



Phil Teece

*Manager, personnel
& industrial services*

This month *inCite* focusses on education, training and workplace issues. *Picketline* therefore takes a look at differing approaches to workplace reform in Australian organisations and doesn't much like a lot of what it sees.

In the past two years Australia has seen unprecedented industrial relations change. Both the law and practice of employment regulation have already been radically restructured. And further change is certain. We have moved, with almost indecent haste, to a system of local bargaining and enterprise level agreements which is producing a new and remarkable diversity in wage outcomes. A major recent survey by the *Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research* has shown wide disparities in wage increases secured under enterprise bargaining in the previous 12 months. They vary from 1.5 per cent to 14.8 per cent in the *manufacturing* sector, 0.7 per cent to 14.8 per cent (*recreation*), 0.3 per cent to 10.1 per cent (*metals*), 0.7 per cent to 10.1 per cent (*mining and construction*) and 0.8 per cent to 11.3 per cent in *public utilities*.

The diversity of these results represents a revolution in Australian wage fixing. For decades, wage levels in one part of an industry have been set with close reference to rates applying elsewhere in the same sector. Now it seems clear that, once organisations step into the enterprise bargaining stream, the notion of industry-wide standards is rapidly set aside. It is therefore probable that one of Australian industrial relations' most enduring elements — industry wide flow-on of wage settlements — is a thing of the past.

But industrial relations reform is only one part of much wider change in Australian enterprises. Industrial relations never takes place in a vacuum. Today, it can be argued that, for all their historic significance, the new IR processes will not in themselves be the major determinants of whether Australian organisations — and whether libraries and librarians-prosper in a new era of work organisation. Rather, the broader notion of workplace reform itself, in which industrial relations processes are merely means to that end, will be the real driver of change in the working lives of Australian employees. There are, however, competing models for reshaping Australian enterprises. And very probably the results of this competition will determine whether change offers employees personal development, more interesting jobs and a greater say in how their work is performed, or whether they are locked into an environment of increasing insecurity, casualised short term jobs and minimal opportunity for career development.

In this context, it can only be disturbing to note the extent to which Australian management still holds traditional views of how work should be organised and managed. Efficiency is still strongly associated with strict division of labour, strong managerial prerogative and control. 'Mean and lean' remain as accurate descriptions of management approaches to the workforce in many organisations, notwithstanding corporate plans which describe the workforce as 'our most valuable resource'. In reality, employees are too often seen as a cost overhead to be cut, casualised and cast off as a first reaction to business pressure. There are exceptions, of course, but traditional reluctance to invest in the workforce as a resource for development is still dominant in Australia.

For years a major barrier to organisational improvement has been created by adversarial industrial relations, based on managerial prerogative and a narrow negotiating agenda. Lack

Both the law and practice of employment regulation have already been radically restructured. And further change is certain. We have moved, with almost indecent haste, to a system of local bargaining and enterprise level agreements which is producing a new and remarkable diversity in wage outcomes.

of trust between managers and managed has been a continuing problem. It should, therefore, be obvious that mutual trust and co-operation will not be achieved simply by recourse to traditional methods. A more positive, expansive and inclusive approach to workplace reform accepts a broader role for employees. It begins with the notion of a negotiated, agreed framework for organisational development, in which work structures, practices and skills can change. It sees enterprise bargaining as being primarily about increasing communication and consultation between management and the workforce. It takes 'employee relations' far beyond traditional terms of employment into areas once excluded by managerial prerogative. But this cannot be successful if commitment is superficial. There must be a genuine broadening of the negotiating agenda and a willingness to listen to the suggestions and views of the workforce.

This is not just 'pie in the sky'. It is happening in some Australian organisations, and they are reaping rewards from the time and effort spent. Sometimes these more enlightened policies can be found in libraries: two examples are the admirably broad and positive enterprise agreement negotiated by Eastern Regional Libraries in Melbourne and the wide-ranging best practice program commenced by Newcastle City Council in New South Wales [*features on both these programs appear elsewhere in this edition*]. Organisations such as these are taking the trouble to pursue a more positive approach to workplace change because they realise that it represents an example of congruence between equity and efficiency.

Sensitivity and concern for people should be a crucial element of any sustainable organisational change program. Of course, fairness suggests it anyway; but so too does efficiency. Because no organisation, however tough or determined it may be, will achieve sustainable goals unless its staff are committed to them. A climate of fear, uncertainty and confusion about the future will logically produce only frightened, risk-averse employees who are unable or unwilling to grasp the nettle of organisational improvement. As Dr John Mathews so clearly points out in his excellent study *Catching the Wave: workplace reform in Australia*, Allen and Unwin, 1994, ISBN 1 86373 717 0, 'most programs of organisational change are abject failures'. Is it any wonder, when so many attempts to change organisations and lift efficiency begin with deliberate threats of job cuts and reductions in employee benefits?

Work in most Australian organisations, including libraries, is changing very rapidly. This involves historic redefinition of industrial relations, major changes to training and education policies and redesign of organisational structures and work practices. Most of the changes taking place in organisations are necessary, but employees need to be helped to see that this is so. It is Managements need to ensure that staff are 'given a map- even if the map has uncharted regions'. To negotiate that map they need navigating skills. If they haven't got them, and no effort is made to provide them, they will surely fail. Good managers will recognise this and approach efficiency improvement in ways which go beyond simply reducing direct costs, to seek sustainable results through sympathetic management of the workforce. Whether a majority of Australian organisations are able to make the shift to this more enlightened, enabling and inclusive managerial style will perhaps be the most important determinant of success or failure in both enterprise bargaining and workplace reform. ■