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# Navigating the nexus of academic IR, policy and practice: the centrality of decent work

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that the intellectual heritage of academic industrial relations favours evidence-based engagement with contemporary employment and societal problems. These extend beyond the workplace and enterprise to include major policy challenges relating to the environmental crisis, poverty and inequality and the effects of technological change to which tired neoliberal orthodoxies offer few useful prescriptions. Effective engagement with policy makers and practitioners needs to centre around the concept of Decent Work, which can provide benefits to employers and the state as well as workers' wellbeing.

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## 1. Introduction

The theme of this year's conference is 'Navigating the Nexus: Politics, Profession, and Practice in Industrial Relations'. The *nexus* refers to the connection between scholarship on the one hand, and policy and practice on the other.

As an academic community, industrial relations (IR) scholars seek to understand and inform the real world of work through research that is current and relevant. This world is of course increasingly dynamic and challenging. It is now commonly described by the military acronym of 'VUCA' - an environment that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. This means that engagement between academics, policymakers and practitioners is more critical than ever to address the profound challenges that workers, enterprises and societies currently face.

This is of course far easier said than done. The world of work is not only VUCA but highly contested and political. And the decades long 'neoliberal' trajectory of western political economy presents a largely unreceptive environment for critical scholarship in the halls of power, whether in government, business or our own universities too.

This morning I first want to briefly reprise the case for the vibrancy and relevancy of our field. Then I will have a little vent about where we are in terms of major employment policy challenges that include (among others) the climate crisis, social inequality and the quality of work. I argue that IR has a lot of useful things to say about each of these given its fundamental focus on decent work.

I also believe that we have some useful if unlikely allies in researching and advocating for decent work, from international agencies to national HR associations. Here in Australia

and New Zealand we are also privileged to be able to draw upon indigenous conceptions of the world that emphasise people as humans, not just as resources.

## 2. The vitality of IR

Our Association was constituted in 1983, inspired in large part by the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA). Both organisations provide a friendly arena for researchers and teachers to exchange ideas from a range of disciplinary traditions and perspectives. Our members share an intellectual heritage of radical and progressive pluralism, and a concern with addressing workplace problems (Berridge and Goodman 1988; Kelly 2005; Voskeritsian 2014).

Academic IR is concerned with understanding the organisation and regulation of work or, more specifically, the employment relationship, as characterised by what Flanders (1974) termed its market and managerial relations. The former refers to the determination of pay, hours and other terms and conditions of the employment contract. The role of collective bargaining, and the state, has long been the primary concern in this area. The latter concerns the exercise of power, authority and resistance around strategies and practices designed to realise labour power, or discretionary effort, through various forms of motivation and control.

Marx's notion of 'labour power' is an important intellectual foundation of IR analysis, drawing attention to the fundamental indeterminacy of the employment relationship and what Edwards (1986) refers to as its 'structured antagonism'. A highly unequal but nevertheless mutual dependency between workers and employers generates multiple possibilities for cooperation and conflict at work. This balance of power is highly contextual, shaped by factors such as the skill and scarcity of labour as well as its collective organisation, political influence and rights granted by law, which together determine labour's countervailing power (Batstone 1988).

In this understanding, industrial relations is a broad and flexible field of study, reflecting the diversity of contexts in which the employment relationship is found. Its focus is expansive and multi-level, taking in what has been described as 'a whole bundle of subjects' (Berridge and Goodman 1988, 155). Being grounded in real-world contemporary problems, the discipline is naturally oriented to analyses of policy and practice, from the 'macro' political economy of labour market regulation to the 'micro' management of union relations in the firm and workplace.

This apparent eclecticism does not mean that IR scholarship is empiricist and atheoretical (Townsend et al. 2019). Far from it, as another feature of its curiosity and flexibility is multi-disciplinarity. As Meardi (2024, 26) notes, 'as a social science field of study, it draws on theoretical paradigms from different disciplines to frame theoretical statements on the meanings, causes and effects of the processes it studies'. This versatility means utilising concepts and methodologies from labour economics, law, history, industrial sociology and more recently organisational psychology, geography and politics.

Industrial relations remain, therefore, an agile discipline given the range of issues and problems it addresses and the rich heritage of intellectual resources it is able to bring to bear. Thomas and Turnbull (2025) note that this enabled IR scholarship to thrive even in challenging business school environments. In contrast to the more disciplinary-constrained US context, IR scholars in the UK and Australasia were better able to shift

from addressing the institutional problem *of* labour (focused on trade unions and conflict) to the pressing problems *for* labour such as a lack of voice and decent work (Wright 2023). In Australasia as well as the UK, IR academics were likewise able to co-opt the discourse of HRM to more or less carry on with what they were doing in their teaching and research.

So, IR scholarship has a lot to say, in a lot of ways, about a lot of contemporary issues and problems at work. We only have to look at the conference program for proof of that! The problem, as Chris Wright convincingly set out in his 2022 Presidential Address, is that the conversation is often one way (Wright 2023). There is a collective myopia within the political and business class when it comes to recognising let alone addressing the social, political and economic problems associated with the commodification of labour.

