

**EMPLOYMENT AND
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS
LAW SUMMARY**



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Table of Contents	2
Cases	8
Statutes	12
Other Authorities	13
Topic 1: The Source of Labour Law	14
1.1 Labour Law Theories	14
1.1.1 <i>Theory 1 (Left wing) – The power imbalance</i>	14
1.1.2 <i>Theory 2 (Right wing) – The free market is the best protection for both workers and business</i>	14
1.1.3 <i>Theory 3 (Middle) – The third way</i>	15
1.2 The Constitutional foundation	16
1.3 Growth of Commonwealth influence	17
1.4 Globalising Forces	17
1.5 Moving to new Heads of Power	18
1.5.1 <i>The referral power – s 51(xxxvii)</i>	22
1.5.2 <i>The Referral by Victoria</i>	22
1.6 The debate over a national system	23
1.6.1 <i>Arguments in Favour of a National System</i>	24
1.6.2 <i>Arguments Against a National System</i>	26
1.7 The Role of the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)	27
1.7.1 <i>The Common Law</i>	27
1.7.2 <i>The Statutory Framework</i>	28
1.7.3 <i>Overarching Provisions</i>	29
1.8 Equality	30
1.9 Privacy	31
1.10 Surveillance	31
Topic 2: Anti-Discrimination	33
2.1 Direct discrimination	34

2.2 Indirect discrimination	36
2.3 Sexual Harassment	40
2.3.1 <i>Special Measures – s 7D</i>	43
Topic 3: The Employment Relationship - Contractor or Employee?	45
3.1 Employees	45
3.2 Contractors	45
3.2.1 <i>The Control Test / Multi-Factor Test</i>	46
3.2.2 <i>Applying the test</i>	46
3.3 Case law examples of employees	47
3.4 Case law examples of contractors	49
3.5 Non-standard forms of work	50
3.5.1 <i>A note on taxation</i>	50
3.5.2 <i>Insurance</i>	50
3.6 Sham Contracts & Protections regarding independent contractors	50
3.7 Common Law Employment Contracts	52
3.8 Principles of Employment Contracts	52
3.8.1 <i>Offer and acceptance</i>	52
3.8.2 <i>Intention</i>	53
3.8.3 <i>Consideration</i>	54
3.8.4 <i>Capacity and legality</i>	54
3.9 Regulation of employment contracts	54
3.10 The relationship of contracts to other sources of industrial relations law	55
Topic 4: Rights and Responsibilities	56
4.1 Express terms of employment contracts	56
4.1.1 <i>Construing a contract</i>	56
4.2 Implied Terms and Common Law Duties	57
4.2.1 <i>Service earns remuneration</i>	57
4.2.2 <i>There is a duty for Employees to obey reasonable demands</i>	57
4.2.3 <i>Duty of care and competence</i>	58

4.2.4 No Duty to Provide Work	58
4.2.5 Duty to provide a safe workplace and indemnify	59
4.2.6 Duty of Good Faith – owed by employees to employers	59
4.2.7 Duty of Good Faith – owed by employers to employees	61
Topic 5: Work Standards	63
5.1 Sources of employment standards.....	63
5.2 Workplace Policy Documents and Employment Contracts	63
Topic 6: Terms and Conditions of Employment.....	67
6.1 Overview.....	67
6.2 National Employment Standards	67
6.2.1 Part 2.2 – National Employment Standards.....	67
6.2.2 Relationship of NES with other instruments.....	69
6.3 Modern Awards.....	70
6.3.1 Part 2.3 – Modern Awards	70
6.3.2 Content required	71
6.3.3 Unlawful content	71
6.3.4 Duration	72
6.4 The National Minimum Wage.....	72
6.5 Fair Work Act: Part 2.4 – Enterprise Agreements (Enterprise Bargaining)	72
6.5.1 Key provisions.....	73
6.6 Content of enterprise agreements	74
6.6.1 Mandatory terms	75
6.6.2 Unlawful terms	75
6.7 Approval procedures of enterprise agreements	75
6.7.1 Pre-approval requirements	75
6.8 Enforcement, variation and termination.....	75
6.8.1 Greenfields.....	76
Topic 7: Trade Union Law.....	77
7.1 Historical foundation – Marx	77

