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## Labour and value: new challenges for work and industrial relations in a post-pandemic era

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, a highly disruptive crisis event, significantly impacted economies, societies and organisations globally. It also brought questions of labour and its value to the fore, particularly as workers from key occupational groups sought to protect the most vulnerable individuals in society. It also triggered a mass re-evaluation of the meaning we assign to work. But to what extent has a fundamental re-evaluation of work, labour and value taken place in the aftermath of this crisis? In this introduction to the Special Issue of the 2023 AIRAANZ Conference, we examine this question, exploring new challenges facing labour and value in the aftermath of the pandemic and inviting scholarly discussion on emerging ways of valuing labour that promotes decent work and sustainability.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Labour; value; industrial relations; work; COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

Emerging out of the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic, new, yet remarkably familiar challenges are on the horizon in the fields of industrial and employment relations. In this Special Issue of the 2023 AIRAANZ Conference, we present papers that strike at the heart of ongoing debates and discussions concerning the study of *labour and value* that were central to the conference theme. Not only was the pandemic a significant health and economic crisis, but a crisis that impacted work, labour and livelihoods (Gavin et al. 2022). The pandemic placed the value of work and labour at the fore, prompting discussion about how we value, or need to re-evaluate, work and labour (Wahlquist 2022). After two years of online conferences, necessitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, scholars re-connected at the AIRAANZ Conference over three days in February 2023 to discuss the dialectics between labour and value, situating them within their material processes and social relation. Significantly, the 2023 conference also marked the 40th anniversary of the founding of AIRAANZ, which offered an opportunity to examine evolving perceptions of the value and importance of labour in our changing environments. With the world of work ‘transformed’ by the pandemic (Gavin et al. 2022), we turn to reflect on questions of labour and value at the intersections of the dynamics of capitalist economies and the

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diverse experiences of workers, and encourage discussion on emerging challenges for the field.

For the first time, the conference was hosted on Magnetic Island in North Queensland – Yunbenun, the traditional land of the Wulgurukaba people – in a spirit to embrace conferencing in more regional geographies. Two keynotes were delivered by Professor Patrice Jalette from the Department of Industrial Relations at the Université de Montréal on issues arising from labour shortages, and Gail Barry, Traditional Owner of the Great Barrier Reef as a Kuku Nyngunkal Elder of the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Nation, Chairperson of the First Nations Women’s Legal Services Qld Inc, and former Member of the Queensland Stolen Wages Reparations Taskforce. In a heartfelt address reflecting on her penitentiary-like upbringing on Palm Island, Gail emphasised the intergenerational trauma endured, stating that ‘they put a prison in our heads’, while underscoring the transformative power of education to overcome barriers and ‘break through’.

Of significance, a panel discussion was held featuring Māori, First Peoples, Pākehā, and Katiya (non-Indigenous) speakers who shared their experiences in indigenising and decolonising curricula. Former AIRAANZ President Dr Julie Douglas (AUT) convened the panel which highlighted the importance of cultural confidence and genuine engagement, cautioning against tokenism. The presenters emphasised the significant influence that academics wield in shaping generational perspectives and acknowledged the historical dominance of Euro-centric ideologies in universities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Professor Johanna Macneil (RMIT) provided insights into institutional strategies at RMIT while Associate Professor Ella Henry (AUT) spoke to te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) obligations at Auckland University of Technology. Dr Mark Jones (University of Melbourne) and Pro Vice-Chancellor Professor Mark Rose (Deakin University) called for a critical examination of colonial hegemony within educational institutions and the need to decolonise academic spaces. Dr Jones further advocated for active resistance to the status quo and the identification of allies willing to share experiences, opportunities and risks with Indigenous communities.

In acknowledging those who have helped forge the field of industrial relations, the conference paid a fitting tribute to Emeritus Professor Ray (Raymond) Markey following his passing in 2022. Ray was a champion in industrial relations research and practice in Australia and internationally, considered ‘one of Australia’s leading labour historians and industrial relations scholars’ (Thorntwaite 2023, 238). Ray leaves behind a strong legacy to the field, having produced over 130 books, articles and chapters over his career across areas of climate, the labour market, employee voice and participation, trade unions, labour history, comparative industrial relations, and the institutions of work (Thorntwaite 2023).

