

Reworking citizenship: Renewing workplace rights and social citizenship in Australia

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ABSTRACT

As a focus of creative self-expression through work, the workplace is key site of identity formation as well as economic reward. A new narrative of social citizenship must be sourced in workplace experience and capable of adaptation to discreet needs. This paper considers the potential for reconstructing this narrative, and reflects on the significant obstacles. Reconstituting meaningful social citizenship in a deregulated economic and social system requires adaptation to the fractious diversity of deregulation; it requires an acknowledgment that workers have legitimate rights to equitable conditions of work and opportunities to participate in civic life – to influence the conditions that affect them both in the workplace and the wider community. Unions have and can continue to play an active and creative role in advancing these rights.

Introduction

Those whose economic condition forces them to labour for most of their waking hours do not have the leisure to be citizens in any proper sense (Oliver & Heater, 1994 p.19).

Work is seldom directly linked to the concept of citizenship in Australian public discourse. Yet recent key contributions to the literature on these issues explore, explicitly and implicitly, the relationship between our function as productive contributors to the economy and our rights as citizens, able to participate in civic or community affairs and enjoy the benefits of time with family and friends. The literature reflects increased concern about the impact of intensified work patterns. Labor politician Lindsay Tanner laments our Crowded Lives:

We're working longer and harder, separating from our partners and children more ... Many of us no longer live in a neighbourhood, a small world of strong, interconnecting relationships built on trust, informality and respect. ... With less time for family and community involvement we're creating a society with less connection, more alienation, and more loneliness. We are leading more crowded lives, but slowly losing our sense of connection with each other (Tanner, 2003 pp.9-10).

Watson *et al.* (2003 pp.1-2) took up this theme to analyse the 'fragmented future' of Australian working life: despite consistent economic growth over the last decade, and the diversification of work regulation, Australia is gripped by a 'social crisis' produced by inequality and overwork. Employers may organise their workforce through traditional awards, enterprise agreements or individual contracts. The debate on work and family as outlined in Pocock's *The Work/Life Collision* has perhaps generated the most public concern about the erosion of family and community life triggered by longer working hours and increased diversification and casualisation of work, which has most severely impacted on working women. 'The Australian "mummy track" of part-time work – with its poor job security and lower rate of benefits relative to full-time work – has entrenched the peripheral status of carers in many workplaces' (Pocock, 2003 pp.4-5).

The deregulation of the traditional structures of Australian workplace relations, accompanied by the sustained reduction of state funding for education, health and welfare, has unravelled the conditions of social citizenship that many Australians took for granted. Social citizenship has been defined as the 'adequate standard of life assured by education and social and welfare services' (Oliver and Heater p.34), and the provision of industrial entitlements – long service and annual leave, restrictions on overtime and shifts – that facilitated worker participation in civic, community and family life. These principles developed from Marshall's seminal 1949 lectures *Citizenship and Social Class*. Marshall's concept has been contested and revised, but remains an influential benchmark for determining 'the relative success of each western society in empowering its citizens in an equal and inclusive way throughout their lives' (Hudson and Kane, 2000 p.137).

This paper argues that reconstituting meaningful social citizenship in a deregulated economic and social system requires adaptation to the fractious diversity of deregulation. While generating opportunity and enterprise, deregulation is insensitive to the conflicts and stresses of insecure employment and competitive work environments. Reconstituting social citizenship requires an acknowledgment that workers have legitimate rights to equitable conditions of work and opportunities to participate in civic life. Workers should have the time, and appropriate forms of representation and self-expression, to be able to influence the conditions that affect them both in the workplace and in the wider community.

Unions can play an active and creative role in advancing these rights. For over one hundred years unions have developed the social citizenship of their constituency, by campaigning for working conditions and pay rates that left time for family, community and civic life. We briefly explore the historical development of Australian unions to understand why they have played a vital role in cultivating social citizenship, and why the collapse in workforce union participation so effectively erodes the conditions of civic participation.

Unions and social citizenship

From the late nineteenth century the union mobilisation of the workforce, and the democratic structures of unions, reflected an instinctive and powerful idea of citizenship. Unions sought not only to address grievances but to facilitate worker participation as citizens, enjoying both political and industrial rights. Unions offered workers a chance to directly participate in democratic institutions, as rank and file members, delegates and as full-time officials. As Irving and Taksa (2002 p.5) observed, 'trade unions... have the longest and broadest record of inducting people into the routines of democratic citizenship of any voluntary organisation in the modern state'.