7.2 The role of trade unions	77
7.3 Industrial Action - Strikes	78
7.3.1 <i>Industrial action under common law</i>	78
7.3.2 <i>Industrial action under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)</i>	79
7.3.3 <i>Industrial torts</i>	80
7.3.4 <i>Regulation of industrial torts under the Fair Work Act</i>	82
7.3.4 <i>Secondary boycotts and the Competition and Consumer Act</i>	82
7.4 Trade Union Accountability	83
7.5 Trade union entry into the workplace	87
7.5.1 <i>GROCON Dispute</i>	88
7.5.2 <i>Responsible unionism</i>	88
7.6 Good Faith Bargaining	89
7.6.1 <i>The BHP Decisions</i>	89
7.6.2 <i>The QANTAS Dispute</i>	91
7.7 Trade Union Royal Commission	94
7.7.1 <i>What is a Royal Commission?</i>	94
Topic 8: Termination of Employment	97
8.1 Common law principles	98
8.1.1 <i>Wrongful dismissal</i>	98
8.1.2 <i>Summary dismissal</i>	99
8.1.3 <i>Constructive dismissal</i>	100
8.1.4 <i>Reasonable notice</i>	100
8.1.5 <i>Resignation</i>	101
8.1.6 <i>Revocation of offers or acceptance</i>	101
8.1.7 <i>Special conditions</i>	101
8.1.8 <i>Unfair dismissal under the Fair Work Act</i>	101
8.2 Substantive Unfair Dismissal Provisions	102
8.2.1 <i>Small Business Fair Dismissal Code</i>	102
8.2.2 <i>Small Business Fair Dismissal Code Checklist</i>	104

8.2.3 Problematic Unfair Dismissal Scenarios	106
8.2.4 Procedure and Desired remedies	108
8.2.5 Insolvency	108
8.2.6 When head contractors cease to operate	108
8.3 Adverse Action	109
8.4 Freedom of association	109
8.5 International law	110
8.6 Domestic law.....	110
8.6.1 The Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)	110
8.9 Other statutory protections	111
Topic 9: Liability of employees	114
9.1 Common law	114
9.2 Statute law.....	114
Topic 10: Liability of employers	115
10.1 Personal liability	115
10.2 Vicarious liability	115
Topic 11: Restraint of Trade	118
11.1 Basic Principles.....	118
11.2 The superstars of Australian Restraint Law:	119
11.3 Cascading restraint	119
11.4 Anti-Poaching Clauses	120
11.5 IP & Confidentiality.....	122
11.5.1 University Sector in Flux	123
11.6 National Commission of Audit	124
Topic 12: Public Service Law	125
12.1 Investigations that have gone wrong	130
12.2 Workplace Safety.....	133
Topic 13: Allied Areas	134
13.1 Budget speech.....	134

13.2 National Commission of Audit Report.....	134
13.3 Labour Law in China	136
13.4 International Labour Organisation.....	136
13.5 Superannuation	138
13.6 Occupational Health & Safety	139
SOURCES CONSULTED	141

