Labor and Employment Law in Indian Country

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Kaighn Smith, Jr.
Labor and Employment Law

In

Indian Country

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Contents

Foreword, by John E. Echohawk  xiii
Preface  xvi
Acknowledgments  xx

1 Introduction: Historical Framework  1
   A. Early Policy Failures: Removal, Reservation, and Allotment  1
   B. The Indian New Deal: Reorganizing Tribal Governments  4
   C. The Indian Bad Deal: Termination Backlash  7
   D. The “Modern Era”: Indian Self-Determination  8
   E. The “Post-Modern Era”: Judicial Termination?  15

PART I
THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY UNDERLYING LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN INDIAN COUNTRY  21

2 Affirmative Tribal Sovereignty: Legal Bases for Tribal Authority Over Labor and Employment Relations  22
   A. Introduction  22
   B. The Established Attributes of Inherent Tribal Sovereignty  23
   C. Tribal Authority Over Labor and Employment Relations  28
       1. Regulatory Authority  29
       2. Adjudicatory Authority  37
   D. Conclusion  39

3 Defensive Tribal Sovereignty: Barriers to State and Federal Authority Over Labor and Employment Relations in Indian Country  40
   A. Introduction  40
B. Barriers to State Authority: Infringement and Preemption Doctrines
   1. The Infringement Barrier
   2. The Preemption Barrier
   3. Application of the Barriers

C. Barriers to Federal Authority: Federal Infringement
   1. Supreme Court Decisions Affecting Federal Infringement
   2. Varying Approaches to the Application of General Federal Labor and Employment Laws to Tribes and Tribal Enterprises
      b. Tenth and Eighth Circuits: If the Application of Federal Law Would Undermine an Attribute of Sovereignty, It Will Not Apply Absent a Clear Congressional Directive
      c. Seventh Circuit: Uncertainty
      d. D.C. Circuit: Degree of Infringement Affects Approach

D. Federal Court Deference to Tribal Adjudicatory Authority: The Exhaustion Doctrine
   1. The Roots and Elements of the Indian Law Exhaustion Doctrine
   2. The Exhaustion Doctrine and Reservation Labor and Employment Disputes in Indian Country

E. Conclusion

4 Defensive Tribal Sovereignty: Sovereign Immunity and Tribal Employment Disputes
   A. Introduction
   B. Sovereign Immunity: Basic Principles
   C. Sovereign Immunity: “Official” and “Individual” Capacity Lawsuits
1. The *Ex Parte Young* Doctrine 86

D. Sovereign Immunity: Tribal Enterprises 89
   1. Sovereign Immunity and “Subordinate Economic Organizations” 92
   2. Tribal Gaming Enterprises and Sovereign Immunity 94

E. Waivers of Sovereign Immunity 96
   1. The Effect of “Sue and Be Sued” Clauses 97
   2. Arbitration Clauses and Contractual Waivers 99
   3. Forum Selection Clauses 101

F. Conclusion 103

PART II

THE APPLICATION OF FEDERAL AUTHORITY TO LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN INDIAN COUNTRY 105

5 Civil Rights and Tribal Employment 107
   A. Introduction 107
   B. The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 108
      1. Non-Enforcement of ICRA in Federal Court 110
         a. *Dry Creek* Exception 111
      2. Tribal Court Enforcement of ICRA 113
   C. Federal Civil Rights Laws and Tribal Employment 114
      1. Federal Civil Rights Acts 114
      2. Federal Employment Discrimination Laws 120
      3. Exemptions of “Indian Tribes” Under Title VII and the ADA 121
      4. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 123
      5. Federal Employment Discrimination Laws Tied to Federal Funding 128
   D. Conclusion 131