In turn, and as Markey (2002 pp.19, 37) comments of the period, 'the role of the state was a critical factor in the early 1900s in constructing [a] public place for unions.' The tolerance of union organisation by the state was a reflection of public sympathy for the union cause. Unions were seen to be playing a legitimate role in representing workers and in the cause of nation building. The policies that the labour movement embraced in the pre-1914 period, including compulsory arbitration in industrial relations, tariff protection and immigration restriction (White Australia), were seen as vital elements of the inclusive strategies of the 'Australian Settlement' that lent purpose and meaning to the young Commonwealth of Australia. Unions were helping to make citizens (Markey, 1988 pp.6-14, 312-313; Hearn and Patmore 2001).

State-defined wage structures and industrial entitlements provided a foundation for social citizenship. The concept of the basic or 'living' wage articulated in Justice Henry Bournes Higgins 1907 Harvester judgement incorporated specific nation building and citizenship ideals: Higgins sought to provide for 'the normal needs of the average employee, regarded as a human being living in a civilized community' (Commonwealth Arbitration Reports Vol.2 p.2). Higgins system privileged the male breadwinner at the expense of women, who were paid only 54% of male wages: as a result women were marginalised as citizens as well as workers (Lake, 1997 p.101). The predominantly male workforce also benefited from sympathetic state intervention in the development of an elaborate system of entitlements across the twentieth century. Long service, sick and annual leave provisions provided workers with rest, recuperation and leisure; shift allowances and penalty rates discouraged excessive overtime and night work (Baird and Burgess 2003; Patmore 2003).

The deregulation of workplace relations which challenged the role of unions as legitimate representatives of workers and traditional notions of social citizenship began in the late 1980s. The New Right advocated economic and industrial relations deregulation and the Hawke Labor Government promoted enterprise bargaining, including a non-union stream (Costa and Hearn 1997). The *Workplace Relations Act* 1996 (Cth), introduced by the Howard Coalition Government, pursued the established logic of deregulation by limiting the powers of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to intervene in industrial relations or make awards. The AIRC was restricted to administering twenty basic "allowable matters" – the provision of wage rates and basic entitlements (Birmingham 1997). The Act also established the Office of the Employment Advocate to oversee Australian Workplace Agreements, a new system of individual contracts. AWAs were directly negotiated between employers and unions without the interference of "third

parties” such as trade unions. Research by Peetz indicates that the implementation of AWAs and other individual contracts generally resulted in a loss of union influence and membership (Peetz 2002).

The OEA encourages employees involved in AWA negotiations to “cash out” their entitlements (*workSite* Autumn 2001). Whether as a specific result of AWAs or enterprise bargaining, the loss of long service, sick or annual leave, the deregulation of working hours and encouragement of unpaid overtime all diminish the ability of workers to meaningfully participate in family life or community and political activities. Recent research has highlighted the growth of casualisation of the workforce under the award system, a pattern intensified in the deregulated workplace relations of the last decade (Pocock *et al.*, 2004 pp.18, 24). As a result of the spread of casualisation ACTU Secretary Greg Combet told a 2003 ACTU organising conference that 2.2 million workers have no sick leave or annual leave entitlements. 2.2 million workers represents 27.3% of the workforce, a higher proportion of workers than those currently organised by unions (Combet 2003). Australian union membership was once amongst the highest in the world, covering 60% of the workforce during the post-Second World War years. Australian trade unions now represent just 18% of the private sector workforce. Even when the traditionally stronger support for unions by public sector employees is included, Australian unions cover only 23% of the workforce (ABS 2002). If membership levels continue to fall to even lower levels, it will soon be difficult for the labour movement to claim to represent a substantial constituency of Australian workers.

A new narrative of social citizenship

At a November 2003 Work and Organisational Studies seminar on ‘Women, Work and Family’ Pocock argued for a ‘new coalition’ of sympathetic interests groups – political organisations, community and welfare groups, unions and employers – to develop and advocate public policy initiatives that restore the balance of work, family and civic life (Hearn 2004). This coalition requires a new narrative of entitlement and social citizenship, one that does not seek to restore outmoded practices or prejudices (for example, discrimination based on gender or race) but balances principles of equity and enterprise. As Yeatman (1998 p.228) argues, the ‘new contractualism’ represented by the Commonwealth Government’s case management of the unemployed in labour market training programs ‘extends the status of individualised personhood to all’. Carney and Ramia (2000 p.28) caution that contractualism and mutual obligation must not overwhelm ‘social and distributive justice’; the dilemma remains that in a decentralised workplace relations culture, a new form of social citizenship must incorporate sensitivity to individual needs and engage with the discrete requirements of a heterogeneous workforce.

The idea of a *narrative* of social citizenship reflects the fact that language and values are critical elements in defining our notions of work and citizenship. We form our sense of identity through our participation in work and society, a formation in which stories about ourselves and our relationship with society play a vital role. As Somers (1997 pp.82, 84-85) argues, it is through narrative that ‘we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and through which we constitute our social identities.’ These ‘ontological narratives’ structure our ‘activities, consciousness, and beliefs’, as they engage with the wider public narratives of the workplace, church, government and nation. We may dispute or feel constrained by these public narratives; nonetheless we are compelled to establish a relationship with them. To lose a job is to lose a strong element in our sense of identity; a loss that also erodes our sense of participation in society. Work is fundamental to establishing that our lives and actions have legitimacy. Somers (1997 p.88) observes that establishing this legitimacy is often disputed. ‘Which kinds of narratives will socially predominate is contested politically and will depend in large part on the actual distribution of power’.

The influence of rhetoric in public policy should not be underestimated. As outlined below, the advocates of deregulation employ a value-laden language to imply that deregulation of workplace practices and economic structures are ‘normal’ developments, reflecting the ‘natural’ forces of progress. Advocates of regulation are cast as dangerously outmoded, promoting restrictive practices which impede or distort the free flow of natural economic growth. Reconstituting social citizenship requires its own positive language and values, set forward as points of principle and cogent argument, sufficiently adaptable to the prevailing tide of labour market deregulation.

It would be premature – if not presumptuous – to advance a defined set of principles and argument in this paper; here we seek to consider the potential for reviving social citizenship and workplace rights, and to maintain a clear focus on the obstacles ranged against this revival.

Bentley and Halpern (2003 pp.72, 88-89, 96) argue that ‘western societies are characterised by social diversity, moral pluralism and organisational complexity’. In these societies a new ‘narrative of progress and shared aspiration’ cannot be generated from top-down government edicts but must derive from ‘the creative power of the citizen’, and find expression in local democratic networks: ‘political strategy must be mediated through people’s everyday experience of institutions’ if it is to receive support. As a focus of creative self-expression through work, the workplace is key site of identity formation as well as economic reward. A new narrative of social citizenship must be sourced in workplace experience.

The dilemma for defining a set of agreed principles of social citizenship relevant to the needs of deregulated workplaces is that as Watson et. al. (2003 p.3) observe, ‘one person’s inequality can be another person’s diversity.’ At Blackburn Motor Body, a smash repair business in Melbourne, the owner and many of his employees have embraced diversity; over thirty employees have signed AWAs to work a four-day working week, in ten hour shifts that start at 3 pm. These staff also enjoy higher pay than a smaller group of employees who elected to remain employed under the terms of the traditional award, and work the standard five-day working week. The owner claimed increased business profitability and quicker turn-around in repairs while avoiding paying overtime rates for night shifts. The staff on AWAs had the advantage of an extra day off (‘Award wins few friends in body shop’, *Australian*, 29 September 2004).

By contrast Florencia Parajo, a hotel housekeeper in Sydney, has seen few of the benefits that her employer has obtained from the increased casualisation of the Australian workforce. Parajo, a single mother with five children, takes home just \$306 a week for 21 hours work. ‘I try to work every second weekend just to get extra money from the penalty rates to help pay the bills. I cannot remember the last time I was able to take a break.’ Her union argues that a single person without children needs at least \$550 a week in order to enjoy ‘decent quality of life’ in an Australian city (LMHU 2004). More than a half of all new jobs in the last 16 years have been casual positions; less than half of all casual workers know how much they will earn each week. One in three said that they would prefer to work longer hours (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 June 2004). Campbell’s research (2002 pp.92, 94) has shown that extended working hours has substantially increased in Australia in recent years, in defiance of a general OECD trend to lower hours. The increase ‘seems to be almost entirely composed of increases in unpaid overtime’, contributing to poor occupational health and safety and placing stress on family and community relationships.

The construction of a new narrative of work and citizenship requires sufficient flexibility to avoid an overly prescriptive regime that stifles innovation and diversity, while rejecting exploitative work regimes that turn human beings into little more than poorly paid drones and leave little time for any kind of life, civic or otherwise. The Employee Bill of Rights advanced by Sonnenberg in the United States provides a mechanism for exploring the subjective, negotiated nature of the employment relationship, and a clearly structured framework for analysing individual experience in the context of valid comparative criteria. Sonnenberg’s bill of rights includes the employees right to: ‘be treated as unique individuals’, ‘be challenged’, ‘try and fail’, ‘be treated with dignity and respect’, ‘be informed’, ‘be able to approach management’ (Sonnenberg, 1993 pp.23-26; Birch and Paul, 2003 p.120).

The concept of a bill of rights need not be prescriptively advanced in the Australian context; it provides a starting point for not only asking workers what they require of work, but how work is framed within their overall experience and aspirations as members of civic society. Developing social citizenship requires interaction not only between employers and employees, unions and the state; it requires researchers to embrace the diverse subjectivity of experience. The participation of employees and employers in a program of case studies and interviews would ground the development of a revived social citizenship in actual experience. That such qualitative research cannot claim to be universally representative should not be seen as a barrier to knowledge, but rather provides the discipline of restraining inflated claims and encouraging respect for the discrete needs of the experience under examination. Even on a relatively small scale, such programs would also fill a significant research gap: there has been little previous

research into the linkages between the workplace, rights and citizenship in Australia (Dabscheck, 1997; Peetz, 1998; Callus *et al.*, 1991).

Deregulation of the Australian labour market has compelled unions to focus more intensively on the workplace needs and experience of their members. The traditional arbitration processes and the Accord years of the Labor Governments 1983-1996 tended to disengage unions from the workplace experience of their members. Since the mid 1990s unions have moved towards an increased focus on union agency in organising strategies, with programs such as Organising Works, initiated in 1993 by the Australian Council of Trade Unions. ACTU organising strategies have recognised the key linkage between workplace justice and workers' ability to participate in family, community life and the political process. The ACTU's 2003 'Statement of Union Values' elaborated an explicit demand for an acknowledgement of citizenship rights, as expressed through union activism (Davis, 2003 p.245).

There is also a need to develop employer consciousness of citizenship obligations. Birch and Paul (2003 p.110) argue that 'the vast majority of Australian firms have no formal recognition of their human rights responsibilities'. Only five of Australia's top 100 firms had a publicly stated commitment to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Worker rights are recognised in the Declaration; the International Labour Organisation is charged with the protection of labour standards, and Australian employers and unions participate in ILO structures and forums.

Sonnenberg's Employee Bill of Rights provides one benchmark for testing employer commitment to their obligations to consult and respect their employees; it may also be strengthened by reference to the ILO conventions on labour standards, and particularly the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. The declaration was framed 'to ensure that social progress goes hand in hand with economic progress and development' and commits member states, whether or not they have ratified relevant conventions, to promote freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of compulsory labour, the abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in employment (ILO 1998; ILO 2004 pp.1, 7). The ILO argues that the principle of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining 'is a reflection of human dignity' and 'an integral part of democracy', offering workers and employers to defend economic interests and civil liberties (ILO 2004 p.1).

The ILO's report 'Organising for Social Justice' (2004 pp.69-74) outlines the uneven global progress of ratification of ILO labour standards and adherence to the principles of the declaration. The report also stresses positive initiatives to build effective employer-employee workplace co-operation, through processes such as the Social Dialogue and International Framework Agreements (IFAs). The ILO's Social Dialogue program draws together employers and employees, sometimes with the participation of government and unions, to resolve economic or social issues and promote 'democratic involvement among the main stakeholders in the world of work.' IFAs are a specific expression of social dialogue, negotiated between employers, workers and unions and designed to facilitate dialogue and reconcile corporate and employee needs. A recent IFA reached between food industry multinational Danone and unions led to formal recognition of trade unions rights and consultation on business restructuring.

A number of employers have addressed workplace rights or forms of exploitation particular to their industries. Birch and Paul (2003 pp.116-123) point to various companies, including Levi-Strauss, Body Shop, Gap, Berri and Reebok which have embraced principles such as the payment of fair wages, environment protection, racial tolerance and guidelines for contractors on the rights of women and children. Birch and Paul also note that these reforms were often prompted by NGO or union pressure, or ILO initiatives.

Deregulation and the language of 'freedom'

Implementing the rights that Sonnenberg and the ILO recommend requires both a co-operative spirit between employers and employees and government intervention in defence of such rights. Intervention is often represented as an outmoded and prescriptive practice. Yet the advocates of deregulation relentlessly preach and practice prescriptive and interventionist strategies. The Howard Government has intervened in workplace relations to uphold managerial prerogative, although the Government professes to leave the rights of employees to the operation of the market. Yet the market – effectively, employers - is guided by the legislative framework imposed by the Government.

