

Review: Nel, P.S. (editor) (2002)

South African Employment Relations – Theory and Practice

Van Schaik Publishers

Reviewer: Karen Hinrichs

This is the new edition of the previously published *South African Industrial Relations* and it specifically sets out to revisit this body of knowledge and update “theorists and practitioners” on developments in the field of labour or employment relations since 1999.

The approach and structure of the book are covered on page 30 (only – it would have been useful to have understood these upfront or at least earlier, especially that there would be some emphasis on “ ... more cooperative consensus-seeking modes of interaction in employment relations”)

The layout and format of the book, with specific reference to step-by-step actions, guidelines and the use of the case study, ensure that it will be a welcome addition to the tools available for teaching and learning in the field. It must be mentioned however, that in perusing the contents in some detail for the purposes of reviewing the book, I was **not** struck by a fundamentally new and/or different way of looking at industrial/labour/employment relations. For example, our understanding of conflict seems still to be based on the concept

as defined in the mid seventies! Whether these particular authors should take responsibility for moving beyond this way of seeing the relationship is, of course, debatable but it does seem like it is time to move on!

That said, some attention is indeed paid to emerging trends, for example in chapter 1, there is a discussion about moving from a tripartite to a pentagonal employment relations system and in chapter 4, trends in the trade movement are covered. However, the detail in the writing tends to be somewhat academic as evidenced (for example) on page 234 “... The institution of workplace forums ... is a novel approach to organisation-level representation.” This is true but what is not mentioned is that for a variety of reasons Workplace Forums have failed to meet expectations and their potential has not really been realised at all.

As a matter of interest, it is not clear whether the lack of ‘answers/suggested responses’ to the case studies is an indication that the reader will know which way to go or that progress through the book has to be a facilitated process.

In conclusion, this book is a solid, accurate representation of ‘what is’ and in that sense, it is a useful and comprehensive reference for learners and (less experienced?) practitioners as well as academics but, it is not a beacon of ‘what could or even should be’. The contributors to this book would certainly be well-equipped to fill this critical gap in the market.