6 Federal Labor and Employment Laws of General Application and Tribal Employment 132
   A. Introduction 132
   B. Occupational Safety and Health Act 133
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. Fair Labor Standards Act</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Family Medical Leave Act</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Employee Retirement Income Security Act</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Application to Tribal Enterprises Before 2006 Amendment</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Application to Tribal Enterprises After 2006 Amendment</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Conclusion</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The National Labor Relations Act and Tribal Employment</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Setting and History</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Early NLRB Concerns</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Determining Whether a Tribal Enterprise is Part of Government</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Determining Whether the Government Exemption Extends to Tribal Entities Off-Reservation</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The NLRB’s Change of Course: Indian Gaming</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. The D.C. Circuit’s Decision in <em>San Manuel</em></td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Tribal Authority Over On-Reservation Labor Relations: The Tenth Circuit Decision in <em>Pueblo of San Juan</em></td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. NLRB Authority Over Labor Relations of On-Reservation Enterprises That Are Distinct from Indian Tribes</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Conclusion</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART III</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOWARD TRIBAL LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT LAW</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Developing Tribal Law: Civil Rights and Employment Discrimination</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Civil Rights Protections for Employees Under Tribal Law</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Navajo Nation</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a. The Navajo Bill of Rights: Protections for Government Employees 182
   i. Navajo Sovereign Immunity Act: Waiver of Immunity for Money Damages 183
   ii. Sovereign Immunity: Civil Rights Claims versus Employment Claims 185
b. Navajo Nation Preference in Employment Act: “Just Cause” and Other Protections for Public and Private Sector Employees 188

2. Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation 193
   a. Mashantucket Pequot Civil Rights Code: Protections for Government Employees 193
   b. Mashantucket Pequot Employee Review Code: “Just Cause” and Procedural Protections for Nation Employees 195

3. Mohegan Tribe 200
   a. Protections for Mohegan Government Employees under ICRA 200
   b. Mohegan Discriminatory Employment Practices Ordinance 201

4. Little River Band of Ottawa Indians 204
   a. Protections for Tribal Government Employees Under the Constitution of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians 204

5. Crow Nation 208


7. California Tribes with Employment Laws Required by Compact 213

C. Civil Rights in the Employment Setting: Selected Substantive Issues 217
   1. Sovereign Immunity Issues and the Scope of Governmental Action Under Tribal Civil Rights Codes 217
   2. Due Process and Government Employment 222
3. Freedom of Speech and Governmental Employment 226
D. Conclusion 235

9 Developing Tribal Law: Unions and Collective Bargaining 237
A. Introduction 237
B. Tribal Governance of Labor Relations: Public and Private Sectors 237
C. Tribal Labor Relations Laws Before San Manuel 240
1. “Right-to-Work” Laws 240
2. The Tribal Labor Relations Ordinance in California 242
3. Other Tribal Laws Governing Labor Relations Before San Manuel: Choctaw and Eastern Band of Cherokee 247
   a. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians 248
   b. Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians 249
D. Tribal Labor Relations Laws After San Manuel 250
1. Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation 251
2. Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan 253
3. Little River Band of Ottawa Indians 254
E. Significant Policy Issues in Tribal Labor Organization Laws 256
   1. Key Decisions Facing Tribes in Enacting Labor Relations Laws 256
   2. Union Solicitation 258
   3. Elections 260
   4. Unfair Labor Practices and Dispute Resolutions 262
      a. Employee Rights 262
      b. Union Duties, Violations of Which May Be Unfair Labor Practices 263
      c. Employer Duties, Violations of Which May Be Unfair Labor Practices 263
   5. Strikes and Lock-Outs 264
   6. Collective Bargaining Impasse Procedures 266
Developing Tribal Law: Native American Employment Preferences in Transition

A. Introduction

B. The Legal Basis for Indian Employment Preference Laws
   1. Morton v. Mancari: “An employment criterion reasonably designed to further the cause of Indian self-government”
   2. The Inherent Authority of Tribes to Enact Indian or Tribal Member Employment Preference Laws