Sample

Cases

<i>Achal v Electrolux Pty Ltd</i> (1993) 143 QGIG 144.....	99
<i>ACT Visiting Medical Officers Association v AIRC</i> (2006) 232 ALR 69	48
<i>Adami v Maison De Luxe Limited</i> (1924) 35 CLR 143	98
<i>Adams v Union Cinemas Ltd</i> [1939] 3 All E.R. 136.....	99
<i>Addis v Gramophone Co Ltd</i> [1909] AC 488.....	60
<i>Aldridge v Booth & Ors</i> (1986) EOC ¶¶92-177	42
<i>Amalgamated Society of Engineers v Adelaide Steamship Co</i> (1920) 28 CLR 129	22
<i>Ansett Transport Industries (Operations) Pty Ltd v Australian Federation of Air Pilots</i> [1991] 1 VR 637	80
<i>Ashton v Wall & Anor</i> (1992) EOC ¶¶92-447	42
<i>Australian Air Express v Langford</i> (2005) 147 IR 240	47
<i>Australian Boot Trade Employees' Federation v Whybrow & Co</i> (1910) 11 CLR 311	28
<i>Australian Iron & Steel Pty Ltd v Banovic</i> (1989) ¶¶92-271	37
<i>Australian Iron & Steel Pty Ltd v Banovic</i> (1989) 89 ALR 1	34
<i>AWU v BHP Iron-Ore Pty Ltd</i> (2001) 102 Industrial Reports 410-480	88
<i>Baker v Markellos</i> (2012) 114 SASR 379	47
<i>Barratt v Howard</i> [1999] FCA 1132	127
<i>Bendigo Regional Institute of Technical and Further Education v Barclay</i> (2011) 191 FCR 212	111
<i>Bennett & Anor v Everitt & Anor</i> (1988) EOC ¶¶92-244	41
<i>Blackadder v Ramsay Butchering Service Pty Ltd</i> (2005) 221 CLR 539	57
<i>Boehringer Ingleheim v Reddrop</i> (1984) EOC ¶¶92-108	35
<i>Boin v Harvey</i> (No WO1742358 Victorian Mags Ct March 2008)	50
<i>Byrne v Australian Airlines</i> (1995) 185 CLR 410.....	54, 105
<i>Cahill v Big W Ltd</i> (2000) 163 QGIG 287	106
<i>Carlill v Carbolic Smoke Ball Co</i> [1893] 1 QB 265	51
<i>Coal and Allied Operations v Australian Industrial Relations Commission</i> (2000) 203 CLR 194	91
<i>Commissioner of State Revenue v Mortgage Force Australia Pty Ltd</i> [2009] WASCA 24.....	48
<i>Concut Pty Ltd v Worrell</i> (2000) 75 ALJR 312	59
<i>Daley v Public Transport Corporation of Victoria</i> (1998) 119 IR 242	99
<i>Davies v Davies</i> (1887) 36 CH D 359	53
<i>Deatons Pty Ltd v Flew</i> (1949) 79 CLR 370	115
<i>Delaney v Staples</i> [1992] 2 WLR 451	99
<i>Digital Pulse Pty Limited v Christopher Harris</i> [2002] NSWSC 33	60

<i>Dollar Sweets Pty Ltd v Federated Confectioners Association of Australia</i> [1986] VR 383	80
<i>Elazac Pty Ltd v Shirreff</i> [2011] VSCA 405.....	48
<i>Endeavour Coal Pty Limited v Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia</i> [2012] FCA 764	89
<i>Ermogenous v Greek Orthodox Community of SA Inc</i> [2002] HCA 8.....	52
<i>Escobar v Rainbow Painting</i> (2002) 120 IR 84.....	38
<i>Ex Parte HV McKay</i> (1907) 2 CAR 1.....	71
<i>Faccenda Chicken Ltd v Fowler</i> [1986] 1 All ER 617	121
<i>Faccenda Chicken Ltd v Fowler</i> [1987] 1 Ch 117.....	59
<i>Foreign Affairs and Trade v Styles</i> (1989) 23 FCR 251.....	34
<i>General Engineering Services v Kingston and St Andrews Corporation</i> [1988] 3 All ER 867	78
<i>Goldman Sachs JBWere Services Pty Ltd v Nikolich</i> (2007) 163 FCR 52	64
<i>Hall & Ors v A & A Sheiban Pty Ltd & Ors</i> (1989) EOC ¶¶92-250	41
<i>Hamlyn & Co v Wood & Co</i> [1891] 2 QB 488.....	51
<i>Harris v Digital Pulse Pty Ltd</i> [2003] NSWCA 10.....	60
<i>Hartley's v Martin</i> [2002] VSC 301.....	120
<i>Harvester Case</i> (1907).....	71
<i>Harvey v RG O'Dell Ltd</i> [1958] 2 QB 78	115
<i>Heape v General George Carpets Pty Ltd</i> (2002) EOC ¶¶ 93-237	36
<i>Heptonstall v Gaskin (No 2)</i> [2005] NSWSC 30.....	61
<i>Herbert Morris v Saxelby</i> [1916] 1 AC 688.....	117
<i>Hickie v Hunt & Hunt</i> [1998] ¶¶92-910.....	38
<i>Hill v CA Parsons Limited</i> [1972] Ch. 305, CA.....	99
<i>Horne & Anor v Press Clough Joint Ventures & Anor</i> (1994) EOC ¶¶92-591	42
<i>Hughes Aircraft Systems International v Air Services Australia</i> (1997) 146 ALR 1.....	53
<i>Humberstone v Northern Timber Mills</i> (1949) 79 CLR 389	48
<i>Jarratt v Commissioner for Police for New South Wales and Another</i> [2005] HCA 50 127	
<i>JJ Savage & Sons Pty Ltd v Blakney</i> (1970) 119 CLR 435.....	55
<i>Lee v Smith & Ors (No. 2)</i> [2007] FMCA 1092	129
<i>Lister v Romford Ice & Cold Storage Co Ltd</i> [1957] AC 555.....	57
<i>Lloyd's Shipping</i> [1987] FCA 70.....	118
<i>M'Dowell v Ulster Bank</i> (1899) 33 IR LT Jo 223.....	60
<i>Mahesan v Malaysia Government Officers' Co-operative Housing Society Ltd</i> [1979] AC 374 (PC).....	60

