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Agency Work and the Evolving Employment Model in Australia

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The development of agency employment is instructive in the ways the standard employment, together with workforce collectivisation, can be undermined, together with exposing the inadequacies of national systems of labour regulation. This article reviews agency employment in Australia in the context of a shifting national employment model and underlying labour regulation regime. The trend is towards an individualised and de-collectivised employment model where increasingly work and work arrangements are becoming more fragmented and diverse. The rise of agency work has been steady, from a low base, and across many OECD economies (Burgess and Connell, 2004). This has been mirrored by the strong growth in agency employment in Australia (Burgess, Connell and Rasmussen, 2004). Through the ongoing development in agency work we can see at play some of the forces that are shaping national labour employment models and challenging the traditional employment model. These include the forces of globalisation (associated with the presence of transnational agency operators), the forces of restructuring (especially through outsourcing and the privatisation of public sector activities), the role of business process re-engineering (downsizing/re-contractualisation) the attempt to commodify labour (captured by the brokerage of labour services) and de-collectivise labour (through substitution of agency workers for direct employees). Agency employment is diverse and imposes challenges for trade unions, labour regulations and for user organisations (Hall, 2006). The agency sector is symptomatic of many of those pressures that are challenging standard employment, collectivised labour relations and job security. This article explores these developments in Australia by looking at what the agency sector itself says about itself, what it does, and what is revealed by the emerging patterns of agency employment. In Australia agency employment remains a relatively small component of the workforce, yet it contains the possibilities for what could come, in terms of an emerging employment model in a neo-liberal regulatory regime.

References

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