In April 2010, following the G20 Labour and Employment Ministers meeting in Washington, the International Labour Organization (ILO) announced that the Government of Australia and the ILO had signed a five-year Partnership Agreement that would provide $15 million in the first two years to promote employment and decent work conditions in the Asia-Pacific region. Endorsement of the agreement ensued from representatives of the Labor Government, trade unions and employers in terms that echoed Australia’s earliest engagements with the ILO – engagements which always emphasized the benefits that would accrue to Australians of higher living standards in the Asia-Pacific region.

“The Australian Government welcomes this new way to partner with the ILO to improve the lives of working people in our region,” said Senator Mark Arbib, minister for employment participation. President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions Sharan Burrow, a strong advocate of the Australia–ILO Partnership Agreement agreed: “This is a great step towards further collaboration with the ILO and we hope to expand on this in the very near future.” Peter Anderson, CEO of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry observed that the partnership represented joint regional leadership by the ILO and the Australian Government. “It also signals that the well being of labour markets and economies of our near neighbours is important to Australia and the global community.”

In partnership with the Asia-Pacific region

The ILO, Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region: New Solidarities or Internationalism in the National Interest?

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The press release emphasized the agreement’s “historic” nature. It was the first time that the Australian Government had funded “an overarching package of labour programs through the ILO.”

Although historic in one sense, the package was nevertheless in keeping with Australia’s long tradition of engagement with the ILO, which had, from the first, emphasized that the enhancement of global labour and living standards – especially for Australia’s regional neighbours in Asia and the Pacific – was not primarily an altruistic project, but rather one of central importance to the maintenance of Australia’s own living standards. National interest had informed Australian commitment to internationalism from the beginning.\(^2\)

Australian attitudes had long been informed by a policy of “good-neighbourliness towards Asian nations,” in the words of legal historian, J. G. Starke. In a chapter on “Australia and the International Labour Organisation” for a collection on *International Law in Australia*, Starke noted that Australia had always sought to cooperate with Asian ILO member States in matters of common interest and suggested it was a tribute to Australia that the Fifth Session of the ILO’s Asian Regional Conference was held in Melbourne in 1962, with 19 countries represented. There they adopted “the resolution of Melbourne” that set out a large number of desirable standards aimed at economic and social advancement in Asia.\(^3\)

The economic and social advancement of Asian countries was a key motivation for Australian Labor’s enthusiastic support of the ILO from the beginning, but it also explains the limits of Australia’s response to and engagement with ILO initiatives, which might be understood as one legacy of the colonial division of the world into so-called “backward” and “advanced” countries and Australia’s foundational status as a “white man’s country.”\(^4\) The policy of offering technical assistance and partnership agreements to enhance the development of Asian/Pacific neighbours represents a continuation in a different form of Australia’s original relationship with and investment in the ILO, an approach that might be best characterized as internationalism in the national interest.

**The history of migration and living standards**

The management of migration – and its restriction – have been considered crucial to Australian (and, relatedly, Canadian as well as New Zealand’s and the United States’) living standards since the nineteenth century. Migration has also been an important concern for the ILO, which established the International Emigration Commission that first met in