

Giving Employees a Voice in the Workplace: A Comparative Historical Perspective

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In the past 20 years the focus of Australian industrial relations has shifted dramatically from the national and industry levels to the workplace, encouraged by federal and State legislation. The shift towards the workplace has been accompanied by a decline in trade union membership in Australia and many other western countries. Since the 1980s, State and federal legislation in Australia has also removed the primary role of unions in representing workers in the industrial system through the concept of non-union enterprise bargaining. This opens the way to alternative forms of non-union employee representation. Scholars emphasise that workers without union representation no longer have a voice in the management of their workplaces. This 'representation gap' reduces the potential of workers to contribute to improving productivity and the quality of working life. Whilst these changes have occurred, however, the institutional employment relations infrastructure at the workplace level has not been developed in a systematic way as it was with the previous more centralised system. Because of this, commentators and academics in Australia have looked towards the instigation of European style works councils or joint consultative schemes as a way of establishing employee participation at the workplace level (Gollan and Hamberger, 2002: 24-25; Gollan and Patmore, 2006; Jenkins and Blyton, 2008; Kaufman and Taras, 2000: 4; Mizrahi, 2002; Patmore, 2006a).

In the United States and Canada, academics interested in overcoming the representation gap have explored the historical traditions particularly in regard to the Rockefeller Plan or Employee Representation Plans (ERPs) of the period before World War II (Kaufman, 2000). ERPs were joint committees of employees and management representatives funded by the employers

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bargaining between unions and management and provided union members with an opportunity to provide suggestions to improve productivity. Union membership was the basis for participation in the cooperative committees and controversy arose over the right of union members to elect the representatives directly. In the open shop climate of the 1920s, the ERPs became far more successful, with the cooperation scheme having its major impact in the railways, particularly the B and O and the CNR. Both provided an avenue for workers to have a voice in the management of their enterprises. The cooperation scheme did bring some increased benefits for management in terms of sales and contracts. Both approaches were casualties of the events associated with the *Wagner Act* in the United States. The ERPs were outlawed in the United States, while unions no longer saw the cooperative committees as helpful in gaining and maintaining recognition as agents for collective bargaining.

While these ideas did not have a noticeable impact on Australia between the world wars, some of the historical impediments to their adoption in the current Australian environment have been altered. Australian industrial legislation no longer gives the primacy to union representation it once did and allows for non-union collective bargaining. Union membership has declined and there are a larger number of large scale companies operating in Australia. The ERP with its emphasis on a non-union workplace clearly represents a threat to union organisation and highlights the legislative need to ensure that such arrangements do not inhibit freedom of association. As the Sydney, Nova Scotia, experience indicates, however, a well resourced union can use an ERP as a platform for successful organising. The union-management cooperative committees represent an opportunity for unions to highlight how they enhance employee voice on workplace issues such as productivity, safety and even the marketing of goods and services. The challenge remains for Australian unions, as it did for their North American counterparts between the wars, as to whether this form of representation can provide a direct voice for rank and file members in the workplace or even non-union employees.

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