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Lots to beef about for sacked abattoir workers

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AS GARY BRYANT sees it, bosses at Cowra Abattoir were doing a "try-on" when word went around around late last year that there would be lay-offs among his meatworker mates.

"There was a hint of what came to pass, but we thought it was a bluff because the pigs [pig-meat workers] had a year to run on their enterprise agreement," the **union** delegate said yesterday.

"The company was saying the blokes were working four to six hours a day rather than the usual eight, but they were meeting their targets. Anyway, this is about money, not hours."

Whatever the rationale for the termination of 29 meatworkers - 16 on the beef shift, 13 on the pig shift - the abattoir on the edge of this pleasant, outwardly affluent Central West town, has become the early key battleground of the Howard Government's overhaul of **workplace** relations.

The Mayor, Bruce Miller, said the dismissals, to take effect on May 5, were hard because "we all know each other". "This perhaps confirms what many have thought - that the new WorkChoices legislation is going to be abused in many ways," he said.

Many of the Cowra meatworkers live outside town because of their need for cheaper housing and, says Mr Bryant, are reluctant to talk to media for fear of hurting their chances of winning renewed **employment** at Cowra Abattoir.

The company and worker representatives were interviewed yesterday by Greg Mason, regional manager of the Office of **Workplace** Services, the Federal Government's investigator of alleged **industrial** relations abuses. The **Workplace** Relations Minister, **Kevin Andrews**, said yesterday the investigation was "in its infancy".

On Sunday he implied Cowra Abattoir had jumped the gun and might have breached the new rules by terminating workers then rehiring some on

reduced wages.

The abattoir wants to shed the 29 workers on the promise of taking back 20 under the federal award - said by the **union** to be worth \$580 a week, up to \$180 less than the meatworkers can currently earn under the incentive-based NSW award.

The company has been mute on the issue, apart from the March 30 letters of termination. "It is with regret I give you five weeks notice of termination," wrote the abattoir boss, Ray Petterson. "We deeply regret this situation: however, given the current economic conditions we must take this action to ensure the ongoing viability of the abattoir."

Since the law took effect on Monday last week there have been claims in several states of sackings under its provisions. In Melbourne, eight long-term workers at Triangle Cables were given a month's wages and told to leave.

Caption :PHOTO: "This is about money, not hours" ... Gary Bryant and his son Peter at their home in Cowra yesterday. Photo: Lisa Wiltse

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