

Cable firm sackings under microscope

By **MEAGHAN SHAW**
and **MISHA SCHUBERT**

A PORT Melbourne cable company that sacked nine workers last week using new industrial laws is under scrutiny from the Howard Government's workplace inspectors.

The inquiry comes after a similar Office of Workplace Services investigation at the Cowra abattoir prompted the company to withdraw termination notices to 29 sacked workers this week.

But the meatworkers' union and abattoir workers yesterday warned the reprieve could be temporary. They fear new retrenchment notices could be issued if pay negotiations break down.

A growing number of disputes over retrenchments, attempted pay cuts and bids to lock unions out of workplace wage deals are becoming fodder in a battle over the new workplace laws, which came into effect 10 days ago.

A spokesman for Workplace Minister Kevin Andrews yesterday confirmed inspectors visited Triangle Cables after reports that it had used the new laws to sack

staff who were union members — six of whom were also on WorkCover benefits.

The National Union of Workers claims the company restructured its operations to get below the 100-worker limit to avoid unfair dismissal claims. It also found the workers' jobs advertised on a website in February.

The sacked workers received a letter signed by managing director Allan Greenfield last Tuesday — the day after the new laws began — despite the fact he had been holidaying in New Zealand. He has not returned *The Age's* calls.

The Office of Workplace Services this week also launched a prosecution against a Canberra restaurant, Pangaea Bar and Restaurant, for the alleged underpayment of its Filipino employees under the old laws.

The inspectorate will be seeking penalties for breaches of the restaurant award in the ACT Magistrates Court, which can impose fines of up to \$33,000.

But the firm hit back at Mr Andrews and Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone over the publicity, accusing them of

unfairly smearing the restaurant's reputation.

"We are pleased to note that we have served both of you on many occasions in our restaurant," owner Michael Harrington wrote to the ministers.

Mr Andrews yesterday praised the role of the Office of Workplace Services in prompting the reinstatement of workers at the Cowra abattoir.

He suggested the company's actions could have breached "freedom of association" clauses in the new laws, which are meant to stop a company sacking or downgrading the conditions of an existing worker on an award or agreement.

"If the company was simply relying upon (operational reasons) and hasn't looked at its other obligations including its 'freedom of association' obligations, then it could have misadvised itself about the way in which it could go forward."

But Rodney Veney, one of the reinstated abattoir workers whose wife, daughter and disabled son are dependent on his salary, said he was not confident that the issue had been resolved.