C. Tribal Member Preferences versus Indian Preferences: Contradictions and Controversy
   1. Federal Statutes and Regulations in Conflict
   2. Challenges to Tribal Member Preferences: Unlawful Discrimination on the Basis of “National Origin”

D. Conclusion: Challenges Past and Present

Conclusion

Appendix A: Variables Affecting the Governance of Labor and Employment Relations in Indian Country

Appendix B: Federal Labor and Employment Laws of General Application

Appendix C: Labor and Employment Laws of Indian Tribes

Index
This book is intended to serve as a resource for anyone concerned with labor and employment relations in Indian country. It is also a practical guide for anyone interested in how basic principles of federal Indian law operate in a specific field. It should be of use to elected officials of tribal governments; managers and officers of tribal enterprises; human resources staff; attorneys representing Indian tribes and their enterprises; attorneys representing non-Indian interests doing business in Indian country; students of Indian law; and judges in the tribal, state, and federal courts.

A central theme and driving force in this area of the law is competition for power, particularly the emerging competition between sovereign Indian nations and federal agencies over the regulation of labor and employment in Indian country. This competition continues to play out in the lower federal courts, and will likely be addressed by the United States Supreme Court unless Congress steps in to resolve it first. At stake is the very operation of tribal sovereignty, not only as a means for the assertion of tribal regulatory authority over labor and employment relations in Indian country, but as a barrier to the intrusion of federal authorities.

This book unabashedly argues that Indian tribes must affirmatively exercise authority over labor and employment relations in Indian country as a means to protect tribal self-determination. Thus, it is designed not only to be a tool for dealing with practical legal problems, but as a resource for tribal decision makers to examine and shore up legal infrastructures for tribal self-government at a critical juncture in history.

The area of labor and employment law in Indian country lends itself particularly well to the application of root principles of tribal sovereignty. Controversies in this area invoke a wide spectrum of federal Indian common-law doctrines, ranging from the inherent power of Indian tribes to regulate economic relations within their territories, to limitations on federal agency powers to impose authority from the outside, to questions of whether a particular tribal entity or officer may be immune from suit. This
book, therefore, combines a study of fundamental principles of tribal sovereignty with a practical application of those principles to labor and employment relations.

A book dealing with issues of tribal sovereignty can hardly do justice to the subject without providing the reader with a historical framework for the development of federal Indian law. After all, Indian law may best be viewed as the product of a difficult—sometimes tragic, sometimes heroic—history, and less that of rational doctrinal development. Thus, our introductory chapter seeks to provide the necessary historical context for understanding the conflicting policies that inhere in this area of the law.

In structuring the presentation of Labor and Employment Law in Indian Country, we settled on three distinct parts. Part I discusses the legal principles that provide the basis for Indian tribes to exercise authority over labor and employment relations within their territories. Chapter 2 examines the basis for tribes to exercise what may best be termed “affirmative sovereignty”: the authority to regulate economic activity and to adjudicate labor and employment disputes arising in Indian country. Chapters 3 and 4 then examine the principles underlying what may be termed “defensive sovereignty”: legal barriers used to defend against asserted authority. Chapter 3 looks at the barriers to assertions of authority by the state and federal governments over labor and employment relations in Indian country. Chapter 4 looks at the operation of tribal sovereign immunity as a barrier to the authority of courts to resolve labor and employment disputes.

Part II turns to a central problem in this field: the application of federal laws to labor and employment relations in Indian country. Chapter 5 considers federal civil rights laws affecting employment relations, including the Indian Civil Rights Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. Chapter 6 looks at how a variety of federal labor and employment laws of general application have been applied to Indian tribes and

their enterprises in Indian country: the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act. Chapter 7 then turns to the recent and growing controversy over the application of the National Labor Relations Act to collective bargaining and labor organizations in Indian country.

Part III changes gears to survey what tribes are doing with respect to the enactment, implementation, and judicial enforcement of their own labor and employment laws. Chapter 8 explores tribal laws that provide remedies for civil rights violations and employment discrimination. Chapter 9 looks at tribal laws governing collective bargaining and unions. Finally, Chapter 10 looks at Indian employment preference laws and some of the emerging challenges to these laws.