### 3. Policy challenges

Two of the biggest challenges of the age are the threat of *environmental collapse* and the social disintegration caused by *poverty and inequality*. The *technological revolution* that we are living through is another profound challenge, and one which could accelerate rather than mitigate the others depending on the policy choices made.

I want to suggest that a focus on decent work, which is natural terrain for IR, and should have broad political appeal, offers a way forward to engage these challenges. This is problematic if policymakers remain wedded to neoliberal diagnoses and prescriptions, which are in many ways the antithesis of a decent work agenda and indeed essentially caused these aforementioned crises in the first place. We need to keep beating the drum for decent work and seek alliances to press for this policy framework.

#### 3.1. *Marching towards environmental catastrophe*

Capitalism is a system based on constant private accumulation, but externalising costs and waste. Left to its own devices, it has no consideration of social value beyond satisfying immediate 'market' needs. Capitalism has achieved spectacular things but is now leading us to environmental disaster – the inevitable outcome, as the saying goes, of a rapacious drive for infinite growth within a finite world.

In a recent article in the IMF journal *Finance and Development*, the economist Daniel Susskind notes that 'The relentless pursuit of growth has come at a huge price, with destructive consequences we do not yet fully understand' (Susskind 2024, 46, 48). This damage includes the environment, but also inequality, and economic and social dislocation. 'We must use every tool at our disposal', he states, including regulation, taxes and incentives, 'to change the nature of growth and make it less destructive of the many other things we might value – from a fairer society to a healthier planet'. This echoes Tim Jackson's argument in *Prosperity Without Growth*, that we need to end our obsession with GDP and consumerism (Jackson 2009). Echoing feminist perspectives, we need instead a non-material conception of prosperity and work that values creativity and care.

But the climate crisis is accelerating. De-carbonisation efforts cannot keep up with the energy demands of population and economic growth, nor the digital economy. Data is the new oil, as Clive Humby once said, not just because of its value and ubiquity, but because of its environmental impact. All online activity has a carbon footprint, including every email, text and app use. In Ireland, a country similar in size to New Zealand, 82

datacentres consume as much electricity as the entirety of its urban dwellings, and each uses as much water as three hospitals (Naughton 2024). New Zealand will soon have two colossal hyperscale data centres run by Amazon and Microsoft to add to the one already established by CDC, placing huge demands on its energy infrastructure. And yet, of course, most of the data serviced and stored at great social and environmental expense is ROT – redundant, obsolete or trivial (Jackson et al. 2023). This is before we get to the much greater energy needs demanded by AI to service its graphics processing units. According to Goldman Sachs, a ChatGPT query uses 10 times as much electricity as an equivalent Google search (Gibson 2024). The International Energy Agency predicts that electricity demand from data centres worldwide is set to more than double in five years to equate to more than the entire electricity consumption of Japan (IEA, 2025). Neither is ‘renewable energy’ a realistic solution, given that it uses a huge amount of metals and minerals that are environmentally damaging to extract and difficult to recycle (Räthzel and Pulignano 2022).

A second existential threat is colossal pollution, which is profoundly damaging ecosystems, economies and human health. Late monopoly capitalism is a gigantic producer of pollution and waste. Consider the problem of plastic, which is of course a derivative of oil, and a problem that has only arisen in my lifetime. A recent study of 50,000 cities estimates that a fifth of all global plastic waste, equivalent to 52 million metric tonnes per year, is ‘unmanaged’ and either ends up in waterways (43%) or is burned (57%), leading to acute ecological and health problems (Cottom et al. 2024). Another study finds that the average brain is now 0.5% plastic by weight, contributing to the rise in dementia (Main 2024). Microplastic presence is also extensive in our other organs which leads to more disease including cancers. This is just one aspect of the massive discharge of airborne and residual pathogens which are a byproduct of global capital accumulation.

Well, what has all this got to do with IR? To answer this I would acknowledge AIRAANZ colleagues, including AI Rainnie and our immediate past President, Caleb Goods, who have helped position climate change as central to IR scholarship and practice in recent years (Flanagan and Goods 2022; Goods 2017, 2025; Rainnie and Snell 2023). It is relevant because the organisation of work helps drive these problems, and the organisation and experience of work is directly impacted by their consequences and mitigation efforts.

Accordingly, trade unions have sought to influence the policy process, though unsurprisingly have been largely marginalised. The European Green Deal, for example, a massive EU fund to support de-carbonisation, the circular economy and address pollution, is expressed in the union-friendly terms of ‘just transition’. A just transition strategy aims to anticipate and manage the economic shocks posed by climate and technological change through partnership based on equity. According to Eurofound (2024, 4), ‘for trade unions just transition means good-quality jobs, respect for labour standards, employee participation and collectively agreed solutions’. It focuses on generating skilled employment in the new economy, including for those displaced from the old. However, there has been little involvement of organised labour in developing and implementing the Green Deal even in the so-called social or coordinated market economies of the bloc. Policy remains in hock to vested interests.

