

Comparative Collective Bargaining Systems

Overview

There is growing recognition of a need for fundamental change to collective bargaining policy settings in Australia and New Zealand. Intended as the main workforce pay and conditions setting tool, enterprise-level bargaining has failed to ensure workers receive a fair proportion of national income; by all indicators, real wages growth has dramatically slowed (or declined) with workers unable to obtain adequately-paid secure jobs with enough hours. The proliferation of non-standard forms of work such as casual, labour hire, temporary, gig work and independent contracting mean workers increasingly fall outside enforceable labour laws, with a concomitant decline in the standard employment relationship (including legal entitlements and protections afforded to traditional employees such as bargaining rights).

Collective agreement coverage has dramatically declined, particularly in the private sector, with less than 12 per cent of Australian workers under current EA coverage (down on 19% in 2013), and lower in New Zealand at only 10 per cent coverage. Most workers now rely on individual contract instruments, and minimum wage floors (including the modern Awards systems in Australia). Meanwhile, union density has dramatically declined and full legal protection for free riding has dramatically eroded union resources (and thus capacity to keep “oiling the cogs” of agreement-making) and undermined “bread and butter” union membership incentives. Without a “trigger” to coordinate and initiate employee representation, bargaining rights are now unreachable to the majority of Australian and New Zealand workers. As these countries look to rebuild their collective bargaining systems, it is pertinent to learn from the policy settings of other jurisdictions.

The Centre for Future Work, co-sponsored with the Nordic Policy Centre, proposes to conduct a stream for the 2020 AIRAANZ Conference comparing aspects of collective bargaining systems across jurisdictions, including, but not limited to, Nordic nations, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The aim is to compare selected aspects of international collective bargaining systems to inform policy pathways for Australia and New Zealand to building a more equitable collective bargaining system that achieves real wage increases, bolsters skills system regeneration, and harnesses the benefits of technological investments for public good.

- ***How wide, how far? Bargaining scope, extension mechanisms & interaction of collective agreements with other wage setting tools***
- ***Building the social contract of collective bargaining – Resourcing, membership and governance***
- ***Collective bargaining to build high performing skills systems and sectoral strategies***

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