Malik v Bank of Credit and Commerce International SA (In liq) [1998] AC 20	60
Marshall v Whittaker's Building Supply Co (1963) 109 CLR 210	48
<i>McManus v Scott-Charlton</i> (1996) 140 ALR 625	57, 124
<i>Mill v Hawker</i> (1874) LR 9 Ex 309.....	113
<i>Minister For Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs And Workplace Relations</i> [2011] FWA FB 744491	
<i>National Workforce Pty Ltd v Australian Manufacturing Workers Union</i> [1998] 3 VR 241	77
New South Wales v Amery (2006) 230 CLR 174	38
Nordenfelt v Maxim Nordenfelt Guns and Ammunitions Co Ltd [1894] AC 535	117
NSW v Lepore (2001) 52 NSWLR 420	114
<i>O'Neill v Medical Benefits Fund of Australia</i> (2002) 122 FCR 455	56
<i>Orman v Saville Sportswear Limited</i> [1960] 1 WLR. 1055.....	99
<i>Oscar Chess Ltd v Williams</i> [1957] 1 WLR 370	55
Poland v Parr [1927] 1 KB 236	115
Portal Software v Bodsworth [2005] NSWSC 631	117
<i>Pupazzoni v Fremantle Fisherman's Co-operative Society Ltd</i> [1981] AILR 168	58
Qantas Airways Ltd v Christie (1998) 193 CLR 280	40
R v Kelly; Ex parte Victoria (1950) 81 CLR 64	73
<i>Reddrop v Boehringer Ingelheim Pty Ltd</i> (1984) EOC ¶92-031	35
Rena Weeks v Baker and McKenzie (1998) 63 Cal. App. 4th 1128	34
<i>Renard Constructions (ME) Pty Ltd v Minister for Public Works</i> (1992) 26 NSWLR 234	53
<i>Reynolds v The Minister For Health & Anor</i> [2010] FMCA 843.....	30
Riverwood International Australia v McCormick (2000) 177 ALR 193	63
<i>Robb v Green</i> [1895] 2 QB 315.....	59
<i>Roy Morgan Research Pty Ltd v Commissioner of Taxation</i> (2011) 244 CLR 97	47
<i>Ryan v Textile Clothing & Footwear Union Australia</i> [1996] 2 VR 235.	54
<i>Sanders v Parry</i> [1967] 1 WLR 753	59
<i>Saunders v Snell</i> (1998) 196 CLR 329	99
Secretary of State for Employment v Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (No 2) [1972] QB 455	77
<i>Spring v Guardian Assurance Plc</i> [1995] 2 AC 296	60
<i>State of New South Wales & Ors v Commonwealth</i> [2006] HCA 52.....	21
<i>Stephens v Ewall</i> (1815) 4 M & S 259	113
Stevens v Brodribb Sawmilling (1986) 160 CLR 16	45
<i>Sweeney v Boylan Nominees Pty Ltd</i> (2006) 226 CLR 161.....	48
Tenuyl v Delaney & Anor (1996) EOC ¶92-836	42
<i>Thomas Marshall (Exports) Ltd v Guinle</i> [1979] 1 Ch 227	59

