipline</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
The Fusion of Picketing, Policing and Public Order Theory within the Industrial Relations Context of the 1992 APPM Dispute at Burnie	1
<i>David Baker</i>	
Diversity Management, Equal Employment Opportunity and the Compartmentalisation of Identity: Some Australian Case Study Evidence	11
<i>Santina Bertone and Mary Leahy</i>	
External Influences in the Trade Union Movement in the Philippines: One Hundred Years of Challenges and Response	19
<i>Virgel C. Bingham</i>	
“Family-friendly” Working Arrangements and the Howard Government Industrial Relations Agenda	26
<i>Tom Bramble</i>	
Free Trade, Fair Trade and Job Loss	34
<i>Tom Bramble</i>	
The Representation Gap in Australian Workplaces	42
<i>Mark Bray, Duncan Macdonald, Stephane Le Queux and Peter Waring</i>	
The Modernisation of the ACTU Under the Fraser Government: from the end of the Post-war Boom to the Accord, 1975-83	50
<i>Chris Briggs</i>	
Flexibility and Work: Conceptualising the Feminisation of Part-time Work in Japan	57
<i>Kay Broadbent</i>	
Volunteer workers: on the margin of the industrial relations system?	65
<i>Peter Brosnan and Graham Cuskelly</i>	
Whither Women’s Work in Non Metropolitan Australia?	71
<i>John Burgess, Glenda Strachan and Anne Sullivan</i>	
Is Casual Employment In Australia Overstated?	79
<i>Iain Campbell and John Burgess</i>	
Managing Fathers: Male Managers and Early Child Care in Australia and Sweden	87
<i>Joan Eveline</i>	
Learning More Deeply about the Experience of Negotiation	95
<i>R.E. Fells</i>	

Enterprise Unions and Employer-Dependence <i>Carol Fox and Corrina Langelaan</i>	104
The Cultural Factor – Who Needs It? Explaining the Peculiarities of East Asian Employment Relations <i>Simon Fry</i>	112
Takeaway Feuds? Labour Relations in the New Zealand Fast Food Industry under the Employment Contracts Act 1991 <i>Glenda Fryer and Peter Haynes</i>	121
Changing Patterns of Support and Opposition for the Workplace Relations Act: A Two-stage Cohort Study <i>Peter Gahan and Bruce Hearn-Mackinnon</i>	129
Reluctant Managers: Nurses Surviving Despite the Bottom Line <i>Richard Gough and Maree Fitzpatrick</i>	137
Union Effectiveness: It ain't watcha do – it's the way that you do it – that's what gets results <i>Glennis Hanley</i>	148
Call Centres – The New Contested Terrain: The Human Resource Management Paradigm and Trade Unions <i>Peter Holland</i>	154
Regulating Casual Education Work in Australia: Markets, Professionalism and Industrial Relations <i>Anne Junor and Margaret Wallace</i>	161
Neo-Liberalism and Industrial Relations in Australia's Shipping Industry <i>Thomas Klikauer and Richard Morris</i>	170
Industrial Relations in Australia: The State of a Discipline <i>Russell D. Lansbury and Grant Michelson</i>	179
Why workers don't become delegates: Some insights from the shopfloor <i>Michael Law</i>	187
Crossing Borders with Performance Management <i>Priscilla Leece</i>	194
AWAs – A Woman's Affair: The Effect of Decentralisation and Australian Workplace Agreements on Women's Employment in the Banking and Finance Sector <i>Kathryn Leonard</i>	200
Clash of the Titans: Rio Tinto vs the CFMEU <i>Bruce Hearn Mackinnon</i>	208
Part-time Employment, Gender and Employee Participation in the Workplace: An Illawarra Reconnaissance <i>Raymond Markey, Jo Kowalczyk, and Simon Pomfret</i>	214
Time for A 'Professionals' Union?: Evidence of the Marginalised and Vulnerable within the Professional Contractor Workforce <i>Tui McKeown</i>	224
Exploring Place: Aspects of Industrial Relations in the Illawarra <i>Terri Mylett, Ann Hodgkinson, Ray Markey and Frances Laneyrie</i>	233