In this Special Issue, we examine two key themes addressed during the conference. The first theme explores labour and value, featuring three papers. These look into the value of indigenous perspectives in research, as well as the intersections of labour, value and work in the healthcare and teaching professions. The second theme explores value within the context of climate, labour and regional development. Here, we examine three papers that tackle a range of issues around climate change, voice, labour shortages and regional development. Our editorial introduction concludes by considering emerging challenges for the field of industrial relations and proposing avenues for future research to advance theory and practice.

## Labour and value

In the wake of the pandemic, a growing body of literature has emerged, grappling with profound shifts and re-evaluations surrounding the value of labour and nature of work more generally (Herman et al. 2021; International Labour Organization 2023). In her article based on her Presidential Address, Noelle Donnelly takes an in-depth analysis of the ongoing debate surrounding the value of work and labour, pioneering indigenous perspectives in this re-evaluation process. From the outset of her article, Donnelly reminds us how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated discussions about the reassessment of labour's value: 'As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, political, economic, health and well-being and technological and environmental disruptions all came into play at once, forcing a re-evaluation of underlying assumptions of the value of labour' (pp. 1–2). Yet, while the article foregrounds its theoretical analysis in the value of three 'types' of labour – essential labour, women's labour, especially that of ethnic women, and academic labour – Donnelly, contends that long-lasting changes in valuing labour and work have yet to emerge.

Donnelly's analysis of labour and value departs by calling for a fundamental reassessment of the value of labour. She specifically urges a challenge to the conventional economic framing of labour as merely a commodity and pioneers theoretical analysis through an indigenous lens. In doing so, the article draws a considered link between value and worth, arguing that 'in modern-industrial or post-industrial Western cultures', value is often synonymous with 'worth', which is closely tied 'to economic values, and to "utility", which is primarily linked to economic perceptions of usefulness' (p. 2). Yet, through this entrenched framing, minimal changes have occurred in the worth, utility and status of certain groups including essential workers, women, especially those from ethnic backgrounds, and academic workers (p. 7). Donnelly's article transcends traditional economic views, calling for a reimagining of these constructs, specifically through the incorporation of indigenous perspectives, enabling a more holistic understanding of worth, utility and status of labour – one that offers greater recognition of collective social wellbeing.

Next, labour and value are examined within two key professions – healthcare and school teaching – two professions deemed 'essential' in response to the pandemic. In their article, Hussain, Franken, Bentley and Jogulu explore the value of doctors' work in Pakistan's public sector, offering important insights into the alignment of doctors' work with the concept of decent work. Through a framework that considers various contextual and occupation-specific factors, their study sheds light on the factors that both enhance and diminish the value of doctor's work within the broader ambit of decent work. The research identifies a sense of fulfilment as a significant element of enhancing the value of work for doctors, emphasising the importance of serving others, receiving recognition, and engaging in professional development (Buowari 2022; Ferraro et al. 2020). These findings resonate with the psychological and sociological dimensions of decent work, highlighting the intrinsic motivation that drives doctors to persevere in their duties, even amidst challenges such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Duffy et al. 2017).

Their study also underscores the critical role of organisational and healthcare system-level strategies in mitigating challenges faced by doctors in Pakistan's public sector. Recommendations include improvements in work environments, safety measures, and

the provision of essential facilities, with the Ministry of National Health Services of Pakistan playing a central role in rectifying healthcare system deficiencies. By addressing these challenges, policymakers and healthcare organisations can improve working conditions for doctors, ultimately contributing to the fulfilment of conditions outlined in the concept of decent work (Hafeez et al. 2023; The Lancet 2020).

Turning to the teaching profession, Gavin and McGrath-Champ chart the growing crisis stemming from work intensification, mounting workload demands, and administrative burdens faced by teachers. This is a significant issue that the authors note has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst ongoing changes to teaching curriculums, increased administrative tasks, prolonged work hours, increased parental expectations, growing accountability requirements, and diverse student learning needs, the authors provide valuable insights into the pervasive ‘workload problem’ confronting teaching professions, even predating the pandemic. Gavin and McGrath-Champ attribute these challenges to governmental neoliberal ideology and to marketisation and competition within schooling systems, that have amplified accountability for schools and teachers, resulting in heightened workloads and work intensification that burden teachers with policy outcomes.

