Preface

This book stems from my involvement in the Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA). Although my affiliation with the organization began in the early 1980s, I became editor of its journal, Perspectives on Work, in late 2001, a position that provides a superb vantage point from which to view work and employment relations. Established as the Industrial Relations Research Association in the United States during the 1940s, LERA is currently reexamining all aspects of its mission, activities and plans in the wake of decreasing academic and practitioner membership that is part of an overall decline affecting the intellectual community associated with ‘industrial relations,’ especially in the United States and Canada. That ongoing reexamination, and the erosion that sparked it, prompted me to organize and prepare this volume.

While I am one who believes strongly that the academic enterprise of industrial relations needs to survive (indeed, even flourish), I believe just as fervently in the need for the field to change. New directions in the study of work and employment are warranted, and charting and pursuing them requires – as this book shows – a rethinking of institutions, practices and concepts; it may even be necessary to rename the field (‘employment relations’ is currently the top contender). At the same time, this collection of essays demonstrates that moving forward does not mean turning our backs on the past. In fact, key insights from the early days of industrial relations may now be more important than ever.

This book focuses primarily on industrial relations as it is practiced in the United States, but not all of its contributors are based in that country. Indeed, the project is collectively informed by training, teaching and scholarship that are global in scope. Due to unanticipated developments, plans to cast an even wider net in the current volume did not work out, but this collection is not intended to be the final word on the subject. Moreover, the book that came together provides a solid foundation for wider collaboration in the future.

My job as the volume’s editor has been made easier due to the talent and collegiality of the contributors, and I thank each of them for cheerfully participating in this project. I received much valuable assistance – especially in the project’s early stages, when it was needed most – from Bruce Kaufman and John Budd, and I wish to acknowledge their help. Similarly, I want to
recognize the help and guidance provided by Alan Sturmer and Bob Pickens at Edward Elgar Publishing. Finally, on behalf of the contributors, I wish to thank the members of LERA who shared their ideas on how to revitalize the field during a 2007 symposium that addressed this topic at the organization’s annual meeting. This book is dedicated to all those in LERA now engaged in efforts to revitalize the association and the field. Let the dialogue continue.