

## **Editorial: Precarious work, vulnerable workers and the Living Wage**

KATHERINE RAVENSWOOD\*

In February 2013 the living wage rate was launched at a symposium, *Precarious Work and the Living Wage* at AUT University. The symposium was hosted by the Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (AUT), the Council of Trade Unions and the Service and Food Workers' Union. It attracted speakers and participants internationally from among activists, unions, church and community groups and academics. Robust discussion fuelled the passion and desire for change from all who took part in the two day symposium. Conversations brought all these groups together, and this special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* continues some of the themes from the symposium and furthers some of the debates and discussions that were held.

As Employment Relations and Human Resource Management academics, we tend to focus on the workplace and on the individual while they are at work. Even topics such as work-life balance typically concentrate on work-life balance and the individual *at work*. We often overlook what happens when those workers return from work to their home and communities. The living wage movement calls upon us to recognise that workers belong to communities and families. The living wage acknowledges that full participation in society is part of decent work and decent pay (Standing, 2011), and that organisations should recognise this in their remuneration of employees.

Several speakers at the symposium called to mind examples of the impact of work on the lives of workers. Helen Kelly (President of the NZCTU) recounted the story of a young forestry worker and his daily home life before a work accident took him from his family. Malcolm Sargeant (Middlesex) also connected the workplace, in terms of OHS outcomes, and the life of the workers at and outside of work. Workers working long hours, several jobs, commuting across large suburbs for work, lacking in sufficient or adequate food, are further disadvantaged in their health and safety at the workplace. Unions are a type of 'community' too, and their support for members' participation and activism are crucial in the fight for better wages and conditions for all workers, especially those who are 'vulnerable' or in 'precarious' work.

New Zealand has a history dating back to the early twentieth century and before of establishing protections and social welfare systems for workers and their families (Lamm, Rasmussen & Anderson, 2013; Anderson & Quinlan, 2008; Quinlan & Sheldon, 2011). However, internationally legal minima only now provide "the most disadvantaged and vulnerable with a modicum of security at work and in living standards" (Sheldon & Quinlan, 2011: 1). We are now seeing a growing number of workers in precarious, low paid employment with poor working conditions and fractured employment relationships (Burgess, Connell & Winterton, 2013; Standing, 2011; Weil, 2011; Fenton, 2011). The breakdown of the traditional employment relationship along with pressure on traditional employment and social protections has an ongoing effect not just on paid work, but on workers' lives, impacting negatively on workers' well-being and living standards (Cockfield, Buttigieg,

---

\* Senior Lecturer, Management, AUT University

Jerrard & Rainnie, 2011). There is an established connection between precariously, low paid employment and poor working conditions and negative individual and community outcomes (ILO, 2012).

Workers in precarious, low paid employment with poor working conditions frequently find themselves in a vulnerable position. Vulnerability is, as indicated by Reverend Unasa, a contested term whereby some people link it to the work itself, while others associate vulnerability with the workers themselves (also see Burgess et al., 2013). Some workers will be vulnerable in the labour market because of their ethnicity, age, gender or level of education for example owing to systemic and individual discrimination (Burgess et al., 2013; Piasna, Smith, Rose, Rubery, Burchell & Rafferty, 2013). However, the Reverend Uesifili Unasa reminded the audience that vulnerability and precariousness describes the form of work and the conditions of work. He noted that there are many examples of vulnerable workers becoming empowered by joining together in their communities and working towards change. He also argued that as a society we are judged by the work we do and not necessarily by the role we play in our community. The fact that we place such importance on our employment status further disadvantages and disempowers those workers in precarious, low paid work. Thus, secure work at a living wage provides some dignity and respect to vulnerable workers.

Some of the key themes arising from the symposium included the necessity for us to build bridges across communities, to collaborate and debate, and most importantly *take action* to make sure that all workers have decent work and conditions that enable them to live as full participatory citizens in our societies. Speakers at the symposium brought international knowledge and experience (Guy Standing (UK), Malcolm Sargeant (UK), Deborah Littman (Canada), Iain Campbell (Australia) ) that complemented a wide variety of perspectives and communities in New Zealand, including Annie Newman (SFWU), Rev Uesifili Unasa (University of Auckland) and Professor Judy McGregor (AUT University). In the spirit of ongoing discussion across communities and disciplines, this special issue brings together multiple perspectives and knowledge of precarious work, vulnerable workers and the living wage: a human rights perspective to the discussion of equal pay for low paid women workers (Judy McGregor); a comparison of Danish flexicurity and the working poor with the New Zealand living wage movement (Erling Rasmussen and Jens Lind); a Trans-Tasman comparison of low paid work in residential aged care (Sarah Kaine and Katherine Ravenswood); discussion of youth who are not in training, education or employment (Gail Pacheco and Jessica Dye) along with comments from Annabel Newman on the New Zealand living wage movement and Deborah Littman on the living wage movement in Vancouver, Canada. We also have an extended review on a recently published book on inequality in New Zealand (Peter Skilling).

As guest editor of this special issue, I would like to conclude this editorial with my own exhortation to you to remember those less fortunate among us who work hard in paid and unpaid work and do all they can to barely keep their and their family's heads above the water. A living wage acknowledges that a decent standard of pay and decent standard of living should allow for more than barely surviving. It should enable families and communities to grow and support each other. For those of us who are not struggling, perhaps it is now our responsibility to ensure that the living wage movement, the research, experiences and knowledge shared at the symposium in 2013 and in this special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* are carried with us everywhere we go, into our communities and networks in New Zealand and globally.

## References

- Anderson, G. & Quinlan, M. (2008). The changing role of the state: Regulating work in Australia and New Zealand 1788-2007. *Labour History*, 95(November): 111–132.
- Burgess, J., Connell, J. & Winterton, J. (2013). Vulnerable workers, precarious work and the role of trade unions and HRM. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(22): 4083-4093.
- Cockfield, S., Buttigieg, D., Jerrard, M. & Rainnie, A. (2011). Assessing the impact of employment regulation on the low paid in Victoria. *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 22: 131-152
- Fenton, D. (2011). Insights into Contracting and the Effect on Workers. *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, 36(3): 44-58.
- International Labour Organisation. (2012). *World of Work Report 2012 “Better Jobs for a Better Economy”* [Report]. Geneva: Author.
- Lamm, F., Rasmussen, E. & Anderson, A. (2013). The Case of the Disappearing Department of Labour: Whither goes state protection for vulnerable workers. In M. Sargeant and M. Ori. (eds.) *Vulnerable Workers and Precarious Working*. (pp. 184-219). Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne
- Piasna, A., Smith, M., Rose, J., Rubery, J., Burchell, B. & Rafferty, A. (2013). Participatory HRM practices and job quality of vulnerable workers. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(22): 4094-4115.
- Quinlan, M. & Sheldon, P. (2011). The Enforcement of Minimum Labour Standards in an Era of Neo-Liberal Globalisation: An Overview. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review : ELRR*, 22(2): 5-31.
- Sheldon, P. & Quinlan, M. (2011). Minimum Labour Standards and Their Enforcement. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review : ELRR*, 22(2): 1-4.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat. The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Weil, D. (2011). Enforcing Labour Standards in Fissured Workplaces: The US Experience. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review: ELRR*, 22(2): 33-54.