The authors question the undervaluation of teachers’ labour by society and policymakers, particularly in the context of the COVID crisis. Their discussion underscores the pressing need to address workload problems as teachers grapple with new teaching methods, including online learning, and heightened work demands in the post-pandemic landscape. Gavin and McGrath-Champ propose a research roadmap to explore how the pandemic could shape teachers’ future work and delivery. They underscore the importance of ongoing debates on workload and work intensification, as well as the influence of technology in shaping teachers’ work, which could provide crucial insights for tackling workload issues. This contribution enriches ongoing discussions on work intensification and attrition in the teaching profession, linking workload issues to teacher well-being in the post-pandemic era (Johnson and Coleman 2023), and advocating for policy changes to address the root cause of the problem.

## **Climate, labour and regional development**

In the second theme of this Special Issue, we examine labour and value in the context of climate change and the intersection with labour markets, particularly focusing on regional economies. In their article, Orsatti and Dinale examine women’s voice at the intersection of climate change, work and industrial relations in Australia. While extant research (e.g. Goods 2017) has theorised the crucial connection between climate change and work, particularly focusing on the impacts and experiences of vulnerable groups in the transition to a low-carbon economy, Orsatti and Dinale expand on theoretical debates in the just transitions literature by elevating the voice of women and advancing a gendered lens in the analysis of climate impacts. Their contribution is significant as the perspectives of women have, so far, been underrepresented in policy debate on Australia’s climate change policy. The authors contend that in many developed nations, including Australia, climate policies and debates among key industrial relations stakeholders rarely incorporate or apply a gender lens to consider the implication of climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Drawing upon policy documents from the National Women's Alliances – a series of bodies that collaborate with the Federal Government to prioritise women's voices in policymaking – they use text-mining and quantitative content analysis to examine how women's experiences of natural disasters inform policy at the intersection of climate adaptation and industrial relations. Their findings offer key insights into implications for family and community care, employment, recognition of women's roles and resilience, as well as natural disaster response and recovery. Notably, their research reveals a predominant focus on reactive policy responses to natural disasters, rather than proactively addressing the gendered impacts of climate mitigation and adaptation in Australia's preparation for a just transition. In doing so, Orsatti and Dinale's article adds an important dimension to the climate change and just transitions literature which, so far, has largely ignored the valuable experiences and voices of women within policy debates.

Turning to the cases of Canada and North/Far-North Queensland respectively, Jalette and Boccalatte's contributions address the issue of labour shortages; an issue exacerbated by the pandemic for the former, and one causing significant strain on the economy yet endemic in regional Australia, for the latter. Both articles address labour as a proxy for the value of value: of bargain; of potential. Amidst mounting pressures in the labour market, Jalette's article confirms that Canadian workers successfully advocated for significant gains, prompting employers to intensify efforts in attraction and retention strategies against a backdrop of generous unemployment packages adding further strain. Jalette observes that in classic economic terms of demand and supply, it is logical for labour to gain from a situation of shortage. However, he raises the question as to why a similar trend did not manifest in Australia, leaving it open-ended as to whether it is a systemic issue. Although providing comparative data between Canada (and Quebec), Australia and New Zealand, Jalette does not delve into this aspect. While shortages and associated pressures were prevalent in unionised and non-unionised sectors in Canada, he contends that this trend was occurring in a relatively highly unionised market environment, a factor providing powerful tailwinds. However, Jalette notes that a closer examination of social dynamics at play reveals nonetheless that it did not make it easier for unions. He goes on to reveal significant challenges for workers and unions, such as increased workloads. The need to balance collective expectations and individual bargaining power complicated matters; while workers gained ground, the situation was nuanced, with unions navigating collective expectations and individual bargaining capacities. Jalette, thus, exposes a paradox: 'While this new context reinforces the ability of unions to demand and obtain more, union members now judge union action against the new context (. . .) The perception of an increase in individual worker bargaining power might eventually lead to a decreased demand for unionisation. Thus, labour shortages can be seen to both reinforce union power and potentially erode trade unions as an institution' (p. 12). Shortage pressures have eased marginally since the article was written, partly due to a significant increase in temporary migration in 2023, up to 8 times the level observed in 2015.