This marginalisation of unions reflects their ‘reduced power, voice, agency and autonomy at work’ (Flanagan and Goods 2022, 493), and brings into question how far any transition will be substantively ‘just’. As we know, rights and protections for workers, as

consumers and citizens as well as employees, are rarely achieved without struggle, yet the capacity of the union and labour movement has been eroded for decades, enabling disinterest from those wielding power. This means not just fewer checks on environmental exploitation, but the acceleration of poverty and inequality too.

### 3.2. *Inequality and poverty*

Post-Covid inflation contributed to a ‘cost of living crisis’ across the western world and even those on average incomes struggled to cope with rising housing, energy, and grocery prices. A recent survey by The Australia Institute found that nearly three quarters of Australian workers had experienced a decline in real wages, and over half said their household was worse off than a year ago (Heap 2024). In Australia, 3.7 million households now experience food insecurity and the charity Foodbank provides relief to over one million people every month (IPSOS 2023). In New Zealand, there has been a 165% increase in the numbers receiving charitable food support since 2020, at nearly half a million in 2023 (New Zealand Herald 2023). This includes many people in lower-paid jobs who no longer have a ‘living wage’ even when in regular full time work.

Social inequality and the problem of the ‘working poor’ have been increasing for decades due to low real wage growth and a declining national income share to labour. Ever since the 1980s, a neoliberal orthodoxy has been followed by governments of various political hue across the anglophone world. This was first articulated by the UK Thatcher government with its mission to dismantle trade unions, the mixed economy and the welfare state. The result is a normalisation of extreme inequality and mass poverty which, as the title of a recent book from Danny Dorling (2023) attests, is indicative of a ‘shattered nation’ and a ‘failing state’. The UK model serves as a warning to us Down Under, so here’s a few pertinent facts about the UK from two authoritative reports released last year. These demonstrate that poverty is rapidly deepening, widening, and becoming more enduring (JRF, 2024; SMC 2024).

- 24% of the UK population is in poverty – more than 16 million people. Around 3.8 million people experience *destitution* (where they cannot afford to meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed). This includes around one million children.
- one in five part-time and one in ten full-time *workers* is in poverty. Two-thirds of working-age adults in poverty lived in a household where someone is in work. Given the nature of low paying and part-time jobs, the working poor are disproportionately women and from ethnic minorities.

Poverty and inequality are major social, economic and individual problems. First, and most obviously, those who are financially struggling experience a brutal existence. In a 2024 report on global mental health, the UK ranked the second worst of 71 countries, with only Uzbekistan scoring lower (Sapien Labs 2024). Individual stress is compounded by a wider sense of desolation and despair as poor communities fall into decay and disrepair. Even the British Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, in a speech on the 27 August 2024 lamented a ‘societal black hole’. Recognising this anomie is one thing, addressing it is another, and the Prime Minister has done little so far to roll back austerity,

restore trade union rights or introduce any taxes on wealth. Labo(u)r governments in New Zealand and Australia were similarly disappointing in their recent years of political tenure.

Low pay, and other factors such as expensive housing and childcare, make it hard for people to earn enough to save and materially progress. Any modern day Samuel Smiles should be reminded, as even *The Economist* (2015) notes, that 'it's expensive to be poor'. The 'poverty tax' (Karger 2007) is the price premia that low earners and people on welfare pay for energy and goods because of disadvantaged access to banking, credit and insurance, transport and other services. It also refers to the regressive impact of sales taxes and inflation, given that the poor have less discretionary spend and the bulk of income is consumed by essentials such as electricity, food and rent. Lower incomes thus intersect with higher expenses. The Discworld novelist Terry Pratchett (1993) illustrates it thus:

The reason that the rich were so rich, Vimes reasoned, was because they managed to spend less money. Take boots, for example ... A really good pair of leather boots cost fifty dollars. But an affordable pair of boots, which were sort of OK for a season or two and then leaked like hell when the cardboard gave out, cost about ten dollars. Those were the kind of boots Vimes always bought ... But the thing was that good boots lasted for years and years. A man who could afford fifty dollars had a pair of boots that'd still be keeping his feet dry in ten years' time, while the poor man who could only afford cheap boots would have spent a hundred dollars on boots in the same time *and would still have wet feet*. This was the Captain Samuel Vimes 'Boots' theory of socioeconomic unfairness.

Or, in the more succinct if less vivid words of the *Economist* again – the high cost of being poor means that 'inequality is worse than income figures alone suggest'.

Added to low pay and inflation is the problem of higher interest rates in recent years. The cost of living is impacted by the cost of borrowing because servicing loans for vehicles and homes leaves much less disposable income for goods and services that are also in any case increasing in price (Summers et al. 2024). Increasing wages alone is not an enduring solution. Our research into the living wage demonstrated gains for employers (through better recruitment, retention, motivation, and branding) as well as employee wellbeing but that this effect was continually undermined by the triple whammy of rising housing, energy and grocery costs (Arrowsmith and Parker 2023; Arrowsmith et al. 2021). The political economy of the living wage is such that it is not a micro-level employment issue. Unless policy addresses markets rigged in favour of landlords, privatised utilities and service oligopolies, employers and unions will struggle to deliver a living wage. Even lowering interest rates and inflation is not enough – there needs to be active measures to reduce housing costs (such as rent controls and increased public supply), initiatives to tackle consumer cartels and address windfall profits, as well as supporting unions so as to restore wage growth.

