

The demise of Australian shipping: Power and control in industrial relations

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ABSTRACT

This paper will argue that the demise of the Australian shipping industry, with its repercussions for Australian seafarers and their unions, lends weight to two propositions.

Developments in industrial relations can only be properly understood by an examination of the wider economic, political and ideological environment in which they take place. A conventional, bargaining model approach does not always capture the relevant variables, and the globalised shipping industry represents the ultimate form of unfettered capitalism and demonstrates, all too graphically, the implications for labour of further increasing the influence of capital, or at least certain sections of capital, over the regulation of the labour market.

In respect of the first proposition, the paper will attempt to show that while certain developments within the industry have been highly significant to its demise, it has been the increased globalisation of the industry, along with the dramatic shift to the right in the policies of the Australian Government that are the ultimate determinants. Moreover, these government policies are underpinned by and, in turn, are reinforcing of, the growing conservatism and self absorbed individualism of the Australian public.

The second section of the paper will attempt to show that globalised shipping is “free enterprise at its freest” (Langewesche, 2003). It satisfies a number of the major conditions for perfect competition and its operation has been disastrous for labour, ie the seafarers who are not officers. They are poorly paid, work extremely long hours and are subject to various forms of abuse. Moreover, despite a well organised and active international union, this situation seems likely to continue. Finally, under the policies of the Howard Government, these exploitative and degradating working conditions are now to be found on the Australian coastal trade.

Reference

Langewesche, W (2003) “Anarchy at Sea”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September.