In an Australian context, focusing on Tropical Queensland, Boccalatte's article illustrates the profound impact of labour shortages across regional industries, particularly in primary industries such as agriculture, horticulture, and aquaculture, with a close examination of the Burdekin Shire. Her analysis aligns with the conclusions drawn by the other regional panellists in the plenary session of the conference: regional Queensland is

grappling with significant labour and skills shortages amidst a tight labour market. Barriers to training and re-training, automation and digital skill gaps especially in critical areas for green transitioning and decarbonisation, supply chain disruptions and low business confidence exacerbate the challenges. As a result, numerous projects worth millions of dollars are stalled due to the lack of available labour. To give a sense of the magnitude of the issue, Boccalatte notes that an anticipated shortfall of almost 50,000 workforce is projected for 2032. While she identifies practical initiatives and policies to navigate these challenges, addressing the situation begs for broader action and governance to address demographic shifts (e.g. infrastructure and immigration) and sustain a coordinated approach, rather than relying on ad-hoc measures left to individual stakeholders. According to Boccalatte, the key lesson is the recognition that potential remains unrealised (has mere value) without adequate labour, concluding with a witty reminder, that ‘without farming, you would be hungry, naked and sober’, underscoring the indispensable value of labour in sustaining essential industries and regions.

In their paper, Rainnie and Snell point out that regions dependent on fossil fuels face uncertain futures, with renewable energy transitions touted as solutions by governments and environmental groups. They analyse the potential for job creation and local development from offshore wind farms and hydrogen hubs, arguing that current discussions are too narrowly focused on job numbers without considering where and what kinds of jobs will be created. Their analysis reveals that most new jobs will be temporary and will primarily appear during construction. The authors note that such projects represent a broader trend of large-scale transformations in regional Australia driven by the need to decarbonise. However, they caution that the anticipated job opportunities are often overstated, as local job creation is limited by reliance on global supply chains and imported components.

They further note that the shift to renewable energy presents challenges, as the traditional focus on declining industries in isolated regions is no longer sufficient. For example, regions like Gladstone face the challenge of managing new resource booms rather than decline. Renewable energy projects, they suggest, are primarily driven by profit motives and the need to satisfy financial investors, calling for policies that support strong energy demand and growth. Rainnie and Snell conclude that local job benefits are uncertain, as global firms’ commitment to local hiring and training is weak. They caution against possible disruptions to local communities, such as rising rental costs and environmental impacts, which could lead to opposition. Finally, Rainnie and Snell argue that while there are positive developments involving Indigenous communities in renewable projects, genuine consultation and fair distribution of benefits are essential to avoid exacerbating existing inequities.

## Reflections and conclusion

We write this Special Issue on ‘labour and value’ in the context of a world of work reflecting upon and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic marked a very poignant and significant moment in time requiring us to re-evaluate – seemingly everything. As Chris F Wright raised in his Presidential Address at the 2022 AIRAANZ Conference, ‘The impact of the COVID pandemic, lockdowns and recessions since March 2020 have prompted many of us – perhaps all of us – to engage in a process

of re-evaluation. We have re-evaluated our lives and our priorities. We have re-evaluated our work – both in terms of what we do for work, and how and where we do it’ (2022, p. 11). Dabaja et al. (2023, 8) special issue in *Labour and Industry* in the same year similarly reflected on how the world of work is changing, emphasising how the pandemic ‘prompted a reassessment of essential work and the value attached to it.’

