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A Critical History of Migrant Labour in the New Zealand Hotel Sector

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Title: A Critical History of Migrant Labour in the New Zealand Hotel Sector

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Abstract:

Recent Government reports in Australia and New Zealand contrast the rapid growth and economic success of the hospitality and tourism sector (both being one of the largest export earning sectors for their countries) with long standing labour market problems, including a dependency on migrant labour and rapidly increasing reports of migrant exploitation (Cropp, 2016; Deloitte, 2015; New Zealand Tourism Industry Association, 2015). This paper will use a critical employment relations approach to highlight the historical origins of migrant labour conditions in the New Zealand hotel industry. Based on recently completed research, the paper will demonstrate an engagement with a multi-level employment relations analysis of hospitality and tourism employment. Specifically the paper will focus on the history of migrant labour in the New Zealand hotel sector and the impacts of employment legislation and ownership structure leading up to and including the crucial year of 1991. The paper will then discuss how those changes have affected the migrant labour force the modern New Zealand hotel industry. This paper will take a traditional employment relations focus on the nexus between the Tourist Hotel Corporation (employers), the Hotel Workers Union (employee representative) and the New Zealand Government. The THC was the major tourist hotel chain in New Zealand, consisting of 10 major tourist resort hotels and remained the key employer, trainer and industry voice until its sale to the Southern Pacific Hotel Corporation in 1990. The New Zealand Federated Hotel, Hospital, Restaurant and Related Trades Employees' Industrial Association of Workers (hereafter referred to as the Hotel Workers Union) was the national representative of hotel workers and one of the largest and most powerful industrial unions in New Zealand. The paper aims to answer calls to liberate hospitality and tourism research from 'presentist', positivist, unitarist paradigms (Lashley, 2007, 2016; Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011; Walton, 2012; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011). By using a unique multi-layered historical, critical, employment relations theory lens, the paper will argue that 1991 marked the point at which the New Zealand neo-liberal revolution 'locked in' radical changes to employment law and hotel ownership structures that have resulted in a hotel sector entirely dependent on migrant workers and dominated by 'race to the bottom' employment conditions which disproportionality affect migrant workers. The paper will argue that while migrant labour has always been a crucial component in the hotel sector workforce, the changes of 1991 mark the point at which weakened labour protections and the associated degradation of conditions became the 'new normal' for the migrant workforce. Further, the paper suggests that 1980s neo-liberal ideas from the UK and US led to the collapse of the corporatist consensus in New Zealand and that in turn resulted in political, managerial and legislative change that 'locked in' a new normal of poor pay and poor conditions for migrant workers after 1991.

CTS 2019

The data for this paper was gathered as part of a history of employment relations in the New Zealand hotel sector from 1955-2000. The main methods included semi-structured interviews and archival research. The interviews produced rich data from 20 managers, union representatives, hotel consultants and industry advocates in the New Zealand hotel sector.

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