

# A tough year for library workers



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Through the fast-fading year of 2003 ALIA members have sought help with a bewildering array of workplace issues. Some have been esoteric and highly individual; others worry almost everybody. Despite their overall reach, more than eighty per cent of inquiries can be covered by just four broad categories, some of which overlap. They are:

**Wage levels:** member concerns centre on frustration that, despite major advances in New South Wales government employment from that state's 2002 pay equity test case decision, the overall national picture is one of downward pressure on wage levels. Progress in flowing the NSW outcomes has been slow. Trade unions in most states have been less than enthusiastic in mounting pay cases for library workers, even where new equal remuneration provisions have been adopted in, for example, Tasmania and Queensland. At the same time, greater use of casuals and labour hire companies by many employers has forced rates down. A number of members engaged as casuals, either directly or through labour hire, have complained that their current pay is much lower than that of full-time colleagues doing exactly the same work. Some point out that they are earning less now than they were paid for doing very similar work with the same or a similar organisation several years ago.

**Job losses:** this year many more members have raised redundancy concerns. These have included difficulty in accessing termination benefits provided by awards, agreements or personnel policies. In some cases, legal notice provisions have not been complied with. In others, so-called redundancy has not been genuine but has been used merely to remove an existing employee who is promptly replaced by another. This is a blatant breach of due process and, as such, is strictly illegal. But redress for affected employees is complex and requires the individual to go through a quite stressful, sometimes costly, exercise to pursue very limited benefits, even if she is successful. Understandably, most do not bother. Further concern arises from abolition of library units in various organisations on cost-cutting grounds.

**Casualisation of employment:** as indicated above and in last month's column, more and more jobs are being casualised. Many are being contracted out to labour hire companies. A number of affected members have expressed serious dissatisfaction about their conditions under labour hire arrangements. As well as being disappointed by poor wage rates, members express real frustration with a lack of transparency. They have found it simply impossible to establish how their wage rates are calculated. 'Commercial-in-confidence' assertions are being used to restrict advice to members about

the basis of their conditions. Explanations are often restricted to the vague phrase 'market rates'.

**Recruitment practices, including de-professionalisation and job status:** this year's rise in complaints about recruitment has been startling. Many of these have concerned staffing of positions by lower level people. Professional jobs have been restructured as para-professional or even clerical/administrative positions. The extent of substitution in the past three years can be clearly seen in figure 1, below.

**Figure 1: Australian library workforce**

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003-2004
<b>Librarian</b>	13 100	11 100	12 900	11 400	10 900	10 300	Slight fall
<b>Library technician</b>	4700	5000	3400	5000	600	6800	Modest growth
<b>Total</b>	17 800	16 000	16 300	16 400	16 900	17 100	Balanced

After the promise of late 2002 when NSW government librarians finally achieved success in their major pay case, this has been a disappointing year. The problems and stresses experienced by ALIA members over the past twelve months are by no means unique to them, however. They replicate the experience of a majority of Australian employees. Most result from the successful drive for 'deregulation' of the labour market that has dominated industry's agenda over recent years. Yet employer success in this campaign does not mean we have seen genuine flexibility appear, despite the frequency with which that result is claimed.

Primarily, the breaking down of standards has changed power relationships, rather than the extent of rigidities. Where once standards and safeguards were established in concert with independent bodies created for that purpose, increasingly powerful managements are now imposing different but equally inflexible arrangements unilaterally. This is not deregulation but different regulation, shorn of the balance that third-party involvement almost always provides. As researchers at the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training point out in an excellent recent study [*Fragmented Futures: new challenges in working life, Federation Press 2003 ISBN 1 86287 471 9*], 'proper reform should not just mean overturning existing arrangements and institutions', especially when they remain relevant. Reform based merely on making life easier for one party is not reform at all.

With an ageing workforce, potential skill shortages are pressing in on Australian industry, especially in the library and information sector. Given that reality, employers should ask themselves whether achievement of their self-focused version of deregulation is really a war won. Faced with a looming need to attract, retain and motivate skilled staff, they may find a cowed workforce means only Pyrrhic victory. ■

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