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Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 9

Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity: The Sixties*

Article 11

2009

Review - Employment Relations: theory and practice

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Recommended Citation

Hilder, Mark, Review - Employment Relations: theory and practice, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 9(1), 2009, 87-89.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol9/iss1/11>

Review - Employment Relations: theory and practice

Abstract

Employment Relations: theory and practice is an ambitious book that provides a balanced view of employment relations in Australia. The authors, Bray, Waring and Cooper, are scholars in the field of Industrial Relations in Australia. Mark Bray is a Professor in Employment Studies at the University of Newcastle, Peter Waring is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Newcastle's Singapore Campus and Rae Cooper is a Senior Lecturer in Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney. The book appears to be written to provide a historical perspective of the employment relationship in Australia, introduce key concepts, explain the legal framework of employment relations and to muse about the future of employment relationship in Australia.

Book Review

Mark Bray, Peter Arnold Waring and Rae Cooper, *Employment Relations: theory and practice*, McGraw Hill, 2009, 438p.

Reviewed by Mark Hilder, University of Canberra

Employment Relations: theory and practice is an ambitious book that provides a balanced view of employment relations in Australia. The authors, Bray, Waring and Cooper, are scholars in the field of Industrial Relations in Australia. Mark Bray is a Professor in Employment Studies at the University of Newcastle, Peter Waring is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Newcastle's Singapore Campus and Rae Cooper is a Senior Lecturer in Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney. The book appears to be written to provide a historical perspective of the employment relationship in Australia, introduce key concepts, explain the legal framework of employment relations and to muse about the future of employment relationship in Australia.

The book comprises thirteen chapters grouped into four parts covering theory and context, the parties in the employment relationship, processes and outcomes and the future employment relations in Australia. The book introduces key theoretical concepts of employment relations in the initial three chapters and builds on these concepts to assist the reader understand the current modes of employment relations in Australia. From the outset, in chapter one of the book, the authors acknowledge that Employment Relations may be an arduous academic discipline to examine by stating that Employment Relations "... seems to require commonsense at the same time that it requires deep analysis and complex concepts" (p.5). To assist the reader to understand the academic concepts of employment relations, the book includes an array of pedagogic features designed to reinforce the theoretical concepts introduced in the book.

There are various competing theoretical views in the discipline of employment relations and the book adopts a pluralist perspective of the discipline. The authors suggest that the pluralist perspective "...takes the view that the potential for

conflict is inherent in the employment relationship, but it is manageable and can be contained by an appropriate network of rules and regulations” (p.48). This view appears consistent with Keenoy and Kelly (1998, p.305), who suggest industrial conflict is normal and predictable, yet it is puzzling why many people regard conflict as a symptom for social disease. Conversely, contemporary Human Resource Management books propose a unitarist perspective of employment relations, where relations between employers and employees are harmonious and conflict is unusual, *ceteris paribus*.

The book objectively analyses and contrasts the various actors in the employment relationship. Bray, Waring and Cooper equitably allude that each actor in the employment relationship organises in a manner to assist the actor achieve their individual objectives. However, the book cautions, that trade unions, who have a history of representing employees in Australia, have declining membership levels and subsequently a large number of employees may be unrepresented in the work place. Non union employee representation in Australia according to the authors, is “...likely to remain underdeveloped and at the behest of management” (p.239).

A multitude of neoclassical economists suggest that trade unions are responsible for marring productivity and increasing labour costs. The book challenges these assumptions by suggesting that through “employee voice” mechanisms, unions can assist reduce employee turnover, increase morale and ameliorate relations between employers and employees. Moreover, the book proposes that harmonious relationships between employers and unions can increase productivity.

An important contribution of the book is highlighting the increasing level of importance that non-union employee representation plays in Australian employment relations. Non-union employee forms of representation warrant inclusion in the book because, as the authors dutifully point out, “The massive decline in union density, has meant that, in 2006, four out of every five Australian employees was not represented by a union” (236). The inclusion of non-union employee representation in the book is also timely as a number of Australian employment relations books are surprisingly silent on this topic. The book contrasts the state sanctioned forms of non-union

representation in Europe with those in Australia, and suggests that while non-union forms of representation are largely at the will of employers in Australia, that state sanctioned forms of non-union forms of representation are not a new phenomenon in Australia because most of the state occupational health and safety (OH&S) statutes require the establishment of safety and health committees within enterprises.

The book provides evidence that lock outs, where employers refuse to allow employees to work, re-emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s (p.353). However, the book does not suggest why an employer may invest in a dispute. Keenoy and Kelly (1998, p.327) suggest that where a company is facing an uncertain future if productivity is not significantly improved or is running at a loss, it may be sensible to invest in a dispute (lock out). OH&S is an important aspect of the employment relationship which employers, employees, unions and the government are key stakeholders. The book does not include any contribution to the topical issue of OH&S. A comparison is made to another text by Sappey, Burgess, Lyons and Buultjens (2006), which has a valuable chapter on the subject of OH&S. The chapter outlines the importance of OH&S in Australia, describes the actions needed to create a safe and healthy workplace and outlines the major aspects of hazard and risk management.

Employment Relations: theory and practice is well researched, explains the competing perspectives of employment relations and is appropriate for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying Australian employment relations. Overall, the book makes an important theoretical and pragmatic contribution to the study and debate of employment relations in Australia.

References

- Keenoy, T & Kelly, D 1998, *The Employment Relationship in Australia*, 2nd edn, Thomson, Southbank.
- Sappey, R, Burgess, J, Lyons, M & Buultjens, J 2006, *Industrial Relations in Australia*, Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forrest