WORKSHOP

Untangling The Circulation Of Ideas: Historical Perspectives On Dispute Resolution And Enforcement In Labour Law

11-12 September 2025

University of Strathclyde

Room LH127, Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow, G4 0LT

A system of modern labour law comprises three broad mechanisms: a process by which labour rights and standards are determined and set as legal norms; mechanisms whereby information about the observance of labour standards is obtained and fed back into the system; and processes and mechanisms by which standards can be enforced where necessary.

While there has been extensive historical research concerning the development of labour standard setting, there has been less investigation of the second and third mechanisms of labour law – what we might call labour law enforcement. Different bodies are charged with ensuring labour law's enforcement. For example, trade unions and labour inspectorates may monitor conditions in the workplace. Enforcement also takes place through dispute resolution bodies (such as arbitration and conciliation bodies as well as labour or industrial courts and tribunals); through trade unions calling industrial action; through other informal trade union and worker action; deployment of administrative sanctions by state agencies; or availability of court sanctions such as penalties.

From the outset, the development of national labour law was influenced by international networks and exchanges, in which both problems and solutions were discussed. Ideas circulated here, inspiring each other, being further developed, and being adapted to the respective national contexts. This circulation of ideas extended to how to ensure compliance with and enforcement of labour law. However, little is known about the history of these international networks or the paths and ideas of their protagonists.

This Workshop, organized by Johanna Wolf (Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory), John Howe (University of Melbourne) and Rebecca Zahn (University of Strathclyde), explores the history of international and transnational 'entanglements', networks, links and other modes for the circulation and exchange of ideas across borders and jurisdictions which shaped labour law enforcement practices, focusing particularly on the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Interested scholars and researchers are invited to attend this workshop as audience members. Attendance (including lunch) is free of charge.

If you would like to attend, please email rebecca.zahn@strath.ac.uk by Monday 1 September 2025. Please note that audience member spaces are limited and will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

The Workshop is being financially supported by the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, the University of Strathclyde, and the Centre for Employment and Labour Relations Law, Melbourne Law School.

PROGRAMME

Thursday, 11 September

1.30pm Welcome and Introductions

John Howe, Johanna Wolf, Rebecca Zahn, Untangling the circulation of ideas: historical perspectives on dispute resolution and enforcement in labour law

2pm – 3pm Panel 1: The emergence of female inspectors and inspection systems

Chair: Jim Phillips (University of Glasgow)

Petra Herzfeld Olsson (Stockholm University), How the idea of a female labour inspectorate took off – walking in the footsteps of Kerstin Hesselgren

Jonathan Zeller (University of Zurich), From England to Zurich: Transnational Roots of Female Inspectors

3.00 – 3.30pm Coffee

3.30pm – 5pm Panel 2: Enforcement and Compliance

Chair: Ruth Dukes (University of Glasgow)

Louis Debersaques (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), Coming down like a ton of bricks? Enforcing safety regimes on the Belgian construction sector via international discussion, national inspection and local dispute resolution (c. 1890- 1900)

Eric Tucker (Osgoode Hall Law School), Constructing a Compliance Orientation to Factory Act Enforcement in Nineteenth-Century Ontario, Canada: English and American Influences

Ivelina Masheva (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), Labour Jurisprudence in a Gender Perspective: Women Workers and Labour Courts in Bulgaria, 1920s–1940s

7.30pm Dinner (for speakers and chairs only)

Friday, 12 September

9am – 10.30am Panel 3: Transnational influences from below

Chair: Douglas Brodie (University of Strathclyde)

Aurélia Gervasoni (University of Zurich / K.U. Leuven), The Poetic Enforcement of Justice: The Poem "Bread and Roses" of 1912 as a Transnational Catalyst for Labour Rights

Johann Nicolai (Berlin), Transnational Networks and Local Initiatives: Shaping the Foundations of Modern Labour Law through B'nai B'rith's Impact in Interwar Czechoslovakia

Virginia Amorosi (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Labour disputes through the lens of liberal legal culture.

10.30am – 11am Coffee

11am – 12.30pm Panel 4: Emergence of industrial rights systems

Chair: Iris Zhang (University of Glasgow)

Marc Steiert (EUI Firenze), Refoundation – Enforcement and Dispute Resolution in the Discussions on a European Industrial Relations Space (1984-1994)

Ajibola Anthony Akanji (Lead City University Ibadan), The emergence and relegation of social solidarity economy in the Nigerian labour movement: a legal perspective

Federico Del Giudice (University of Turin), Social rights and labour justice in Argentina: the impact of transnational debates (1933-1944)

12.30pm – 1.30pm Lunch and Closing