Poverty and inequality impacts everyone. It places severe brakes on economic performance, so perpetuating itself in developing and developed countries alike (Breunig and Majeed 2020). Joseph Stiglitz (2012) demonstrated how wage stagnation and extreme inequality which, as Piketty (2014) has shown, is the natural order of capitalism, serves to dampen productivity growth, even in this revolutionary technological age, *and* fuel economic crises through over-production and financial speculation. Similarly, Kumhof et al. (2015) argue that the acceleration of wealth inequalities, accompanied by mounting debt in lower and middle income households due to stalling real wage growth, triggered

both the Great Depression in 1929 and the Great Recession in 2007. The former led to fascism and war, and the latter prepared the way for Trump and other streams of contemporary national chauvinism.

So, poverty and inequality generate economic crises and political instability, yet policy has been making things worse! For example, the response to both the GFC and Covid pandemic involved massive so-called 'quantitative easing' (QE). By injecting funds into the financial markets rather than the real economy, QE inflates the asset prices of property and shares held by the rich, while spending cuts are inflicted on the poor and wider public through state austerity. The outcome is greater poverty and inequality. Also fundamental is the secular problem of 'wage suppression' due to the purposive weakening of trade unions. The erosion of trade union membership and influence was not just the product of deindustrialisation, globalisation and automation (Harrison 2024). It was instigated by deliberate corporate and political policies to weaken labour standards and prevent collective organisation. This is not me saying this, by the way, but the conclusion of a paper published by the IMF in 2020, headed 'Rebuilding worker power' (Mishel 2020). As usual, this process was most advanced in the US and the UK but we have seen it play out in New Zealand too, notably through the 1991 Employment Contracts Act, as well as various reforms of the Awards system in Australia.

The weakening of trade union power, such as it was, is mirrored by the concentration of *corporate* power and political influence (Khan 2017). This might almost be expected in small economies like New Zealand where we see duopolies or oligopolies across all the major sectors such as groceries, banking, energy and air travel. But the same applies even in a vast market such as the United States, where just four companies (Walmart, Costco, Kroger, and Albertsons) dominate the grocery industry; four beef packers control over 80% of their market; domestic air travel is dominated by four airlines; and many Americans have only one choice of reliable broadband provider. It is not just Bernie Sanders railing against corporate monopolists 'rigging the market' but the Wall Street Journal ('(a) growing number of industries in the U.S. are dominated by a shrinking number of companies', Francis and Knutson (2015), the Economist (2016), 'Profits are too high. America needs a dose of competition') and Forbes magazine (the US has 'become a nation of monopolies', Mauldin (2019).

This is a problem because anti-competitive practices stifle the innovation and productivity needed to sustainably support prosperity (Akcigit 2024). Instead, rent-seeking monopoly capitalism squeezes workers both as consumers and employees (Pellegrino 2023). Interestingly, it was Adam Smith who first noted how dominant players enforce barriers to entry and engage in price fixing of wages and goods to maximise profits (Salvadori and Signorino 2012). Popularly known for his work on the 'invisible hand' of the market, and the Promethean power of the division of labour, he warned against the effects of both in terms of monopolisation and the dehumanisation of work, the latter informing Marx's concept of alienation (Smith 2024). As a political economist, Smith saw the need for state regulation to address market failure.

The scale of contemporary poverty and inequality derives from a deficiency of decent work which is linked to anti-trade union policies and a failure to adequately regulate monopoly capitalism. The costs to society, and therefore, of course, to the economy, are vast in terms of health, education, housing, and crime. Workers bear the brunt of these poor social outcomes yet also pay the price by taxes imposed on

wages and consumption rather than on corporate earnings, capital gains, wealth, and inheritance (Byrne 2024). Meanwhile, the state is content to subsidise landlords and low paying employers via a system of in-work benefits and transfers.

The problem of poverty is an engineered one in wealthy nations. The opportunity cost is what we might have achieved as an economy and society if policies had been designed to reduce not enhance inequality. As documented by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) in their landmark book 'The Spirit Level', inequality is strongly linked to a plethora of adverse social and economic outcomes.

### **3.3. The worsening of work**

Work is central to physical and mental well-being (Wheatley 2022). Good quality work is characterised by decent earnings; good health and safety standards; job security and development; working time patterns that suit workers in duration and scheduling; and employee involvement and 'voice' (Warhurst et al. 2017). However, the evidence is that for more and more people, work is increasingly intense, insecure and tightly controlled (Gagné et al. 2021; Kalleberg 2018). One in five EU jobs are of low quality to the extent of posing a health risk (Green et al. 2011). In one real-time study, work was people's second lowest ranked activity of 36 in terms of wellbeing, just narrowly beating being sick in bed (Bryson and MacKerron 2017). As well as contributing to an epidemic of stress, the deterioration of work has also been linked by the Hans Böckler Foundation (2024) to the rise of populist and authoritarian politics, because people feel increasingly threatened and unheard in their daily lives. Again, all of this is linked to the weakening of trade unions.

