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Battle starts on work law

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A SMALL town abattoir has become the first major battleground for the Federal Government's **industrial** relations reforms.

Twenty-nine workers, who were sacked and offered their jobs back for hundreds of dollars a week less, put up a united front yesterday against what they described as bullying by an opportunistic employer.

Workplace Relations Minister **Kevin Andrews** sent an emissary to Cowra Abattoir, in western NSW, to investigate whether the company had broken the law by sacking the staff and offering to re-employ 20 of them on inferior wages because of ``operational reasons".

Prime Minister **John Howard** said operational reasons were not an excuse to sack people.

The Cowra showdown came as a **union** leader warned some workers may have to work during Easter and on Anzac Day without their usual penalty rates because of the new **industrial** laws.

Trades Hall Council secretary Brian Boyd predicted there would be a rash of cases involving cancelled holidays.

``If they (employees) don't work them they won't get paid, or if they do work them they won't get the normal penalty rates," he said.

``The new **industrial** relations laws allow a lot of power and flexibility for the employers."

But a Australian Chamber of Commerce and **Industry** spokesman said **workplace** deals covering holidays could not be changed by employers.

In Cowra, there were fears the abattoir workers and their families will move if the sackings stand.

John Thompson, a 53-year-old beef slaughterman, was worried he won't be able to get another job at his age after doing the same job for 35 years.

Rodney Veney, who provides his family's sole income as his wife stays

home to look after their disabled son, was concerned that Cowra is a test case for other workers across the country.

``If they put it down to restructuring, then they could sack people every time they install a new telephone," he said.

Brett Jeffries, 28, who works in the mutton department, said he could face the same fate after his **workplace** agreement expires in 18 months.

The workers are pleading with the Federal Government to intervene in what may be a breach of its new WorkChoices legislation, which came into force last week.

Cowra Abattoir planned a restructure after its workload dropped following the reopening of an abattoir at nearby Young.

Instead it issued workers with a notice of dismissal and job applications on Friday.

The company has refused to comment.

Mr Andrews condemned employers who were ``going off half-cocked" and taking advantage of confusion over the new laws.

Cowra mayor Bruce Miller said the job losses could ruin the town.

``It has that flow-on effect with doctors, teachers and police. It may be that the number of teachers at the local school drops if we lose any more people from town," he said.

Sacked worker John Thompson said it was a blow to men who had spent their working lives as the abattoir.

``I've got 35 years of skills as a slaughterman. Who is going to want to employ 53-year-old guys?"

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