New actors in employment relations in emerging economies

Special Issue of Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles

Employment relations in emerging economies has witnessed significant changes in the last decade as a result of two contradictory pressures. First, the opening of markets, heightened competition, neo-liberal reforms, and privatization has all placed strong downward pressures on labour standards. These developments have seen an increased prominence in informal and insecure working, the declining role and capacity of governments to enforce labour standards, and more ruthless cost-cutting through competitive outsourcing practices. Second, these pressures have been somewhat mitigated by the growing adoption of international labour standards, and the role of international bodies such as the ILO. The role of MNCs has been ambivalent in this process: many have ruthlessly pursued agendas of cost-cutting and union busting, but others have actively sought to diffuse best practices from their country of origin. Meanwhile, caught between formidable resistances from the private employers to union recognition and the need to defend workers’ rights and interests against a context of declining employment security and labour conditions, the adequacy of the trade unions in representing the workers has been questioned. These tensions also exist in developed economies to various extents.

The growing inadequacy of the traditional institutional actors (e.g. the state and national unions) in defending workers’ rights and in resolving new issues emerged in workplaces has created both the space and the need for ‘new’ actors to fill the gap. Examples of these actors include: NGOs, employment agencies, HR consultancy firms, counsellors, chaplains, health advisors/trainers, citizens’ advice bureaus, global union federations, employment arbitrators, grassroots activists and social movements, and so forth. Some of the actors are not necessarily new but are playing a stronger or new role in (re)shaping employment relations at the workplace level. In some context, these actors interact and permeate each other’s sites and spatial boundaries in acknowledgement of and to complement each other’s resource/capacity constraints (Cooke, 2009). Whilst operating largely outside the workplaces or cross-organisational boundaries, these actors and their interactions play an important role in shaping employment relations at the workplace level. The emerging role of these new actors, in individual and/or institutional capacity, has been documented in a number of studies (e.g. Abbott, 2006; Heery and Frege, 2006; Michelson et al., 2008) in response to Bellemare’s (2000) call for widening the scope of analysis of institutional actors in employment relations. However, these studies have focused primarily on developed countries. By contrast, studies on employment relations in emerging economies continue to focus largely on conventional actors and often at the macro level. Little attention has been paid to new issues emerged and the impact of new actors, for example, the role of HIV/AIDS peer educators in South Africa (Dickinson, 2006), informal sector workers movements in tropical Africa, and the role of new actors in the enforcement of new labour regulations in China (Cooke, 2009).

This Special Issue aims to fill this gap by examining the emergence of new institutional actors at various levels in shaping employment relations in emerging economies. Authors are encouraged to submit papers that investigate the following issues and others that fall within the scope of this Special Issue. We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers, with quantitative and/or
qualitative data, at ‘macro’ or ‘micro’ level. We have a strong preference for papers that come up with new ways of theorizing employment relations in emerging economies as well as papers with fresh empirical data.

- The likely impact of new labour legislation on employers and their responding strategy; the role of third parties in ensuring compliance with the law.
- The role of global union federations
- Grassroots politics and worker rights
- NGOs: Limits and possibilities in bringing about fairer work.
- Alternative forms of organizing workers, voice mechanisms and impact on employment relations
- Innovations in trade union strategy/transitional models of organizing and representing workers outside the state sector
- Gender organizing and organizing in the informal sector
- The role of employment agencies, employer associations, MNC client firms, HR consulting firms, and other ‘new’ institutional actors in shaping employment relations at firm and/or industry level

Findings of these issues should have theoretical and policy implications, and seek to inform management practices. Papers should be submitted to Guest Editors Fang Lee Cooke (fang.cooke@rmit.edu.au) and Geoff Wood (g.t.wood@sheffield.ac.uk). The format must comply with submission guidelines of IR/RI. Papers will be double-blind peer-reviewed. Authors of prospective papers are welcome to discuss their with the guest editors in advance.

**The deadline for the submission of the first draft of full papers is 1st July 2010.**

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