

# *The decline of collective bargaining coverage in Australia, 1990–2005*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper outlines a new conceptualisation of the changes in the Australian industrial relations system since the early 1990s. The dominant conceptualisation refers loosely to a move from ‘compulsory conciliation and arbitration’ to ‘enterprise bargaining’. Some have spoken, even more loosely, of ‘decentralisation’ or perhaps ‘deregulation’. This paper draws on the international literature devoted to comparing collective bargaining systems and focuses on the concept of collective bargaining coverage. From this perspective, the change in Australia is not, as it is often falsely portrayed, a shift towards more collective bargaining. Instead it is best seen as centring on the erosion of collective bargaining. We have moved from a system that – though possessing peculiar features – was based on multi-employer collective bargaining to a system that is based on unilateral management determination of wages and conditions (with some islands of single-employer collective bargaining). The surviving residues of the award system provide a brake on this process, but they are slowly fracturing and losing their purchase on wages and conditions.

