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See table of contents

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Introduction to the Special Issue on the Contribution of Industrial Relations to Understanding the Future of Work and Employment

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Introduction

To commemorate the Canadian Industrial Relations Association's (CIRA-ACRI) 60th anniversary, *Relations industrielles-Industrial Relations* (RI-IR) and CIRA have agreed to publish a special issue to advance and consolidate knowledge in our field. For more than a century in North America, industrial relations scholars and practitioners have been studying work and employment problems, which remain age-old under capitalist models of production but are becoming more diverse and complex. For instance, while precarious work, occupational health and safety and technological change have always challenged workers, the global COVID-19 pandemic has shown that we have not come as far as we think in creating employment systems or labour policies that facilitate work-life balance, protect worker incomes against social risks, achieve employment equity, retain the people and skills required for effective operation of organizations and respect workers' exercise of fundamental rights. More and more, practitioners must deal with what some call a "polycrisis"—several crises happening at once (e.g., population aging, inflation, changing worker preferences, remote work and/or a return to face-to-face work, generational demographic shifts). These crises combine with and exacerbate each other, thus making classic labour problems more unpredictable and complex.

To explain this emergent diversity and complexity, we rely on a community of industrial relations scholars who theorize on work and employment from holistic, international and multi-disciplinary perspectives, while being firmly grounded in the empirical realities of local contexts and workplaces. We rely on industrial relations scholars who are constantly engaging in critique, while remaining open to a diversity of ideas, interests, stakeholders, levels of analysis and methodologies that help us both understand work and employment problems and also offer solutions.

Initially founded as the Canadian Industrial Relations Research Institute (CIRRI), CIRA-ACRI is now a diverse network of specialists from unions, employers, governments and universities across Canada and around the world. CIRA-ACRI sponsors conferences, encourages high-quality research and practice and facilitates relationship-building between members. In keeping with its mission to promote research in our field, CIRA-ACRI wanted to celebrate and make room for the richness of industrial relations scholarship through a special issue on the following question: what can industrial relations tell us about the future of work and employment? The ultimate aim was to generate papers for the advancement of research and teaching in industrial relations, thus building a future for our field of study and providing researchers with an opportunity to advance theoretical reflection on contemporary realities and the future of work and employment.

We sent out an open call for this special RI-IR issue on November 15, 2021. The response was excellent. From doctoral students, junior scholars and full professors we received 28 submissions, each of which went through double-blind peer review by dozens of reviewers whom we sincerely thank for their time and careful attention. Eight papers were finally selected for the special issue, and they are each summarized below.

Contributions to the special issue

The first three papers compare (and contrast) industrial relations with other fields that generations of industrial relations scholars have both heavily critiqued and also heavily relied on to develop their own frameworks and theories. Taken together, these papers propose to reenergize our field's long reliance on and integration with fields such as labour law as well as our attempts to reconcile perceived fundamental differences with fields like labour economics and organizational behaviour.

Probably no discipline has done more to help define and shape industrial relations as its own field of study than has economics, particularly in North America. Bruce Kaufman has written extensively about how early industrial relations scholars had interests that overlapped considerably with those of early institutional economists. Interestingly, one of the 2021 Nobel Prize winners in Economics was David Card, a Canadian-born labour economist who came out of the Princeton Industrial Relations section and has authored several publications in industrial relations journals. Nonetheless, industrial relations also came into being partly as a reaction to the neoclassical and formal models of labour economics. It is perhaps fitting then that the first paper of our special issue is by **Morley Gunderson**, an industrial relations scholar and a labour economist, who takes on the task of comparing the two fields and defending economics against common critiques from other industrial relations scholars. Gunderson ultimately wishes to encourage more cross-pollination between the two fields. He suggests that industrial relations could benefit from many of the theoretical and empirical advances of labour economics, while at the same time highlighting the ways that economics could (and has) benefitted from more serious consideration of industrial relations scholarship, particularly the importance of institutions in shaping the labour relations context, production processes, and work practices.

A lot of ink has also been spilled over the relationship of industrial relations with organizational behaviour, especially the rising influence of the latter in business and management schools and the decreasing influence of industrial relations in these spaces. There has been lamenting over the increasing "psychologization" of our field through the dominance of more micro-organizational behaviour approaches to understanding work. However, industrial relations scholars have also called for better integration of our field's theory and empirical research on conflict with organizational behaviour scholarship. Achievement of such a goal has been a continuing challenge because industrial relations scholars often view themselves as adopting perspectives on power and conflict in the employment relationship that differ from those of their colleagues in organizational behaviour. In this context, **Todd Dickey**'s paper makes an important contribution to debate on the two fields' "irreconcilable differences." He analyzes and describes a novel typology of conflict, in which each field differs from the other in the way it conceptualizes conflict and its norms (i.e., spatially in industrial relations and temporally in organizational behaviour) and how the existence of conflict is determined (i.e., by the observers in industrial relations and by the observed in organizational behaviour). Dickey concedes that industrial relations and organizational behaviour may indeed be irreconcilable in terms of how they conceive the underlying logic of conflict. However, he also believes that the two fields could have useful and mutually beneficial conversations if scholars would understand and accept this difference in logic.

