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Bosses warned: observe IR laws

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· Sackings could be illegal

EMPLOYERS have been given a stiff warning by Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews against misusing new industrial relations laws, after sackings that even the Government admits could be illegal.

The most dramatic dismissals were of 29 workers at a NSW abattoir who were told they could compete in a few weeks for 20 jobs at lower pay.

ACTU president **Sharan Burrow** also warned yesterday that a pattern could emerge of employers getting rid of workers who had been injured on their sites.

Mr Andrews, telling employers to "take a deep breath" and not think they were in a totally deregulated system, said a couple may have "jumped the gun".

"Employers have rights but they also have obligations", which they should look at carefully, he told the ABC's Insiders.

He said the Cowra abattoir could be breaking the law if people were re-employed on worse conditions. If the main reason for sacking workers was to seek to re-employ them on inferior conditions, "that's not allowed under the legislation". Employers should educate themselves about the new law.

Prime Minister John Howard, pointing out that with more than 100 workers the abattoir was not exempt from unfair dismissal provisions, told Ten's Meet the Press large companies should not think they could just give "operational reasons" to justify dismissals without a genuine "operational situation".

ACTU secretary **Greg Combet** said the abattoir proposed that a re-employed pig slaughterer would get \$185.80 less a week, and a beef slaughterman \$200 a week less.

The case is being examined by the Office of Workplace Services.

Ms Burrow said six of the nine workers sacked from Triangle Cables in Melbourne had been receiving WorkCover. Unions were concerned that

employers were using the cover of the new workplace laws to dismiss injured workers and so avoid their usual responsibilities to cater for disabled or temporarily injured workers.

She told a picnic gathering of a few hundred workers and community leaders in Yarraville that the sackings in Cowra highlighted the "bastardry that these laws actually allow".

Mr Andrews "doesn't know his own laws", she said. "If he is saying his laws are being misinterpreted, we would say, 'Show us where'."

She said while the new laws allowed companies with fewer than 100 workers to dump workers without adequate reason, the Cowra sackings highlighted how employers with more than 100 workers would use the convenient excuse of "operational reasons".

"We want to know what the minister believes is in the new laws to protect people from unfair dismissal when 'operational reasons' appears to be as powerful a tool to sack people instantly as it is under this law."

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