

Launch of *Work and Industrial Relations Policy in Australia*

AIRAANZ Conference, January 2026

Remarks by Jim Stanford
Voluntary Chair, Board of Directors, Centre for Future Work

I am very honoured to participate in this panel to celebrate such an important and timely contribution to industrial relations (IR) education and research in Australia.

I am also honoured to be the token international rep on this panel, arriving just yesterday from Canada – also known these days as the fifty-first state! (Don't laugh people...if Trump succeeds in taking us over, I know full well who will be the fifty-second state.)

I think it is fitting to have an international voice on this panel. Because this book – though written by Australians, about Australia – will definitely have international reach and impact. Industrial relations scholars and practitioners around the world are always fascinated to see what crazy new ideas you Aussies dream up in the world of work and workplace relations.

Australia's history of IR innovation, and its commitment – often inconsistent but always genuine – to principles of egalitarianism and rule of law in employment relations, carries great influence in other parts of the world. This book will help the global industrial relations community update and deepen their knowledge of Australia's unique way of doing things.

Work and Industrial Relations Policy in Australia takes on a broad and very topical agenda of sub-issues related to labour policy. It is very well-integrated and consistent in its voice. I couldn't resist guessing, but I genuinely could not identify which authors wrote which chapters.

It is readable and short, just 150 pages of core text. And blessedly free of the interminable legal footnotes that clutter most scholarly writing in this field.

Congratulations to all the authors for this achievement. I believe the book will become a standard reference for students, scholars, and practitioners for years to come.

In my remarks I will emphasise 2 themes that are close to my heart as a labour economist: productivity and broader-based bargaining.

First, chapter 7 of the book provides a very compact but rich introduction to the long and tortured debates in Australia about the connection (or lack thereof) between industrial relations policy and productivity.

This review rightly emphasises the ambiguous impacts of labour law on productivity. It criticises predictable employer fear campaigns that protecting workers inevitably means inefficiency, feather-bedding, and inflated unit labour costs (experienced through both a rising numerator and a shrinking denominator of that ratio).

But the authors' treatment of this issue also cautions progressives against putting too much stock in 'win-win' arguments that empowering workers with better protections and collective power will boost productivity enough to make up for the higher wages and other costs that employers will face. Some observers naively try to claim that unionisation and other pro-labour reforms are even 'good' for

employers, because of the impacts on retention, training, and productivity. This begs the question as to why employers fight tooth and nail against these reforms.

Empirical research finds the relationship between unionisation and productivity is weak and ambiguous, and the authors conclude this chapter with an appropriately nuanced view. Most invocations of productivity arguments on both sides of IR debates are selective and opportunistic. Australia's decentralised enterprise bargaining system has likely undermined productivity, not boosted it (through oft-cited 'flexibilities' granted to employers). And at any rate, how productivity is *shared* is just as *important* as how it is generated – and it is to that goal that industrial relations policy is primarily directed.

In a related vein, chapter 5 provides a very good review of recent debates in Australia about extending bargaining beyond the enterprise level, including a work-in-progress evaluation of the impacts so far from the Secure Jobs, Better Pay legislation and other reforms introduced by the Albanese Labor Government after its initial election in 2022.

These reforms open some cautious but promising initial avenues for multi-employer bargaining and standard-setting, including through the supported and single-interest bargaining streams (being wielded effectively by unions in several sectors, from care work to manufacturing to fast food), and through new sectoral standard-setting mechanisms created under the Closing Loopholes legislation (already paying off in encouraging victories, such as the Transport Workers' Union's [TWU's] recent win of fuel price adjustments for employee-like workers in trucking and logistics).

The chapter ably dismantles the sky-is-falling rhetoric invoked by employer peak bodies in their efforts to stop these reforms. The authors remind us that these debates over the scope of bargaining are just the latest skirmish in a never-ending battle of ideas over the appropriate bounds for the industrial relations system. They note that the mere existence of IR rules has always been contested, and each effort to move those rules forward will face predictable resistance from employers seeking to preserve unilateral dominance over work and wages.

As the authors note in their conclusion to the book, 'The scope of industrial relations policy is not a given. Rather, the breadth of policy – what counts as a problem – is itself a matter of conflict and change.' Recent struggles in Australia over strengthening and extending workers' rights to collective voice and bargaining power are just the latest chapter in that conflict.

This book provides students, researchers, and trade unionists with more knowledge to participate in that conflict effectively and hopefully. We are all grateful to the authors for this contribution.