

The South African Labour Market: Critical Issues for Renaissance

The third edition of Frans Barker's textbook provides a substantially revised and up-to-date guide to the characteristics, problems and functioning of the South African labour market. It also serves as a welcome addition to the growing number of studies of the labour market post-apartheid. Other studies, in book form, that are worth noting are: the *Report of the Comprehensive Labour Market Commission*; the *ILO Country Review* by Standing, Sender and Weeks (which remains the benchmark study) and the recent study of labour markets in the Southern African region by Torres.

The first edition of Barker's book appeared in 1992, then sub-titled; '*Critical Issues for Transition*', with the second edition being published in 1995. As the author notes, there have been significant developments since that time which warranted a revised edition. These include: the election of a democratic government and the introduction of new labour legislation; exposure to the process of globalisation and significant changes in the labour market itself. Given that the first two editions of this book sold an impressive 3 000 each, there must clearly also have been a strong market incentive for an updated version.

Economics of wages

In addition to covering new labour legislation, such as the BCEA, the

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Employment Equity Act and the Skills Development Act, the third edition has a new chapter on the economics of wages and collective bargaining. It includes updated figures and also draws on Census '96 findings. Recent developments, such as the Presidential Jobs Summit held towards the end of 1998 are referred to and there is extensive reference to the ILO review of the South African labour market.

The layout and general presentation of the book have been improved. Each chapter clearly identifies its focus; key concepts are highlighted, and there are a set of questions for students at the end of each chapter as well as suggested readings. Previous editions contained an impressive array of empirical data and this feature has been retained and expanded in the latest edition, adding to its value as a reference work.

Too South African

There is thus much to commend in Barker's book. Two issues do, however, leave it open to criticism. The first is that, as a textbook, *The South African Labour Market* is a bit too South African. While the author has an understandable concern to provide 'the general reader with an

overview of the South African labour market' (p.v) a textbook has to situate itself in relation to international developments in its field.

Although Barker adopts a balanced perspective on most controversial aspects of labour markets, the book is primarily economic in its orientation to labour market issues.

The basic approach adopted could have been strengthened by reference to international developments, particularly conceptual developments, that have resulted in the approach to labour markets becoming a far more inter-disciplinary subject matter.

Particularly important, and relevant to South African students of the labour market, have been the impact of institutional and sociological theories of labour markets and their functioning. These require, for example, the incorporation of behaviour and practices that cannot be approached from a purely economic perspective in thinking about labour markets.

The concept of internal labour markets has also broadened (and complicated) conventional approaches. While Barker alludes to some of these approaches and concepts, particularly in the empirical discussion of the South African labour market, he could have given them wider coverage in the more conceptual parts of the book.

Not South African enough

Secondly, it could at the same time be said that *The South African Labour Market* is not South African enough. Although our labour market can certainly be analysed through an economic lens, such an approach is inevitably going to have limited leverage in the context of the particular social and political history which has made our labour market what it

is today – highly segmented, highly unequal and, in certain respects, highly inefficient.

To adequately convey an understanding of this labour market requires not only an inter-disciplinary approach, but also a particular sensitivity to the ways in which it is embedded in particular institutions, norms and practices. In this regard, the book's final chapter on 'Institutions of the labour market' is especially disappointing. The chapter is too formalistic, concentrating on a description of certain institutions (such as Nedlac). It does not do justice to the critical importance of institutions, broadly understood, in both the history and the transformation of our labour market.

Despite these gripes, the third edition of Barker's book deserves success in the bookstores. It should be read, not only by students, but also by line managers, union activists and government officials. When used as a textbook, it should probably be supplemented by other readings. More importantly, however, South African tertiary education needs more courses in labour economics and labour market studies in which books such as this can be put to proper use. ★

References

- Presidential Commission to Investigate Labour Market Policy: Restructuring the South African labour market*. Pretoria: Department of Labour, 1996.
- Standing, G., Sender, J. & Weeks, J. *Restructuring the labour market: the South African challenge*. Geneva: ILO, 1996.
- Torres, L. *Labour Markets in Southern Africa*. Oslo, Fafo-report 257, 1999.

Frans Barker, The South African Labour Market: Critical Issues for Renaissance (Third Edition). Pretoria: JL van Schaik, 1999. The book costs R155 and can be obtained at the CNA or Exclusive Books.