#### **3.3.1. Unrewarding jobs**

Many jobs have low intrinsic *and* extrinsic reward. Some of these may be 'bullshit jobs', as one popular account described them, on the basis of their being unnecessary, or perceived by workers themselves as largely useless (Graeber 2018). Too many jobs today involve Sisyphean tasks lacking meaning, fulfilment or purpose. On the other hand are jobs that are profoundly socially useful – the 'essential workers' revealed by Covid lockdowns – yet are (to extend the terminology) 'shit jobs' (Soffia et al. 2022), in which workers are ground down through low pay, poor conditions and toxic management. In these jobs, high-level problem solving, coordination, communication and inter-personal skills are dismissed to sustain a narrative of 'unskilled' work (Bolton 2004; Burns 1997; Junor et al. 2009). This then serves as an apologia for poor pay and working conditions. Industrial relations scholars have long established that such conditions, and related gender and ethnic pay gaps, are a result of forces that relate to power rather than market supply and demand. In her 2022 Presidential Address, Noelle Donnelly (2023) rightly reminds us to draw on feminist and indigenous perspectives to help reframe the value of labour away from dominant economic conceptions that degrade and devalue socially useful service work, especially that performed by women. There is little sign yet of policymakers taking note.

#### **3.3.2. Poor management**

Good management, which means being supported, listened to and generally treated with dignity and respect, is a vital component of quality work, even more so in lower skilled

and low-paid jobs (Laaser and Bolton 2022; Stuart et al. 2016). Employees want managers who create a climate of trust by being 'approachable', 'competent', 'consistent', who 'act with honesty and integrity' and 'lead by example', according to research by the CIPD (2013).

It was Plato who first argued in his *Republic* that a true leader assumes authority reluctantly, exercises it in partnership with subordinates and 'does not by nature seek his own advantage but that of his subjects'. This concept of 'servant leadership' prioritises empathy, humility, and altruism, characteristics which manifest in listening to, supporting and empowering staff (Roberts 2014). There is now plenty of research demonstrating that this results in higher productivity as well as worker wellbeing, especially in Western contexts where it is less commonly observed (Zhang et al. 2021).

Inclusion is a common feature of indigenous leadership, which tends to adopt a more collective, longer-term and people-centred approach (Haar et al. 2019). The everyday reality for many though is of incompetent and bullying bosses. According to the Chartered Management Institute (CMI, 2023), 28% of workers leave their job because of their manager and a similar figure rate their current manager poorly. This reflects a lack of management training in what is often a high-pressure role, as well as poor promotion practices, but also hierarchical systems that encourage and reward self-serving narcissists, 'macho managers' and 'corporate psychopaths'. The Peter Principle means that the problem becomes worse at the top. One study of CEOs and top managers found they had psychopathic traits similar to patients of the UK Broadmoor secure hospital (Board and Fritzon 2004). Again, declining union density means declining management accountability and it is no real surprise that 'incompetent management is the largest cause of workplace stress' (Whetton and Cameron 2007, 117).

### 3.3.3. *Technostress*

Research shows that automation may enhance productivity and lead to some job growth (Oesh and Piccitto 2019), but it also displaces workers, especially in the first instance the less educated and skilled who may be difficult to redeploy (Aghion et al. 2020; Hunt et al. 2022). The IMF finds that 40% of global employment is currently exposed to AI, rising to 60% of jobs in advanced economies, and predicts that the scale and speed of Schumpeterian destruction will intensify already acute inequalities and social tensions (Cazzaniga et al. 2024).

However, the issue is not just about job loss but job quality. Automation can augment work but also makes some jobs more structured and unrewarding (Andersson et al. 2022; Smids et al. 2020). It can facilitate the worsening of employment terms and conditions through casualisation and organisational 'fissuring' (Gilbert and Thomas 2021; Weil 2014). There is also 'technostress' linked to work overload and the heightened complexity and urgency of tasks (Malik et al. 2022), as well as distress linked to technological surveillance (Ball 2021).

This is novel but not new. Over a century ago, Max Weber (1905) described how the rationalism and hyper-efficiency of industrial capitalism creates an 'iron cage' where bureaucracy and technology is used to control and inhibit human creativity. In the 1980s, Zuboff (1988) observed how early computerisation was used to control workers rather than liberate them from routine tasks. Now we have all-seeing but unseen forms of technological surveillance and control that amount to an 'electronic panopticon' (Lyon

1993) or ‘invisible cage’ (Rahman 2024). In a turbo-technological era, even the Economist (2015) raises alarm at the prospect of ‘digital Taylorism’ and the dehumanisation of work. The fear ‘is less about robots replacing work and more about work being turned into a robot-like experience’ (Spencer 2018, 8). These outcomes were long ago predicted by labour process scholars such as Braverman, who in his landmark *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* (Braverman 1974) forecast the large-scale displacement and proletarianisation of white-collar and professional work through technology.