While Gunderson and Dickey seek to contrast labour economics and organizational behaviour with industrial relations, **Michel Coutu, Ruth Dukes and Gregor Murray** compare the common legacies of industrial relations and labour law. They take a historical look at the system of labour law and collective bargaining we now have in place and review the similarities between the declining influence of industrial relations over the past forty years and the declining influence of labour law. They argue that both fields would benefit from a more systematic integration of their findings and from a broader analytical perspective that would include other academic traditions. They thus conclude that it is insufficient to understand work and employment by looking only at formal legal rules. Instead, industrial relations and labour law scholars should look at the "living law" by investigating the nature and principles of laws and their effectiveness at achieving certain normative outcomes. They also recognize that both labour law and industrial relations have, since their inception, questioned and critiqued the legal status quo. Their analysis is timely, given ongoing debates about the relevance and effectiveness of formal rules that date back to the "Wagner Act" and which are embedded in Canadian (and American) collective bargaining. Indeed, these rules may be deterring both industrial relations and labour law from challenging the status quo and proposing alternatives for the future. Finally, these authors encourage scholars in both fields to look at current workers' struggles and organizational and institutional experimentation

http://doi.org/10.7202/1111498ar

within and across contexts, as this is where we will find new solutions to meet current challenges in work and employment.

Like Coutu et al., **Angel Martin Caballero** is interested in the law but focuses specifically on the legal regulation of platform work. He argues that the expansion of platform work has greatly disrupted and reorganized the regulation of employment. Because the existing literature on this topic is dispersed across different fields, we do not fully know how to frame the conflict over regulation of platform work or the social processes that surround regulatory change. Caballero uses a framework by Jens Beckert to show how market fields change through the interactions of institutions, networks and frames, as well as how these factors increase or decrease the regulatory power of different employment relationship actors. To this end, he critically and comprehensively reviews the literature to understand which state and non-state actors, including employer and worker organizations, influence and shape regulatory conflict over platform work, and what resources enable their interventions. He argues for focusing more on the social processes that surround regulatory change, rather than the formal and informal institutions that regulate platform work in a given country.

The next three papers analyze other topics: how employers respond and adapt to changes in the organization of production; the “standard” employment relationship; and broader structural changes in the economy, including the implications for workers.

David Peetz continues with the conceptual approach of the first four papers by noting that empirical industrial relations research on the growing precarity of workers should be combined with insights from labour process theory to help explain why precarity is not more widespread. Labour process theory, which developed around the mid-1970s, focused on managerial control, worker resistance and worker consent to managerial control, and how the dialectic process through which surplus is extracted from workers and passed on to the owners of capital may explain future workplace developments. Peetz incorporates the concept of “risk cycle” into labour process theory to explain why managers, in seeking to reduce costs by transferring risk from capital to labour, will use a mode of workforce flexibility until it meets with resistance from their workforce, at which point they will switch to another mode. He uses descriptive data to argue that no single mode of flexibility will continue forever or endlessly intensify. As the current mode becomes less effective, management will look for another one to take its place.

Xavier St-Denis notes that the literature on precarious work has described the increasing frequency of layoffs and downsizings and the shift away from a “standard” employment relationship and toward a more flexible work model. Workers have responded to this increase in job insecurity by adopting more personalized career progression strategies over the past few decades whereby they regularly change employers. However, employers still wish to retain workers, even if unable to offer stable employment, and have developed their own strategies to discourage departure in an era where workers are less loyal and less committed. St-Denis calls on industrial relations scholars to examine these “worker capture strategies,” which aim to restrict worker mobility through such practices as non-compete and non-solicitation clauses in employment contracts and no-poaching agreements between firms. These “low road” capture strategies, like casualization of the workforce, may be easier for employers to implement when the labour market has a surplus of workers. In the current post-pandemic context, however, which is characterized by widespread labour shortages, employers are having to deal with a “Great Resignation”— the trend of workers quitting because their jobs are presumably not providing the advancement or benefits that they are looking for. Employees may now have the upper hand and be more willing to strike out on their own (e.g., adopt a “boundaryless” career model).

