Call for Papers: The Economics and Labour Relations Review

Public Sector Employment Relations, Service Delivery and Accountability in Turbulent Times

Public sectors are facing increased pressures within a changing environment, evident before, but exacerbated by, the 2020 pandemic. Proponents of neoliberalism and New Public Management continue to call for the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and outsourcing of public services to the private sector (Diefenbach, 2009). Shrinking public sector budgets and increased public debt and deficits were impacting on public services before the pandemic. With the advent of COVID-19, a new era of public sector austerity may be inevitable as governments manage the economy through and beyond the pandemic.

The 2020 pandemic fundamentally affects the operation of public services, impacting policy development, service delivery and employment relations (see for example, Dingwall, 2020). This Special Issue aims to explore the changed working environment, and considers whether these changes will continue to reshape the public sector in Australia and internationally.

Governments have allocated unprecedented amounts of funding to businesses, workers and the unemployed. Regardless of whether governments maintain this level of funding or return to austerity, increased governance and accountability over these COVID-19-related public expenditures will be necessary to ensure they are managed effectively and efficiently.

As occurred throughout the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), new austerity measures may be introduced which include increased reliance on privatisation, and outsourcing and downsizing (Randma-Liiv and Kickert, 2017). Emulating patterns in the GFC, public sector pay and conditions may be downgraded as collective bargaining stalls (Hebson and Rubery, 2018). Whether governments are prepared to work collaboratively with public sector trade unions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic or, alternatively, return to suspending collective bargaining and unilaterally imposing changes to employee numbers, pensions, wages and working conditions as occurred under the GFC is worthy of investigation (Hebson and Rubery, 2018). What is the likelihood of industrial action by health care and other public sector workers? Will public sector unions mount industrial campaigns to achieve safe staffing levels or adequate levels of protective equipment for their members? Or will public service unions respond defensively as occurred during the GFC (Bach and Bordogna, 2016)?

There are signs of hope for public sector employment relations and public service delivery. Policy development and service delivery has become streamlined in response to the pandemic, new ways of working have been developed (Dingwall, 2020a), governments in Australia continue to progress gender equality for their workforces, trust in the public sector appears to be increasing (Dingwall, 2020b), accompanied by a positive re-evaluation of the work undertaken by front line public servants (Risse, 2020).

Key topics to be addressed by articles in this themed collection, drawing on experiences in developed and developing countries include:

- Public sector collective bargaining, wages, pensions, working conditions and employment levels,
- Public sector labour processes, technology and automation,
- Trade union campaigns, mobilisation and industrial action
- Implications of the pandemic for public sector job quality, work intensification, workplace health and safety, and employee mental health,
• Implications for public sector employment of women, indigenous, youth and disabled workers,
• Government willingness to increase or decrease public sector accountability and governance, and
• Government reliance on privatisation and outsourcing of service delivery.

We are particularly keen to include perspectives from the Global South.

Researchers are invited to submit abstracts of no more than 500 words to Dr Sue Williamson, at sue.williamson@unsw.edu.au, by 30 September 2020. Invitations to submit a full manuscript will be issued by 16 October 2020. Manuscripts are required to comply with ELRR author guidelines, available here. They will be required to be lodged through https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/elrr by 26 February 2021. The themed collection will be published in ELRR Volume 32(4) in December 2021, although individual articles may be published earlier in Online First as they are finalised.

In line with ELRR policy of recognising the particular difficulties faced by women and First Nations/minority scholars during COVID-19 isolation, the journal will be looking for balanced representation in the published collection, and will continue to consider relevant high-quality submissions for publication in subsequent issues in cases where authors were prevented by COVID-19 related circumstances from meeting the relevant deadlines.

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References