The pandemic therefore offered a novel opportunity for more ‘human-centred’ approaches to be taken by governments, unions, employers and other stakeholders to consider impacts of social, political and economic change on worker wellbeing, community sustainability, and economic growth, while designing appropriate policies and safeguards (Dabaja et al. 2023; Gavin et al. 2022). It also prompted a re-evaluation of whether societies and economies truly value various forms of work – not only in terms of wages paid for a job done, but also considering working conditions, and the respect and status conferred by others. As articulated in Donnelly’s presidential address, the pandemic served as a catalyst for change: ‘At first, the global nature of the pandemic appeared as a potential circuit-breaker, sparking a substantial re-valuing of labour’ (Donnelly 2024, 2).

Yet, as we transition away from the intensity of that unprecedented period, we must question whether there is a risk of society, business, policymakers and even researchers reverting to pre-pandemic business-as-usual perspectives and practices regarding work, labour and value. Donnelly notes that while ‘a “re-valuing” seemed to be underway’, she also reflects on ‘why the re-valuing of labour failed to bring about an increase in the worth of labour . . . prompting calls for a deeper re-thinking of the way that the value of labour is understood and measured and the use of classifications such as “essential/non-essential”, “skilled-semi-skilled” and “unskilled” work’ (2024, 3). Since, the pendulum has switched from ‘gratitude to greed’ – referring to the profit-driven inflation that emerged after the pandemic in what was termed ‘greedflation’ (Inman 2023), reflecting a shift from (a context of) ‘labour exhaustion’ to ‘labour extortion’.

Early in the crisis, attention was focused on gender and the value of care work. The pandemic showed just how much economies rely on the day-to-day work of social reproduction, sparking a conversation around how we value care work and reproduction. Similar themes were taken up in Gavin et al. (2022) special issue in *Labour and Industry*, examining the value of the work of those at the frontline of the pandemic, including healthcare workers, police and domestic workers. Indeed, much of society continues to rely on care work whether in the paid workforce such as school teaching, early childhood education or nursing, or unpaid domestic work undertaken at home. As Guy Ryder, former Director-General of the International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization 2020) noted early in the crisis:

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the always essential role of the working heroes of this pandemic . . . People who are usually invisible, unconsidered, undervalued, even ignored. Health and care workers, cleaners, supermarket cashiers, unpaid carers in their homes and communities – a large majority of women, frequently migrant workers, too often numbered among the working poor and the insecure.

Conversations about value, work and status continue, as well as around worker voice and wellbeing, and decent work, which are taken up by authors in this special issue. These conversations are urgent and important. Gendered analysis is also needed in assessing the impact of work. For instance, in climate change policy, Orsatti and Dinale call for



a more nuanced understanding of the role of women's voices in shaping a just transition, calling for a re-conceptualisation of just transition that considers the gendered nature of climate mitigation and adaptation. Similarly, feminist perspectives can help us debunk assumptions about worth and value and overturn enduring capitalist notions of productivity being purely related to paid work. Regarding geographies, there is opportunity to consider how labour might be valued in regional economies that are vital to community and growth.

Further analysis is needed to consider how the nature of work in traditional professions is changing, and what value we ascribe to essential professions. Hussain et al.'s examination of the factors influencing the value of doctors' work in Pakistan's public sector reinforces decent work. Their study not only contributes to the understanding of doctors' experiences but also offers practical implications for policymakers and healthcare organisations to improve working conditions and support the well-being of healthcare professionals. They call for further research to explore the experiences of healthcare professionals in different contexts and to deepen our understanding of resilience in challenging work environments. Similarly, Gavin and McGrath-Champ ask how the work of teachers as professionals may be better valued by policymakers and society, considering evidence of heavy work demands and pressures during the pandemic.

Above all, this collection of papers reflects the necessity for anti-capitalist policies and approaches that rethink labour and value in contemporary contexts. To conclude, we embrace the spirit of Donnelly's presidential address and her call for other scholars to embrace indigenous and other novel perspectives in the re-valuing of work and labour as a way forward, with the potential to rethink the status quo:

... it is important to consider where real progress might come from or, where a significant revaluation of labour might occur. To achieve lasting change that promotes fair and sustainable growth, we must address embedded assumptions and encourage diverse views on what it means to have worth, to be useful and to obtain status in our societies. This may require a closer examination of perspectives that question notions of value not linked to unfettered economic growth. (pp. 7–8).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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