Professions such as medicine, law, and politics are all increasingly stressful. We can just take a look around our own once ivory towers to see what ‘academic capitalism’ has done to a job originally defined by autonomy and scholarly worth (Jessop 2017). This term was coined by Slaughter and Leslie (1997) to describe the marketisation and managerialisation of the university in pursuit of revenues and rankings. This led to ever more centralised and autocratic decision making, greater control of staff through targets and metrics, work intensification and more precarious work. One recent report likens academic work to ‘a contemporary serfdom, where productive output is prioritised well and above any interest or concern in staff welfare’ (Watermeyer et al. 2024, 6). The OECD (2024) also highlights intense workload challenges posed by rapidly digitalised learning environments and notes the extra barriers confronting women and marginalised groups.

Beyond the workplace, technology is leading to more stressful lives through social media and over-consumption. In the 1960s, Marcuse (1964) argued that ‘advanced industrial society’ creates and satisfies ‘false needs’ in order to ideologically integrate individuals into a one-dimensional technological-consumerist society, perpetuating their alienation. This has reached an apogee with what Courtwright (2021: 6) calls ‘limbic capitalism’ – ‘a technologically advanced but socially regressive business system in which global industries, often with the help of complicit governments ... encourage excessive consumption and addiction’. To take one example, the rapid growth of predatory online gambling recently provoked a Lancet Commission to warn of a huge global threat to public health (Wardle et al. 2024). Yet you can’t even watch a sports game without being brainwashed to gamble and consume alcohol and junk food.

In sum, the disassembling and disempowering of the organised working class has helped fuel inequality, bad jobs and the deployment of technology to displace and deskill rather than enhance paid work. As the Nobel economist Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson documented in their recent book ‘Power and Progress’ (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023), in this sense the fourth industrial revolution is proceeding much like the first, before labour became organised, by accelerating exploitation and distress. Worries over jobs, housing and the climate crisis has led to what psychologists have labelled ‘future anxiety’ (Zaleski et al. 2019). Even prior to Covid, the wars in Ukraine and Palestine, and Trump 2.0, this is increasingly damaging our young people who are especially subject to trauma inflicted by contemporary media technologies and practices.

#### **4. Advancing the decent work agenda**

At this point I can almost hear you thinking, this is all a bit grim, Jim, is there anything positive, looking ahead? Yes, a little, maybe (!).

First, the case for decent work and worker wellbeing is increasingly self-evident. Workers in the twenty-first century deserve decent work and to live in a decent society.

Within firms, workers are stakeholders who invest a large part of their lives in their employment, and they should be suitably rewarded. Shareholders, who usually have a transactional relationship with the firm, tend to be amply rewarded to the extent that investment in physical and human capital – i.e. people – is impeded. The Bank of England's chief economist noted that in 1970, £10 out of each £100 of profits was typically paid to shareholders through dividends, but by 2015 that figure was between £60 and £70. The average holding had also declined from six years to six months. The rampant short-termism associated with 'shareholder value' meant that firms are 'eating themselves', he said (Weldon 2015).

There is an efficiency as well as equity case for a focus on worker wellbeing. As the human relations school long ago observed, decent work that is intrinsically as well as extrinsically rewarding is more likely to sustain worker satisfaction, motivation and performance (Ryan and Deci 2000). Without effective employment regulation, in the form of trade unions and enforced statutory rights, and the two are of course related, the risk is instead of a race to the bottom in which, as Findlay et al. (2017, 8) put it, 'providing bad jobs makes good business sense'. This is ultimately self-defeating but also socially damaging. A lack of decent work visibly undermines civilised society through what Beveridge called the 'giant evils' of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. Poor work, and the erosion of the welfare state, means that each of these are back with a vengeance (Armstrong 2017).

Now, during early industrialisation, when British governments first imposed health and safety laws against vocal employer opposition, Marx observed that the state was acting as the 'collective capitalist', taking a broader and longer-term view of capitalist interests on their behalf to ensure the social reproduction of labour power. Subsequent employment and labour law, as well as compulsory schooling and universal healthcare, were conceded through working class struggle, but also justified in terms of social cohesion and improving the stock of human capital. The state needs to rediscover this sense of purpose in the face of the many social, environmental and economic crises to which we are currently exposed, instead of refereeing a race to the bottom. It needs to step up and impose a robust regulatory system of what Wolfgang Streeck (1997) termed 'beneficial constraints', to level up the playing field for all, in the collective interests of employers as well workers.

The second tentative grounds for positivity, related to the undoubted merits of the case for worker wellbeing, is its increased recognition and prioritisation by a range of policy actors. Our first port of call is of course the trade union movement, whose entire *raison d'être* is decent work. Narrow economism is no longer a way forward, if it ever was. The new trade union vision involves a novel political economy articulated through social movement alliances and solidarity (Parker et al. 2021). For example, the New Zealand CTU recently launched a campaign called Reimagining Aoteroa Together in which the central premise is *Mahi ahuru* – good work – firmly located within a sustainable and inclusive economy:

'Everyone deserves good work – work that is secure and pays well, provides lifelong opportunities, fosters health and wellbeing, enables people to have a voice in the workplace, and contributes to a meaningful and fulfilling life. Our economy is dysfunctional. We have failing infrastructure that has been underinvested in for decades. We have a chronic shortage of quality and affordable housing. The tax burden is on working

people, rather than the wealthy. We have entrenched poverty and underfunded public services’.

