

2016 Labour, Employment and Work Conference big success

Overview by Stephen Blumenfeld, Director, CLEW

A 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck near Hanmer Springs, South Island at 12.02am on 14th November 2016, followed by a series of aftershocks. The shaking was felt across the country, and has resulted in damage to a number of buildings within the Wellington region, including Rutherford House, the intended venue for the 2016 Labour, Employment and Work Conference. Despite this occurring just two weeks out from its opening, the Conference was relocated to the Hunter Building on the (main) Kelburn Campus of Victoria University and proceeded as planned with a full programme of keynote addresses and paper presentations.

Close to 100 people attended the two-day LEW Conference, and there was general consensus among those in attendance that the papers presented were of a high standard. A highlight was the opening keynote address by Professor of Law at the University of Waikato, Margaret Wilson, **Challenges for a New Regulatory Environment**. Professor Wilson discussed the basis for the current public policy and regulatory framework governing labour, employment and work in New Zealand, arguing that 'the statutory framework reflects the objectives of economic policy'. She went on to raise the question of whether the public policy and regulatory frameworks being developed will benefit all New Zealanders or does this evolution – or, as some would contend, revolution – foreshadow a less egalitarian New Zealand in which only a handful of elite reap the majority of any benefits accruing from those policy and regulatory changes.

Professor Wilson's proposals include enactment of a minimum employment standards framework that would effectively serve as a workplace constitution, elaborating the rights and responsibilities of workplace citizens. She further argues for regulating the extension of these rights beyond simply those currently defined under New Zealand's employment legislation as 'employees', to both dependent contractors and the self-employed. To this end, Professor Wilson asserted:

'Changing work practices made possible by technology have resulted in further legal challenges and, I would argue, raise the fundamental issue whether the current distinction between employees and contractors is sustainable and whether the time has not come to rethink the whole purpose of employment standards and to whom they should apply.'

This first keynote set the tone for conference sessions on the migrant workforce, the precariat, vulnerable workers, New Zealand's changing labour market, and evolution and change in workplace regulation.

The second keynote address was from David Foden of Eurofound (the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), a research and policy arm of the EU. David reported on the data from the European Jobs Monitor, which shows some of the trends in employment and in particular the changes in employment by job-wage quintiles (jobs classified in five bands of wages).

The main part of David's presentation was a discussion of the results of Eurofound's recently released Working Conditions Survey report, the sixth in the series. This survey focuses on job quality, while continuing to provide an overview of working conditions and a portrait of the workforce in Europe, as have previous European Working Conditions Surveys conducted by Eurofound. Job quality, in this sense, is gauged along a number of constructs, including the physical work environment, work intensity, working time quality, the social environment, skills and discretion (autonomy), labour market prospects (including career and job security) and earnings. A key finding of this research is that job quality is multidimensional and that each dimension of job quality supports a positive experience

of working life. There are also important differences between demographic groups (such as gender and ethnicity), occupations, and countries than make it hard to see one dimension or component of job quality as being more important than any other. Importantly, the most recent Eurofound report reveals that only limited progress on job quality has been made in the last ten years.

Notwithstanding its focus on quantitative survey results, David Foden's keynote address on Eurofound's Working Conditions Survey and the measurement of job quality, it provided a good lead in to other sessions at the LEW Conference in which papers reported findings from qualitative research on workplace wellbeing, workplace capability and training, and equity in the workplace. David's keynote also complemented the excellent workshops organised by Statistics New Zealand on the redeveloped House Labour Force Survey (HLFS) and on the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI). Both of these sessions included papers illustrating the use of official data around interesting research and policy projects in government ministries.

The final keynote speaker, Professor Adrian Wilkinson, overviewed research on employee voice and looked at what employee voice is and how it operates. Professor Wilkinson is an internationally recognised scholar in this area and we were delighted to have him present at the conference. His presentation was followed with a session of three papers on employee voice and a further session on unions and collective bargaining.

Two awards were presented at the conference. The first of these was the Martin Jenkins Award for Best Post-graduate paper at LEW2016. This was awarded to Dawn Duncan, a PhD candidate at Victoria Law School. Dawn's paper, 'Regulating to better meet the health and safety needs of women workers', was considered to stand out for its contemporary significance and review of existing research on the gendered nature of work patterns in New Zealand, was well written and set out clear policy implications and calls for regulatory reforms. The second award was for the Best Paper at the LEW2016 Conference and was awarded to Charlotte Chambers, research officer at the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists. Charlotte's paper 'Burnout in the New Zealand senior medical workforce: stories from the clinical frontline' was presented in the Wellbeing at Work session and was commended for the excellent scholarship it demonstrated with a good review of the extant literature on this important OHS issue while progressing the understanding through a survey study of senior medical workers and a sound critical approach in the discussion of the findings. This award was presented jointly by MPower (Massey University) and CLEW.

Some of the papers from the conference are available as are many of the presentations. Contact CLEW with enquiries. The full list of papers and abstracts is still available on our [website](#). We thank our supporting sponsors for their contributions to the conference – Statistics NZ, Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment, Martin Jenkins, MPower and of course Victoria University of Wellington.