

1999 at work

A real smorgasbord, but some brighter signs

The Australian labour market has continued to be no place for the faint-hearted in 1999. Deregulation marches on. But positive signals are emerging for some ALIA members, albeit hesitantly. For them, the worst could be over.

Nationally, real wages continued to grow during the year. While growth is moderating, wage levels negotiated in enterprise agreements are still increasing at more than three per cent per annum – far higher than rises in the consumer price index. As far as wage increases are concerned, librarians continued to do relatively well in the private sector. On the other hand, most public-sector library workers remain disadvantaged when compared to other public-sector categories.

Collective enterprise agreements are the dominant avenue for determination of wages and conditions of employment right across Australia. But individual arrangements — particularly Australian Workplace Agreements [AWAs] — are making significant inroads. The number of AWAs more than doubled in the past year to more than 70 000. More than 1600 employers are now using them as their primary means of establishing pay and conditions.

There were marked differences in outcomes depending on the *form* of bargaining used. On wages, for example, average pay-rises varied from 4.4 per cent under union-negotiated collective agreements, to 3.3 per cent under AWAs, to 3.1 per cent under non-union collective agreements. Almost eighty per cent of union collective agreements provide for further pay rises during the life of the agreement, compared to fifty-eight per cent of non-union agreements, and less than thirty per cent of AWAs. The standard working week exceeds thirty-eight hours in more than twice as many AWAs as collective agreements. Almost forty per cent of AWAs provide for standard [that is, non-overtime] work on all seven days of the week, compared to around seventeen per cent in agreements to which a union is respondent.

For librarians in the public sector, the most significant basis for optimism about the coming year is the New South Wales Pay Equity Inquiry decision, which has been the subject of much activity during 1999. The decision, handed down by the Industrial Relations Commission, recommended sweeping changes to wage-fixing processes in New South Wales, including a full work-value study for librarians as a prelude to adoption of new classification structures and career paths. These steps were necessary, the Commission said, to redress the pay inequity which was formally found to ex-

ist. As a result, a new pay-equity principle will soon apply to all wage cases conducted in New South Wales. More particularly, a new draft award has been developed to cover all public sector library workers in the state. It is expected to be finalised as a consent award soon. As well as providing better pay and conditions, the award is very encouraging in that it gives great emphasis to eligibility for ALIA membership in its classification descriptions and selection criteria. This reverses the trend experienced in some parts of the industry in recent years.

In reviewing employment issues in this column a year ago, I pointed to research highlighting just how counter-productive the mania with downsizing, or job-shedding, had been in the 1990s. I expressed hope, but little optimism, that this developing body of research might encourage employers to adopt more considered and positive approaches to restructuring their organisations. I was perhaps too pessimistic, because in 1999 there has been some indication that, at least to some extent, this has begun to happen. Especially in the private sector, the latest research suggests that our larger corporations and public companies have largely relegated job-shedding to a minor role. According to one major survey, only five per cent of companies now see downsizing as part of their strategy for the next five to ten years.

In a major research program on the way in which organisational restructuring has been carried out in Australia, another team of analysts now identifies marked polarisation, to the extent that both 'good' and 'bad' styles have become quite apparent. Overwhelmingly, 'good' restructuring and change programs are evident in the private sector. The public sector appears still to be fixated on 'slash and burn' downsizing, with major negative effects for employee morale and staff performance.

In recent years, public sector managers have been very keen to inculcate private sector management styles into their operations. A government focus on so-called private sector methods as answers to public sector problems has been all too evident. Next year, it will be interesting to see if this trend extends to a rejection of downsizing as a frontline public sector strategy. Bearing in mind that around three-quarters of library workers are employed in the public sector, it may well be that the extent to which governments adopt the burgeoning new private sector focus will determine whether the year 2000 marks the beginning of a more encouraging period for ALIA members. Such a development is long-overdue. ■



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