Appendix A presents, in summary fashion, the legal standards governing jurisdiction by Indian tribes, states, and the federal agencies with respect to labor and employment relations in Indian country. These standards vary depending upon the parties involved and the location of the employment relationship. Appendix B is a summary of a variety of federal labor and employment laws of general application, what matters they regulate, the federal agencies that administer them, and the current status of their application to Indian tribes and tribal enterprises. Finally, Appendix C provides a comprehensive guide to the wide variety of existing tribal laws regulating labor and employment relations within Indian country, including employment discrimination codes, tribal employee retirement income security acts, safety and health provisions, wages and overtime regulations, and many others. We expect to provide regular updates in future editions or supplements to this book as more tribes develop their labor and employment laws.

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In many ways, this book is a call to action. It tells of an imperative for Indian tribes: “govern or be governed.” Tribes have significant opportunities to enact and implement their own laws to govern
labor and employment relations within their territories, consistent with their particular values and policy priorities. Making those policy determinations is the essence of tribal sovereignty. The great irony in this field is that the failure of Indian tribes to exercise such sovereignty places that sovereignty at risk. For failure to act leaves a hole for outsiders—in particular, the federal agencies—to try to fill. If tribal self-determination is a worthy goal, this book is a tool for its preservation in an area where it is particularly vulnerable.
PART II

THE APPLICATION OF FEDERAL AUTHORITY TO LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Federal laws affecting labor and employment relations in Indian country can be broken down into three categories: (1) civil rights, which encompass all forms of employment discrimination that Congress has chosen to address through a variety of laws; (2) labor and employment laws of general application, which generally address the terms and conditions of employment, such as workplace safety, hours and minimum wages, and family medical leave; and (3) labor unions and collective bargaining, an area governed by one federal law: the National Labor Relations Act.

Each of these areas presents specific challenges to tribes in their efforts to exercise their own affirmative sovereignty, for the federal agencies that administer the laws governing these areas are not shy about seeking to enforce them against tribes or their enterprises. Whether these agencies succeed or not in any given case can have significant implications for tribal self-government.

Importantly, the law determining the outcome of many such cases is in a state of flux. In some of its enactments, Congress has expressly excluded tribes. In others, however, it has failed to consider tribes at all. Federal courts have struggled to set coherent standards for applying certain federal labor and employment laws to Indian tribes or their enterprises when Congress has failed to signal its intent. The question may well be resolved by
the Supreme Court, unless Congress amends its laws to indicate its intent.

The following three chapters respectively address the application of federal laws to tribal employment relations in the three categories noted above: civil rights, federal labor and employment laws of general application, and unions and collective bargaining. In each area, there is room for the exercise of affirmative tribal sovereignty under the principles discussed in Chapter 2. In each area, there are also potentially competing federal authorities. The law will be shaped as the resulting tensions play out. Thus, this part shows that there are abounding challenges to tribal sovereignty ahead. Part III will turn to the developing tribal law governing labor and employment relations in Indian country. The very development of such tribal laws may well have a bearing on how courts ultimately resolve whether federal laws may infringe on the exercise of tribal sovereignty in these areas.
A. Introduction
When we think of “civil rights,” we typically think of protections afforded to individuals by the United States Constitution that check abuses of power by governmental authorities: for example, due process of law, freedom of speech, and equal protection of the laws. These are found in the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment. Pursuant to federal constitutional law, these rights constrain governmental employers in their relations with employees in the public sector. Thus, governmental employers must provide public employees with “due process” if they have a property interest in their employment; pursuant to the First Amendment, they cannot discipline employees for exercising their rights of free speech; and under the Equal Protection Clause, they cannot discriminate against employees on the basis of such things as race, sex, or national origin. Apart from the United States Constitution, certain federal statutes, most prominently Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, provide additional protections against employment discrimination in both the public and private sectors.

The Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment do not apply to Indian tribes, nor does Title VII. As “separate sovereigns predating the Constitution,” Indian tribes are not constrained by the constitutional provisions “framed specifically as limitations on federal or state authority,” and Congress expressly excluded tribes

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A. Introduction
Congress enacted the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)\(^1\) in 1935 to quell industrial strife and improve relations between private-sector workers and their employers by allowing collective bargaining by unions.\(^2\) The NLRA establishes and protects the right of private-sector employees to organize and join unions and to engage in collective bargaining with employers. Congress established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to administer the NLRA.\(^3\) The NLRB oversees and administers elections establishing unions.\(^4\) It also adjudicates claims of “unfair labor practices,” which may be brought by unions or employers for alleged violations of the duties under the NLRA.\(^5\) Once a union is elected to represent a bargaining unit within an employer, the NLRA requires employers and unions to “bargain in good faith” in order

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\(^3\) Id. § 153.

\(^4\) Id. § 159.

\(^5\) Id. § 160.
to enter into a collective bargaining agreement.\footnote{Id. § 158(a)(5).} Failure to bargain in good faith, and other unfair labor practices, can trigger sanctions and enforcement orders issued by the NLRB.\footnote{Id. § 160.}

Congress expressly excluded federal government agencies and wholly owned federal government corporations, as well as states and their political subdivisions, from the NLRA by excluding them from the definition of “employer.”\footnote{Id. § 152(2).} Labor organizing in the public sector is, therefore, separately governed by state and federal laws, which differ in substantial ways from the NLRA. For example, many states prohibit strikes against state government operations,\footnote{See, e.g., \textit{Iowa Code Ann.} § 20.12 (West 2010); \textit{Mich. Comp. Laws} § 423.201 (West 2010).} and it is a federal crime for employees to strike against the federal government.\footnote{See 5 U.S.C. § 7311(3) (2006).} Under the NLRA, in contrast, the right to strike is protected.\footnote{See 29 U.S.C. § 163.}

For seventy-two years after the enactment of the NLRA, the NLRB did not view Indian tribes or their on-reservation enterprises as subject to the Act; tribes are governments, and the NLRA is a private-sector law. Things changed, however, in 2007 with the D.C. Circuit’s decision in \textit{San Manuel Indian Bingo & Casino v. NLRB}.\footnote{475 F.3d 1306 (D.C. Cir. 2007).} That decision upheld the NLRB’s assertion of jurisdiction over union organizing activity at the gaming facility owned by the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. The NLRB had reversed its decades-old view that Congress did not intend the NLRA to apply to Indian tribes within their reservations. In so
doing, it joined the Department of Labor and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in seeking to impose the laws it administers upon Indian tribes and their enterprises within Indian country. The *San Manuel* case presents a significant challenge to tribes in deciding how to address labor relations and collective bargaining within their jurisdictions.

Notwithstanding Congress’s express exclusion of state and federal governments from the NLRA, the D.C. Circuit allowed the NLRB to impose its authority upon the operations of tribal government, at least when they involve the generation of government revenues pursuant to the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA). While the *Coeur d’Alene Tribal Farm* and *Mashantucket Sand & Gravel* decisions, discussed in Chapters 3 and 6, had signaled a potential threatening trend, the *San Manuel* decision opened the door to far more serious intrusions into tribal sovereignty. It empowered non-Indian enterprises—labor organizations—to operate within the jurisdictions of Indian tribes under the protection of a federal agency, the NLRB, in ways that impact the distribution of economic resources generated by tribes. It remains to be seen whether other federal courts will follow the lead of the D.C. Circuit. A split among the federal courts of appeals would leave it up to the Supreme Court to resolve whether the NLRA applies to tribes and their enterprises.