Tackling these workplace and wider social ills, says the CTU, requires a genuinely just transition, harnessing technology to create environmental and economic resilience, reforming the tax and pensions systems, and investing in affordable sustainable housing.

Other allies include international agencies such as the ILO and the United Nations which articulated its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in terms of social and labour as well as environmental standards. These, alongside ILO regulatory instruments, have become increasingly important mechanisms to promote social responsibility and hold governments and enterprises to account (Van Tulder et al. 2021). The ILO’s Decent Work agenda has even influenced financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank to begin to recognise the importance of worker voice and labour market institutions in sustainable development and poverty reduction initiatives (Hughes and Haworth 2011). The OECD, too, has established a ‘Better Life Initiative’ and in 2020 set up a Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE). Its role is to ‘coordinate international efforts to put the well-being of people and the planet at the centre of policymaking’:

‘inequalities persist and environmental pressures are growing exponentially, compromising the well-being of current and future generations. At the same time, societies are facing new issues such as lower social connectedness and higher mental distress. A paradigm shift towards fairer distribution mechanisms within planetary boundaries, as well as a renewed focus on social and relational aspects of well-being is needed. Economies that generate higher well-being, lower inequalities and better health for people and planet are needed to tackle pervasive societal and environmental challenges’.

This ‘Beyond GDP’ approach speaks to the Australian Treasury’s Wellbeing framework (Treasury 2004) and Measuring What Matters initiative (2022) and the New Zealand Living Standards Framework (2019). Though concrete and enduring outcomes are so far slow and insufficient, at least the discourse may be shifting in the right direction. This includes closer attention to indigenous culture and values and how these may inform policies that generate better wellbeing for all (Sangha et al. 2024).

Other bodies with a close interest in mitigating capitalist self-harm include many of those representing human resource practitioners. The CIPD, for example, stresses the importance of ‘employee engagement’ whereby meaningful work and supportive leadership can enhance job satisfaction and performance. This ‘win-win’ is predicated on job features such as autonomy, responsibility, and variety; opportunities to learn and develop; positive support, coaching, and feedback; and a culture of trust and respect (Alfes et al. 2010). Such a purposive approach to employee engagement involves HR interrogating the employment relationship to address fundamental issues of employee voice, work design and management agency (Arrowsmith and Parker 2013). Employer sector associations may also express similar sentiments around improving the quality of work and management. In our recent Living Wage project, for example, representatives of industries such as dairy, hospitality and tourism expressed support of the Living Wage as part of initiatives to develop more sophisticated management strategies in their industry (Arrowsmith et al. 2020).

As Russo et al. (2023) note, what is necessary are effective human resource strategies that, in the terminology of the ‘AMO’ model, enhance workers’ motivation and opportunity as well as ability to perform. In practice this means a clearer focus on worker wellbeing, job design and ‘voice’, as well as management selection and development. Of course, speaking truth to power requires a particular set of skills and is something that a marginalised HR function, or weak employer association, may not be willing or able to do, which somewhat ironically can also be linked to the reduced leverage associated with union decline (Marchington 2015).

The context may perhaps be more favourable for productive connections between scholarship, policy and practice in Small Advanced Economies, or SAEs, which are characterised as more innovative, democratic and socially inclusive (O’Sullivan 2020). In New Zealand, for example, small family firms dominate the economy and cooperatives are also prominent, with the top 30 cooperatives representing 20% of GDP. According to the NZ Institute of Directors, ‘values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity underpin co-operatives’. Furthermore, supported in part by a series of Treaty compensation settlements, the assets of the Māori economy are now estimated at \$70 billion (Wolfgramm 2023). Iwi organisations are some of the biggest players in Aotearoa New Zealand across the primary sectors, tourism, real estate, transport, construction and in manufacturing. Māori companies characteristically seek to balance people, planet, and profit based on cultural values such as

- Manaakitanga – kindness, hospitality, caring, respect, humility.
- Kaitiakitanga – guardianship and stewardship especially of the natural environment
- Kotahitanga – inclusiveness and involvement (‘He waka eke noa’, we are all in this together)
- Whanaungatanga – being relationship centred through family and other group networks.

These values translate into a distinctive management style. As noted earlier, a Māori leadership approach emphasises altruism and *mahi tahi* (working together) in which the primary focus should be *Mauri Ora*, or creating wellbeing (Haar et al. 2019; Spiller et al. 2017).

Returning to the HR function, in recognition that this approach can sustain healthy work relationships for all employees and organisations, the professional association HRNZ has mainstreamed these values into a new Capabilities Framework ‘as a guideline for HR professionals to empower not only Māori but all employees within the organisation and in all stages of employment’. Knowledge of Te Ao Māori is one of the 6 “core capabilities” for HR professionals and new professional development courses have been introduced to this effect, notably ‘Transforming HRM in Aotearoa’, with the idea that HR should act as change agents within their organisations. According to the HRNZ Chief Executive, Nick McKissack (2022), the goal is ‘to create a collective movement around the incorporation of Māori cultural values into our practice of HR’.

## 5. Conclusions

So, to conclude, how can we usefully navigate this nexus between research and practice?