<i>Thorpe v South Australian Football League</i> (1974) 10 S.A.S.R. 17.....	99
<i>Tillman’s Butcheries Pty Ltd v A-asian Meat Industry Employees Union of Australia</i> (1979) 41 FLR 27	81
<i>Toll (FGCT) Pty Ltd v Alphapharm Pty Ltd</i> (2004) 219 CLR 165	64
<i>United Firefighters’ Union of Australia v Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board</i> (1998) 86 IR 340	78
<i>UWA v Grey (No 20)</i> 2008 FCA 498	122
<i>Victoria Park Racing Grounds v Taylor</i> (1937) 58 CLR 479	31
<i>Victoria University of Technology v Wilson</i> (2004) 60 IPR 392	122
<i>Victoria v Commonwealth</i> (1996) 135 ALR 129	19
<i>Victoria v Schou</i> (2004) 8 VR 120	37
<i>Victoria v The Commonwealth</i> (1996) 187 CLR 416.....	28
<i>Victorian WorkCover v Game</i> (2007) 16 VR 393	47
<i>Village Cinemas Australia Pty Ltd v Carter</i> (2007) 158 IR 137	101
<i>Visscher v Giudice</i> [2009] HCA 34.....	97
<i>Walker v Citigroup Global Markets Australia</i> (2006) FCAFC 101 (23 June 2006).....	98
<i>Walker v Citigroup Global Markets Australia Pty Ltd</i> (2006) 233 ALR 687	100
<i>Wardley v Ansett Transport Industries (Operations) Pty Ltd</i> (1984) EOC ¶ 92-002	34
<i>Waterhouse v Bell</i> (1991) EOC ¶92-376	35
<i>Wormold Australia Pty Ltd v Harward and Venning</i> (1992) 42 IR 166	98
<i>X v Commonwealth</i> (1999) 200 CLR 177	40
<i>Zuijs v Worth Bros</i> (1955) 93 CLR 561	46

Statutes

<i>Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW)</i>	32, 35
<i>Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act 2001 (Cth)</i>	85
<i>Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904 (Cth)</i>	27
<i>Commonwealth Powers (Industrial Relations) Act 1996 (Vic)</i>	22
<i>Competition and Consumer Act 2010 (Cth)</i>	81
<i>Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia</i>	16
<i>Corporations Act 2001 (Cth)</i>	53, 107, 137
<i>Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)</i>	32, 37, 39
<i>Discrimination Act 1991 (ACT)</i>	32
<i>Employee's Liability Act 1991 (NSW)</i>	113
<i>Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA)</i>	32
<i>Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)</i> 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 44, 50, 51, 54, 62, 66, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 81, 86, 87, 96, 100, 101, 108, 109, 110, 111	
<i>Federal Awards (Uniform System) Act 2003 (Vic)</i>	23
<i>Future Fund Act 2006 (Cth)</i>	138
<i>Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986 (Cth)</i>	32, 130
<i>Independent Contractors Act 2006 (Cth)</i>	49
<i>Industrial Relations Act 1988 (Cth)</i>	18, 19, 81
<i>Industrial Relations Act 1991 (NSW)</i>	29
<i>Industrial Relations Act 1996 (NSW)</i>	53
<i>Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993 (Cth)</i>	27, 110
<i>Insurance Contracts Act 1984 (Cth)</i>	113
<i>Minors (Property and Contracts) Act 1970 (NSW)</i>	53
<i>Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)</i>	31
<i>Public Service Act 1999 (Cth)</i>	124
<i>Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 (Vic)</i>	32
<i>Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)</i>	32, 39
<i>Superannuation Guarantee (Administration) Act 2012 (Cth)</i>	137
<i>Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act 1979 (Cth)</i>	31
<i>Trade Practices Act 1974 (Cth)</i>	100
<i>Workers Compensation Act 1912 (WA)</i>	48
<i>Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth)</i>	19, 50, 57, 62, 73, 81
<i>Workplace Relations and Other Legislation Amendment Act (No 2) 1996 (Cth)</i>	23
<i>Workplace Relations and Other Legislation Amendment Act 1996 (Cth)</i>	28
<i>Workplace Surveillance Act 2005 (NSW)</i>	31

