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## Unskilled the losers but firms win in IR changes

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A professor says workers will be hit in hard times and unions are warning of a fall in wages and conditions under the Howard industrial revolution. Kim MacDonald reports. WA's leading labour expert claims there will be a clear set of winners and losers under the Howard Government's industrial revolution, with business and skilled workers to gain but low-skilled workers to miss out.

Professor Bill Ford, of the University of WA, said the changes would further expose workers and employers to market forces, intensifying their existing strengths and weaknesses.

The law school dean said employers would be better off while high-skilled workers in unionised industries where there was a labour shortage and good profits, such as construction engineering, would do as well or better in the new system.

Lower skilled workers in low-margin and fragmented industries, such as hospitality and retailing, would become increasingly vulnerable to market forces and suffer financially.

"Workers will be at the mercy of the market," Professor Ford said. "When John Howard says that he stands by his record, that the economy is doing well, he is saying that the economy is your protection.

"As long as the economy is doing well so will workers, but if the economy dips workers will lose bargaining power to employers."

UnionsWA claims the removal of the award safety net - one of the five main proposed changes - will ultimately reduce wages and conditions for all

workers.

UnionsWA secretary Dave Robinson said all employees now benefited from laws which prevented agreements from undercutting **union** awards, which contain dozens of employee entitlements.

He said the Federal bid to legislate only five minimum conditions, with four covered by existing law, would leave too many existing conditions up for negotiation.

But Federal Industrial Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said it would create flexibility for employers and employees to determine conditions and schedules which suited them, ultimately benefiting the economy.

The second big change would make it more difficult for unions to enter and recruit **members** at worksites, which unions fear will diminish their power.

Mr Andrews said the change, including fines of up to \$22,000 for building workers participating in illegal strike action, would protect employers from wildcat strikes which cost tens of millions of dollars a day.

He rejected claims the move to set up a fair pay commission to set the minimum wage, instead of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, would lead to lower pay.

He said the new commission would not be able to revise wages down, although he admitted that there was no guarantee the minimum would keep pace with other wage levels. Mr Andrews rejected Unions-WA claims that it would be a disadvantage for workers to take the role out of an independent arbitral system into a commission with an as-yet undefined role.

The most opposition has been against the Federal bid to introduce a single industrial system, virtually abolishing the State system.

Mr Robinson, along with both sides of State Parliament, claims this would remove choice for both employers and employees.

But Mr Andrews claimed it would prevent unnecessary duplication and confusion.

"With an economy smaller than California's, a series of different industrial relations systems which were designed a century ago is inefficient, especially with many business operating across borders," he said.

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