

# Public servants in revolt over IR

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THE man in charge of John Howard's workplace reform agenda is facing a revolt from his own department, with staff claiming they were coerced into signing non-union individual employment contracts.

The charge came on the same day Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews demanded the ACTU remove television advertisements from air for wrongly claiming that workers could be forced into signing individual contracts under proposed new Howard government laws.

Mr Andrews yesterday dismissed a union television advertisement that rails against individual contracts as "deceptive" and "misleading", saying that employers who coerced their staff to sign Australian Workplace Agreements faced a penalty of \$33,000.

It is the same charge now being levelled by some staff in the minister's own department.

The new advertisement depicts a casual employee who is offered a permanent job only if he signs an AWA.

For the past nine months, Mr Andrews's department has been locked in a battle with half its 3000 staff, who are holding out against the Government's preferred course that they sign AWAs.

In Mr Andrews's Department of Employment and Workplace Relations it is official policy that all new staff are only employed on AWAs.

But the department recently told 15 employees in Melbourne that if they wanted to continue working, they would need to sign AWAs.

The staff were even provided with forms that already had the yes box ticked to the question: "I acknowledge my com-

Union Lisa Newman said the department withdrew the forms only after her union obtained legal advice that the offer constituted duress.

Department staff on fixed-term contracts were also told they would have to sign AWAs if they wanted permanent positions. This condition was also later withdrawn.

Mr Andrews's department is now offering half of its workforce who are refusing to sign AWAs an annual 3.9 per cent pay rise over three years, plus a possible extra 3 per cent bonus based on performance.

Trade-offs so far rejected by staff include reductions to redundancy entitlements, removal of a remote location allowance and watering down of grievances procedures.

So unhappy are workers from the department's Sydney office that they went on strike for two hours on Friday. Staff in Melbourne and Canberra are considering similar action.

Mr Andrews yesterday declined to comment on the dispute. A spokesman said Mr Andrews did not interfere in negotiations conducted by department management.

The head of the department's legal and policy branch, Jeremy O'Sullivan, said the policy on AWAs was "never misapplied".

He said AWA forms wrongly issued were withdrawn and staff were given an option to stick with a collective enterprise agreement. Mr O'Sullivan said all new employees would be offered only AWAs, but staff whose fixed-term contracts were renewed would be treated as continuing employees.

ACTU secretary Greg Combet accused Mr Andrews of using "Stalinist tactics" against departmental employees.

"We could have used an employee from Mr Andrews's