*San Manuel* did not answer the question of what happens if a provision of the NLRA is in tension with a tribe’s labor law, enacted and implemented under established principles of tribal sovereignty. In 2002, in *NLRB v. Pueblo of San Juan*, the Tenth C

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14 *San Manuel Indian Bingo & Casino*, 475 F.3d at 1311-16.

15 *Donovan v. Coeur d’Alene Tribal Farm*, 751 F.2d 1113 (9th Cir. 1985).

16 *Reich v. Mashantucket Sand & Gravel*, 95 F.3d 174, 176 (2d Cir. 1996).

17 The principles of tribal sovereignty at issue with respect to the authority of
 Aside from the law of domestic relations, there may be no more important area of law affecting a person’s identity and economic security than employment and labor relations law. As discussed in Chapter 2, Indian tribes may engage in substantial lawmaking in this area pursuant to their inherent sovereignty. There is no reason why they should not be active, especially when they may otherwise face the assertion of regulatory authority by outside federal agencies. As sovereign governments, tribes should consider enacting laws to regulate labor and employment relations within these three discrete categories:

1. **Civil Rights and Employment Discrimination.** This category includes laws prohibiting workplace discrimination on the basis of sex, age, disability, race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or other classifications, and/or protecting employee rights of privacy, speech, or due process. Such laws may include the provision of tribal court remedies for employees who suffer discrimination on these bases. A prominent example is sex discrimination, including harassment by coworkers or supervisors. As discussed in Chapter 5, federal law protecting against this and other forms of discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, color, national origin, and disability do not apply to tribes or their subordinate economic organizations. Congress failed to address tribes in federal age discrimination laws, so their applicability is
uncertain. There is no impediment to tribal lawmaking in these areas, and Indian tribes’ civil rights codes or constitutional provisions may already provide certain rights to tribal government employees who suffer from these forms of discrimination. This is a large subject area. Chapter 8 looks at the laws of a number of tribes in this area and selected substantive issues that arise in employment discrimination disputes.

2. Labor Unions and Collective Bargaining. With the success of tribal economic development (particularly Indian gaming), union activity in Indian country has increased. In response, tribes have begun to enact their own laws to govern labor relations and collective bargaining in much the same way that the federal government and states regulate labor relations and collective bargaining involving their governmental employees. Tribal gaming facilities, operating under the terms of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 (IGRA)\(^1\) to generate governmental revenues for tribes, may be subject to tribes’ labor relations laws in the same way that state lotteries or other state revenue-raising ventures are subject to state labor relations laws. Like states, tribes may decide to enact laws to prohibit strikes against their governmental operations, ensure that unions doing business within their jurisdiction are licensed, direct the manner in which union elections are held, or establish rules for collective bargaining. Chapter 9 looks at what tribes have done in this field and explores some of the substantive issues surrounding tribes’ regulation of unions and collective bargaining.

3. Wages, Hours, and Working Conditions. This category includes laws that address workplace safety and injuries, including workers’ compensation; protection of so-called whistle-blowers (workers who report unsafe or illegal working conditions); overtime compensation; minimum wages; and family medical leave. While this category of tribal lawmaking and regulation could warrant a separate chapter in a later edition of this book, the development of laws in this area is fairly straightforward.

Appendix C includes a list of tribal laws in these various categories.

Kaighn Smith, Jr., is a shareholder at Drummond Woodsum MacMahon in Portland, Maine. He has a national Indian law practice focusing on litigation for Indian tribes in tribal, state, and federal courts (including the U.S. Supreme Court). His cases address jurisdictional disputes with the state and federal governments, sovereignty issues, gaming transaction disputes, labor and employment issues, and environmental matters. He has assisted tribes in enacting, implementing, and defending some of the first comprehensive labor and employment laws in Indian country. He and his employment law colleagues at Drummond Woodsum work with tribes throughout the country on labor and employment relations. Smith serves as adjunct professor of American Indian Law at the University of Maine School of Law. He is a graduate of the University of California (Berkeley) and the University of Maine School of Law. He served as law clerk to Frank M. Coffin on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit.