

Too old to work and too young to die? Older workers, changing labour market patterns and the dilemma for trade unions

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ABSTRACT

The contradictory push-pull policies of the past decade concerning the place of the older worker in the labour market reveals a dilemma for trade unions in developed countries, and Australia is no exception.

The paper focuses on Australia with some comparison to other countries, and looks at the shift from early exit to employment retention strategies, contrasting the evolution of public policy towards retaining ‘older’ workers with disjointed and sometimes stealthy corporate policies for cheapening the wage bill.

The OECD backflip on extending the working life of the older worker, however, create a ‘contested terrain’ for trade unions.

Using Australian and internationally comparative data, the paper begins by looking at the two dimensions of the contested terrain for trade unions: the diversity of working patterns among older workers; and the growing diversity of personal objectives around the work-life balance, a growing diversity that has a gender as well as an age component.

It then looks at three dilemmas that are posed to unions by the new contested terrain. These are: the issue of how to craft recruitment and retention strategies for older workers which reflect their diversity; and the challenge of engaging older workers in the union renewal struggle, since workers who are 45 –54 years of age represent the most unionised age slice in Australia. The third dilemma that unions face is crafting a plausible, strategic and industry-specific response to the long-held belief that older workers who ‘stay on’ disadvantage labour market entry for younger workers.

“Too old to work and too young to die” ends by examining the potential role for ‘the prematurely elderly’, workers 45 years old and older, in the union renewal struggle. Specifically, it looks at existing Australian and international examples of their contribution to the 4 Rs of union renewal : recruitment, retention, representation and re-engagement.