From Bad to Worse? The Development of Australian Indigenous Employment Disadvantage <i>Rae Norris</i>	242
Performance – Based Pay In The Australian Public Service: Employee Perspectives <i>Michael O'Donnell and John O'Brien</i>	250
'Breadline' and 'Sitdown Money': The Aboriginal and Islander Peoples, Employment and Industrial Relations <i>Shane Ostenfeld, Stéphane Le Queux and Lauren Reichard</i>	257
Structural Issues for Union Renewal in Korea After the Financial Crisis <i>David Peetz and Neal Ollett</i>	265
'Theorising union power - a model and case study' <i>Barbara Pocock</i>	274
Labour-Management Cooperation at Telstra Corporation: Organisational Experiences with the Participative Management Approach <i>John Rice and Kerry Brown</i>	279
Mothers of Militancy: Some reflections of the female convicts 1788-1830 <i>Bill Robbins</i>	284
Enterprise Bargaining and Union Recognition: Australian, Canadian and American Paths <i>Bob Russell and Nils Timo</i>	292
The Western Sydney Jobs Vacancy Survey – Five Years of Employment Trends <i>Meg Smith, Dennis Mortimer and Sue Bond</i>	300
Enterprise Bargaining in the Victorian Public Hospital System 1992 – 99 <i>Pauline Stanton</i>	311
The 1946 meat strike in Queensland: A regional perspective <i>Gordon Stewart¹ and Bradley Bowden</i>	320
Outsourcing In Electricity Generation And Unon Responses <i>Julian Teicher, Bernadine Van Gramberg and Peter Holland</i>	328
Kelly's Long Wave explanation of trade union growth and the rise of pastoral trade unionism, 1870-1890 <i>Gerry Treuren</i>	336
Mediation, Structural Violence And Industrial Relations <i>Bernadine Van Gramberg</i>	342
An Assessment of the Bargaining Provisions in the Employment Relations Act 2000 <i>Pat Walsh and Raymond Harbridge</i>	349
Australian Employers' Motivations for Providing Paid Maternity Leave <i>Rachel Wynd and Kerry Brown</i>	357
Transaction Cost Theory and its application to outsourcing decisions in a rural hospital <i>Suzanne Young</i>	364

Crossing Borders: Industrial Relations across time, place and discipline

It is seriously an honour to have edited this selection of papers presented at the 15th AIRAANZ Conference, Crossing Borders. Despite its seemingly fading star as a vocational discipline, industrial relations is a dynamic and open research discipline. Ever since the foundation conference in 1983, AIRAANZ Conferences have demonstrated that IR researchers have a singular enthusiasm for research and scholarship into all aspects about work and employment. Industrial relations scholarship enables research and debate over the macro and micro determinants and characteristic of this fundamental area of human activity.

AIRAANZ and its Conferences

The role of AIRAANZ in improving Australian industrial relations scholarship over nearly twenty years has been most significant. Any academic association can play a significant role in the development and direction of a discipline. Such an association only emerges when an intellectual community has developed sufficient mass and impetus to be able to claim a group interest and capacity for an ongoing network. Of itself an academic or scholarly association gives evidence that the discipline or field of study has enough scholars with a shared investment in a particular intellectual territory. Scholarly associations can be likened to speech communities – networks of individuals who share the same vocabulary and goals in a particular area.

In this respect academic associations become institutions, which have a life of their own, with rules and patterns of interaction which ensures their continuity. The new academic association comprises an informal network of scholars who agree to formalise communication channels for both cognitive and 'social' purposes, which are linked through the common ground of disciplinary interests. By so doing, the newly formalised institution performs several roles through the formal and informal interactions and channels of communication, not only for the immediate future, but also, often inadvertently, for the long-term culture and traditions of this new community.

Indeed the actual provision of communication channels is a fundamental function of an academic association, especially where members of the community are geographically isolated from each other. In part, the roles and effects of a scholarly association will depend on membership rules, on who may become a member of the community (see, for example, Coats, 1993). Original choices and later changes about who can be a member will influence the patterns of communication, the cognitive and social imperatives and, indeed the direction of the discipline. Some academic associations are open, some closed; some are hierarchical, and some egalitarian; some have strict formal structures, while others are informal in every respect.

AIRAANZ was formed by the efforts of scholars such as John Benson and Kevin Hince and the "Young Turks"¹ of the 1983 AIRAANZ Conference (Kelly, 1998; Benson, 1983). At the first conference in Churchill, Victoria, the self-styled Young Turks focussed on forming a scholarly association which would encourage

research and teaching, and provide intellectual encouragement. A non-hierarchical cooperative approach was stressed, in which collegiality and communication were seen to stimulate debate and enhance rigour. These ideals were reflected not only in the absence of formal titles such as Professor / Associate Professor, but also in the opportunities for informal debate at informal social occasions. The logic was not simply that of individuals maximising their social utility, but rather more that intellectual improvement was nurtured in non-hierarchical, non-threatening situations, leading to the development of a "common pool of ideas that will strengthen teaching and research in industrial relations" (Benson, 1983b, p.v).