I began with the observation that industrial relations scholarship is relevant rather than esoteric, addressing a range of contemporary problems and challenges in work and society. These can seem overwhelming, and whether our voice is listened to is highly contingent. But here in New Zealand and Australia there are some grounds for positivity, at least compared to overseas. As Andrew Stewart rightfully observed in his 2021 address, we do face serious problems given (a) low union density within systems of enterprise-level bargaining, and (b) employment law that largely fails those designated as contractors or self-employed, including in the growing gig economy (Stewart 2021). Yet there remain relatively accessible institutional mechanisms for worker representation both in the workplace and in the political system. Our unions may be depleted but are far from defeated, and enjoy far better rights to organisation and meaningful collective bargaining than in other liberal market economies. The resilience of the union movement puts me in mind of Chumbawumba – not, as it sounds, a provincial Australian town, but a British anarcho-punk band whose most famous hit included the refrain ‘I get knocked down, but I get up again, You’re never gonna keep me down ...’. The NCTU campaign, for example, is inspirational, especially in the face of current adversity.

We are also fortunate to be inspired and informed by the traditions and vision of our indigenous peoples, though this too will always involve struggle, as the policies of the current New Zealand coalition government and outcome of the recent Voice referendum in Australia attest. These values inspire us to ‘be a good ancestor’, connecting to others through community and stewardship. In New Zealand, Māori perspectives are informing the work of HR as well as unions, furthering a focus on workplace wellbeing, as is also articulated by international bodies such as the ILO and OECD. The ILO’s revitalised Decent Work Agenda places IR front and centre in any policy framework concerned with shaping a Good Society. Sustainable business, driven by good jobs and green jobs, should be a priority of politicians and employers as well as unions and IR academics everywhere.

So, our glass may be half empty, because it used to be more full. But it’s half full when we look around to what others have in their schooners. That said, a fundamental obstacle to engaging business and policymakers is a refusal by too many decision makers to let go of the neoliberal dogma that got us into all the mess that I have described. ‘Neoliberalism’ is not a mere cliché, but an ideological and political project originally articulated by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek to oppose interference by governments and organised labour with private property rights. It sought legitimacy through neoclassical economics, which privileges mathematical formalism and abstract concepts of markets driven by self-interest over real-world empirical observation (McCloskey 1998). Back in 1978, the economist Donald J. Harris (and father of Kamala) derided its failure to adequately explain phenomena such as inequality or even economic growth as ‘the hollow shell of a system of differential equations’ (Harris 1978, 248). He added that the restrictive and unrealistic nature of neoclassical assumptions means that ‘no theory based upon such foundations can lay claim to validity or generality or even to any significance as a “parable” or illustration of what exists in reality’ (ibid: 154). Neoclassical economics is antithetical to the industrial relations approach. We are driven by empirical investigation and analyses grounded in conceptions of political economy, power relations, institutions and historical context. The neoliberal agenda also has little truck with ‘concepts of equity and social justice’, which Di Kelly (2005) identified as a central concern of IR inquiry. It is no wonder then

that we have an engagement gap with large swathes of business and politicians, ideologically wedded to neoliberal orthodoxies even in the face of mounting evidence of disaster. As Karl Popper (1963) observed, true ignorance is not simply an absence of knowledge but the refusal to acquire it by being closed to new ideas and critical thinking.

The direction we are heading appears grim, but the future is an invention not an extrapolation. Like the past, it is a foreign country and they will do things differently there. For all we know, the fourth industrial revolution may finally deliver Keynes's (1930) prediction of a 15-hour work week, underpinned by a Universal Basic Income, in a system of 'fully automated luxury communism' (Bastani 2019). Or, an escalating 'poly-crisis' (Morin and Brigitte 1993) may culminate in some form of final dystopian societal breakdown, or something in between.

The best way to predict the future, as they say, is to shape it, and we can do this in our own small way with relevant and impactful scholarship. Our contribution is critical analysis of the world of work, which can inform policy and practice not just through research evidence, but by building relationships with stakeholders and – importantly – through our teaching the next generation of workers, voters and practitioners. We should always bear in mind the mantra of Antonio Gramsci, sustained even through terrible health in a fascist prison: pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. And remember too, the words of my fellow Liverpoolian, Walter Crane, back in the dismal late Victorian days that 'the cause of labour is the hope of the world'.

Addressing the Queenstown conference in February 2020, just before the world shut down, Julie Douglas observed that work and labour is central to everything, so this gives us as IR scholars a potentially 'enviable position for influence' (Douglas 2021, 11). We can do this through our focus on power, inequity and decent work, and an academic activism that demonstrates that decent work benefits all.

A final and immediate sense of optimism is that we see so much evidence of support and collegiality in our industrial relations community of practice, or praxis. Teaching and research can sometimes be a lonely pursuit, and policy advocacy can be very frustrating. We are fortunate in IR that we not only have a vibrant disciplinary field, but one underpinned by strong local and international scholarly communities. We belong to an *academic iwi*, or tribe.

I finish with this famous whakataukī, which speaks strongly to what IR is all about: He aha te-mea-nui o te ao? He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata. What is the most important thing in the world? it is people, it is people, it is people.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

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