Over the past few decades, the vertically integrated company has given way to production networks (or value chains) that link various entities: client-company, subcontractors, subsidiaries, etc. This reflects a new managerial strategy of fragmenting production through offshoring,

subcontracting and other forms of outsourcing, restructuring and distancing. **Devetter, Geymond, Perez, Perraudin, Thèvenot and Valentin** rightly wonder: in today's fragmented world of work, can employees rely on centralized bodies of collective representation to level the playing field between workers and employers? France's institutional framework does try to even the power balance by providing workers and unions with rights and resources. Yet, in six cases of fragmented companies, this framework has paradoxically enabled management to devise successful counter-strategies in their dealings with centralized labour bodies (*comité de groupe, comité d'unité économique et sociale, comité central d'entreprise*). The authors use the concepts of power resources and institutional toying (or shaping) to show how management uses fragmentation to weaken the power resources of employees by reducing their interest in social dialogue, and their capacity to participate, while dividing and playing the fragmented workers against each other. The authors then show how management takes advantage of the institutional limits of centralized bodies by implementing strategies to avoid them, make them inoperative or limit their influence. Through such studies of actor strategies and power relationships, industrial relations research will continue to look at this trend toward increased fissuring of the workplace by management, particularly with the use of digital information technology to develop new production and business models, such as digital platforms, the connected factory or Industry 4.0. As in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, technological changes are transforming the world of work and workplace relations.

The final paper is unique in that it contributes to a longstanding concern and topic in industrial relations—union renewal—while integrating it with an equally important theme for the future development of the field—equity, diversity and inclusion**. Bernard Pelletier and Le Capitaine** remind us that, although much progress has been made toward gender equality in society and organizations, the situation of women remains problematic even in unions and work environments where they are an overwhelming majority, as is the case in education. The two authors look at the experiences of union local presidents with gender equality and concretely document the democratic deficit due to women's low participation in union organizations and the reasons for this deficit. Taking a materialist feminist approach, the authors reveal the unique experience of women as union local presidents, and how it is shaped, among other things, by social representations of gender and the priority given to family and domestic responsibilities. By speaking also to men, the authors show how the "boys' club" subtly and unconsciously reproduces itself and locks the door to a diversity of identity groups by using solicitation as the main method for recruiting people for the presidency of union locals. They identify a remaining challenge for unions: how to represent their membership in all its diversity (gender, race, age, family status, temporary resident status, etc.) and how to ensure that all workers' rights and interests are defended at all levels of the union structure, including the local level.

Conclusion

This special issue shows that the field of industrial relations is alive and well, and that industrial relations scholars are still developing and adapting our frameworks and ideas to understand the transformations of today's world of work and employment. These articles provide a snapshot of some of the longstanding themes in industrial relations research. One common feature is the call for a more integrated and multidisciplinary approach. Since labour and employment problems are often complex with multiple dimensions, they cannot be well understood or solved by adopting a narrow view. This kind of call, while necessary, is not new and has sometimes been difficult to act upon. An industrial relations researcher cannot easily follow the evolution of several disciplines at the same time. Nor is it easy to work in concert with people from other disciplines and fields who may not be familiar with our assumptions and approaches. However, the papers in this special issue continue in the tradition of industrial relations scholars in their attempts to bridge these disciplinary divides.

http://doi.org/10.7202/1111498ar

The research presented in this special issue has another characteristic: it seeks to gain insight into longstanding labour issues, such as worker representation, gender equality, managerial strategies and job insecurity, from a contemporary perspective. The contributions to this special issue show that our field is still at the forefront of progress in solving work and employment problems, formulating concrete solutions and informing decision-making, policy-making and regulation of work and employment at all levels.

By no means does this special issue exhaust the ways industrial relations scholars can help us understand the future of work and employment. They are continuing to push our collective minds to adapt workplaces to the climate crisis and just transition, to decolonize our field, to consider the new post-pandemic normal (including the balance between remote and on-site work, evaluation of essential jobs and the role of government), to assess the long-term impacts of labour shortages on industrial relations actors and power balances in the employment relationship, to examine the coexistence of multiple identities at work and to raise concerns about health, safety and well-being, harassment and psychological distress, workplace regulation and representation deficits, in addition to other important problems.

Fortunately, the future of work and employment will still be explored in the years to come thanks to such institutions as the RI-IR journal and CIRA-ACRI association, which bear witness to the vigour of our field. These bilingual institutions are helping current and future generations of industrial relations scholars study the realities and issues of today's and tomorrow's world of work and employment through an integrated, interdisciplinary, open and pluralist approach.