Deregulationists such as Des Moore of the Institute of Private Enterprise urge the Government to new forms of intervention favourable to business and the market. Moore advocates a prohibition of the right to strike, removal of 'union privileges' to picket or enter workplaces, and removal of most of the 'absurd' 20 allowable matters from wage awards – matters which include regulation of working hours, pay rates, a range of leave entitlements, overtime provisions, redundancy pay, dispute settlement procedures and notice of termination. The AIRC's defence of these provisions apparently reflects its 'outdated and erroneous beliefs.' As the prejudicial language reveals, Moore's prescriptive and highly interventionist proposals are designed to promote specific policies and privilege an ideological choice. The containment of 'allowable matters' as a small range of workplace entitlements as defined under s.89A of the Howard Government's Workplace Relations Act is designed to curtail and control employee workplace rights; an allowable matter represents, in the context of the Government's deregulatory intentions, a right reluctantly conceded and whose legitimacy is disputed. Moore simply avoids any acknowledgement of the complexities or negative impact of his interventionist strategy, and its blatant conflict with Australia's obligations under UN and ILO declarations ('Right to strike should go', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 October 2004). Moore's views are broadly shared by editorial opinion in the business press and in policy statements by leading employer organisations: for the advocates of market economics, further redistribution of power from the employee to the employer is justified by a narrative of creating a modernised and dynamic economy, in which 'freedom' will prevail, albeit freedom of a narrow and regulated form. The *Financial Review* believes that embracing further workplace deregulation will liberate '...employers' freedom to organise their workforce as efficiently as possible.' Note the employer-employee relationships recommended by this statement: employers have organisational control; the workforce is a passive instrument waiting to be acted upon by the employer's 'freedom' ('Turbocharging productivity', AFR editorial, 12 October 2004; ACCI 2002; BCA 2004).

Governments also actively resist initiatives to re-establish worker protection and rights. The Howard Government's online information about the Workplace Relations Act offers 'a guide to employer's rights'; it is silent on employee rights (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2004). The New South Wales Labor Government has also intervened in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission to oppose the union application in the Secure Employment Test case, which seeks to provide casual workers with greater employment security (Contentions of the NSW Minister for Industrial Relations 2004). By contrast, the federal Labor Party has committed to offering casual workers greater industrial protection including the option of permanent part-time work (*Australian Financial Review*, 28 January 2004).

Given the legislative and global economic context, unions must engage with rather than resist deregulation. It remains problematic whether the abolition of AWAs by a future Labor government would have much impact; employers may still resort to individual contracts under common law. The growth of individual contractors, and increased opportunities for employees to work from home, also reflect the influence of new technology in opening up work patterns that cannot be tamed by strict regulation. A new narrative of Australian social citizenship needs to draw on elements of the ACTU's statement of values, Sonnenberg's Employee Bill of Rights and ILO conventions and declarations to establish a set of principles that are sufficiently adaptable to the needs of diverse workplaces. A new narrative of citizenship and entitlement must acknowledge the limited reach of union organisation. Citizens must be able to obtain satisfaction of their needs and aspirations in the wider framework of public policy and public institutions, and in discrete workplace structures that reflect a spirit of employee consultation and respect.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a new narrative of social citizenship is required in order to reaffirm workers' rights to equitable conditions of work and opportunities to participate in civic life. This echoes Somers' argument that we form our sense of identity through our participation in both work and society in which stories about ourselves and our social relationships play a key role. Reference has been made to an Employee Bill of Rights, based on the 1998 ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which could strengthen the obligation on employers to consult with their employees and help workers realise their aspirations as members of civic

society. Such a Bill would require cooperation between employers and employees as well as government to intervene where rights were threatened or abrogated.

In our brief overview of developments over the past century, it is clear that the legitimacy of state intervention to support and advance the rights of workers as citizens has been progressively undermined. The 'new province of law and order' promised by H.B. Higgins through compulsory arbitration of industrial disputes, was aimed not only at securing wage justice for workers but recognised that unions has a legitimate role in representing workers, while also upholding the rights of managers to manage their workplaces. However, this has been undermined by laissez-faire liberalism which has been reasserted in the name of creating a productive nation at the cost of workers' entitlements and rights, not only in the workplace but also in their social citizenship. Unions have played an active and creative social role in the past, not only by campaigning for decent wages and working conditions, but also by ensuring that workers had sufficient non work time to engage in family, community and civic life. The rights of unions therefore need to be strengthened so that they can play a more active role in cultivating social citizenship and creating better conditions under which civic participation will flourish. Hence, labour market deregulation which undermines collective forms of activity will, if taken to its logical conclusion, destroy workplace rights and participation in civic life for many workers who lack the opportunity for collective voice and action.

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