Other Authorities

Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work 1998..... 30
Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization..... 17
Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948..... 109
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights..... 109
Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 109

Sample

Topic 1: The Source of Labour Law

There are a variety of ways in which people may 'work' and hence, be regulated by the broad framework of employment and industrial relations law. Work may be defined in terms of both 'productive labour' that produces commercial wealth, and 'reproductive labour' that produces and allows other people to engage in productive labour.¹

The context of industrial relations law is made up of economic, social and cultural factors. In addition, the political context of the law of work is informed by the nation state acting as a key player in regulating various forms of work at local, national and international levels. Through work, people develop a relationship of interdependence with society, and form groups with collective opinions on issues of work to be regulated.

1.1 Labour Law Theories

1.1.1 Theory 1 (Left wing) – The power imbalance

Otto Kahn-Freund: Labour and the Law

"It is the theory of English law that a contract is a freely concluded agreement. The norm postulates an exchange of offer and acceptance. Precisely this legal institution however has been put to the service of monopoly. The monopolist and his client are parties to a 'contract.' A passenger who takes a railway ticket 'accepts' the terms offered by the company...Conditions by which a monopolist excludes or limits his liabilities are 'deemed' to have been freely accepted if reasonable notice was given to the other party eg...'for conditions see back.'...The customer has assented even if he is blind."

Kahn-Freund believed the contract for employment was merely a submission by the employee to the predetermined terms and conditions which the employer chose. Therefore, the contract for employment was a farce due to the power imbalance between the employer and employee – Result = take it or leave it scenario. His position represents the prevailing theory in Australia during 1900s – 1970s, formation of trade unions to temper the strength of employers. Accordingly, he argued the law should step-in to protect employees and reduce the power and influence of employers.

1.1.2 Theory 2 (Right wing) – The free market is the best protection for both workers and business

Hayek: The Constitution of Liberty

¹ R Owens, J Riley and J Murray, *The Law of Work* (2nd ed, 2011), [1.1.1].

“Freedom is seriously threatened today by the tendency of the employed majority to impose upon the rest their standards and views of life...Whoever desires a regular income for which he sells his labour must devote his working hours to the immediate tasks which are determined for him by others...the risk of sacrifice in giving up his job may often be so great as to make him continue in it, even though he intensely dislikes it...”

Hayek disagreed with the views of Otto Kahn-Freund. The themes woven through his work are: individualism, freedom, private ownership and the rule of law (as opposed to the pursuit of social goals by Government). Trade unions were viewed as coercive and large governments as arbitrary (and therefore undesirable).

Accordingly, Hayek believed the growth of an advanced society was only possible through individual freedom. The individual must be able to use their own talents and build their own property. The answer for individual suffering is not for the government to intervene on their behalf. Likewise, trade unions, which pursue industrial ends, were considered coercive and ultimately pushed labour costs so high as to cost jobs. The purpose of a trade union, according to Hayek, should be little more than a friendly society – assisting employees in choosing between jobs offered on the employer’s terms. Employers are, after all, actually the supporters of working people – without their growth and wealth (that purchases the means of production), there would be no jobs at all.

Wedderburn criticised Hayek’s work – polar and lacks shades of grey. He considered employment processes enable economic growth which is paramount. If employees don’t like it, too bad because when the market is strong, employment is relatively secure and workers can change jobs if they do not like the way in which they are being treated.

Hayek represents an extreme argument against both power imbalance and any extensive government intervention. He supports employers and believed the more support given to employers, the more businesses will prosper, the more businesses that prosper, the more jobs and in-turn, the more economic growth there will be. Hayek noted trade unions could operate in their own interests but considered it important to advance the interests of businesses, entrepreneurs and those avenues that will make opportunities to employ others.



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