# Special Issue on Industrial Relations and Global Labour Standards

The five papers in this special issue are chosen from a larger number submitted to the Session on Industrial Relations and Global Labour Standards at the 13th World Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association in Berlin. They illustrate very well the variety of issues arising in this connection.

When the idea of 'labour standards' is examined, most people in industrial relations think of legal instruments such as those first introduced by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the 1920s. These standards were adopted by a consensus of members of the ILO, that includes private parties, employer and labour organizations. This system still functions and has received greater attention since the transformation of economic and political systems in Europe and Africa and the expansion of global economic activity. The principles developed by the ILO over 75 years have been imported into regional trading agreements, including the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation, an appendix to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Dombois paper in this symposium illustrates problems arising from the inclusion of labour standards in regional trade treaties, and indeed in any transnational system of legal regulation of labour conditions. He establishes criteria for measuring the effect of these instruments.

Legal regulation is still central to global labour standards, but inevitably based on the experience of member states. Block, Berg and Roberts carried out an exhaustive comparison of labour standards in the United States and the European Union. They found important distinctions between the US and Europe in regulating employment relations and industrial relations. The EU puts a higher premium than the US on formal protection for workers. Their work highlights the difficulty of formulating labour standards in the twenty-first century.

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When the recent debate on labour standards began, workers and their representative organizations were assumed to support the new standards, as they did in the context of the ILO. In the past 20 years, however, a debate has arisen about the position of workers in developing countries. It is often argued that international labour standards are a form of protectionism for workers in developed nations, and that new standards would limit the ability of developing countries to formulate their own policies for development. The Griffin, Nyland and O'Rourke paper is the first attempt to test this argument empirically. The authors carried out a survey among trade union activists at three international labour meetings, asking delegates a variety of questions about international labour standards. The answers will surprise some readers. Delegates were strongly in favour of such standards, and the degree of support was considerable from both developed and developing countries.

The march of international labour standards has not been rapid or without reversals. Perhaps the most significant theme from the papers in this part of the Berlin Congress is the attention to the efforts of private parties to achieve harmony in labour conditions. The Greven and Verma papers illustrate two elements of this process. Greven shows how an American union used the tactics of a 'corporate campaign', i.e. propaganda and political pressure developed in the US against a German-owned employer that was displaying a confrontational approach to a local union in the United States. The German media and opinion leaders were startled by this tactic, which they had not encountered previously. Greven outlines the advantages and limits of a corporate campaign that in this case in Germany was successful.

Verma examines both the employer side of the industrial relations equation and legal regulation. In response to domestic and international political pressures, a number of companies with operations in developing countries have adopted 'corporate codes of conduct.' These codes supplement legal regulation. Among legal obligations, those that focus on procedures allow nation states to work out their own compromises without undermining national sovereignty. A mix of private and public action may be more effective than legal regulation.

Due to space constraints, only a limited number of the papers presented at the World Congress on this topic are included in this issue of the *Journal*.

Readers who wish to pursue this topic in greater depth can refer to the Congress website: <www.fu-berlin.de/iira2003/>.

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