In taking account of the greatly dispersed geographical membership, the Conference was to remain the focal point of AIRAANZ. Informality and minimisation of elitism were central aspects from the first conference. Scholars at all levels could present papers on any topic that they perceived as appropriate to AIRAANZ. From 1983 to 1989 Conferences were held biennially, and then two conferences were held eighteen months apart. In 1993, it was decided to hold Conferences annually, and that has been the case ever since – and the tradition of informality still holds.

Continuities and divergent paths

As I noted in 1998 (Kelly 1998) AIRAANZ Conferences have been a considerable goad to research since 1983. Many scholars have tended to follow the path of using a conference paper as the basis for gaining constructive comment and criticism in order to improve their work for later publication in journals and books.

Such a process can assist novice and experienced scholars alike, especially where the culture of feedback is constructive and reflecting scholarly curiosity, rather than 'point-scoring'. The traditions of AIRAANZ which originated in the ideals of the Young Turks of the early 1980s have tended to encourage this attention to constructive and questioning discussion, although as in any coagulation of academics, there have been exceptions.

These Proceedings cover a majority of the 75–80 papers presented and discussed at AIRAANZ 2001. They reflect the breadth, enthusiasm and openness, which the Young Turks of 1983 sought to generate. Industrial relations as a discipline has altered, in ways not even considered in the early 1980s. Always an object focussed discipline, the topics now covered reveal a great breadth of interest in the new 'objects' in employment and work – outsourcing, performance appraisal, volunteerism, free/fair trade, Recognition of the fragmentation of employment imperatives, attributes and conditions is evident in the differences in industries covered, from hospitals to hospitality, from shipping to contract cleaning, fast food to finance.

Not there aren't also great continuities – the state of the discipline, representation, workplace IR, union roles and needs, affirmative action and industrial action are still all as evident as they were in the 1980s. The quintessential interdisciplinarity of IR is also a characteristic. Now, however, scholars draw on economics, geography, history and psychology in greatly different ways, although still with the same need to understand, explain and analyse the determinants and nature of work and employment taking broad account of employers and employees, and others who

1 The term comes from Griffin (Interview, 1998) "We saw ourselves as Young Turks, but now I suppose we're the old fogies."

see themselves as stakeholders. It is very clear from the papers in these proceedings that what still characterises industrial relations research is that it remains a lively, searching and dynamic, but also still self-doubting. Its scholars are still determined to take full account of all perspectives, macro and micro, collectivism and individualism, social justice and efficiency.

Much needs to be done. There are massive gaps - in theory, methodology and epistemology. With so many areas deserving of research, there is a long-standing tendency to focus on new aspects or areas of employment, with little attention to method or theory. There are also major topic areas that have been scarcely touched upon, such as the role of stock markets and international finance, labour standards and human rights, class actions as the new collectivism

Nonetheless, industrial relations remains a lively and growing academic discipline in Australia. Nearly four times as many papers have been presented at AIRAANZ 2001 than were presented at AIRAANZ Wollongong in 1989, and 30 per cent more papers than five years ago. Given the pressures on universities, Federal Government policies no doubt play some part in this growth, yet the very fact that about sixty papers were presented for the blind refereeing process suggests that scholarship in IR is still lively,

searching, and full of intellectual potential. At AIRAANZ 2000 in Newcastle, all the visiting international scholars commented with great surprise at the high number of youthful scholars and much greater gender balance at AIRAANZ than its sister (or brother) scholarly associations in Europe or North America. It is to the new "Young Turks" whom we look for a continuing joy in scholarly debate in this interdisciplinary discipline of industrial relations.

Di Kelly
Wollongong
January 2001

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Sophie Abercrombie, is not only the Conference Administrator, but also undertook a lion's share of the work of administering the blind refereeing process - recording what was sent to whom, and when and ensuring that comments were recorded and sent to authors. When Sophie was on leave Jacqui Price was wonderful in picking up the process and tracking papers all the way to the proceedings. To them I owe a huge debt.

Finally, Robert Hood, Department of Economics Publication Officer, has, as ever, undertaken the massive task of expertly laying out the Proceedings in a fearsomely short time. His relentless insistence on thoroughness and high quality layout are astounding, and especially on behalf of all those whose papers are published in these volumes, I would express a very deep appreciation.