

Beazley pledges to work with the states

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Opposition Leader Kim Beazley has hinted a future Labor government might establish a unified, national industrial relations system regardless of the outcome of a state High Court challenge to the federal government's Work Choices legislation, while vowing to reinstate unfair dismissal rights if elected.

In a major speech on industrial relations delivered at the University of Sydney last night, Mr Beazley said a "fair dinkum national system" could only be achieved by working with the states.

While he said that he could not have a final view until the High Court had made a ruling, he indicated he would work with the states on establishing a unified IR system.

"A fair dinkum national system can only be created if we work with the states — only through a referral of powers, uniform common-

KEY POINTS

- The Opposition Leader has indicated he would set up a unified national industrial relations system.
- The Labor leader has vowed to reinstate unfair dismissal laws.
- Labor has yet to capitalise upon the unpopular workplace changes.

wealth/state legislation or harmonisation," Mr Beazley said.

"You don't build a workable national system by Canberra firing a 2000-page legal missile at the [states] and then telling the High Court to sort out the mess. The only sensible way forward is to work with the states and build consensus, and that's what I will do."

Mr Beazley also unveiled plans for the establishment of an Unfair Dismissal Tribunal that would hold workplace hearings and aim to settle the majority of cases with 90 days.

The announcement came amid concerns that Labor under Mr Beazley's leadership was failing to capitalise on the unpopularity of the federal government's Work Choices laws. Polls show that the issue was denting the electoral standing of Prime Minister John Howard but not translating into greater support for the opposition.

The Labor leader used the speech to try to impart new momentum to the labour movement's attack on the IR changes, but he has decided to delay the release of the opposition's major policy blueprint, citing in part uncertainty arising from the High Court challenge being mounted by the states against the Work Choices legislation.

Repeating his pledge to "rip up" the new IR laws, Mr Beazley said that by abolishing unfair dismissal protection for workers in firms with 100 or fewer staff, the federal government was rewarding lazy and bad management practices.

"These laws send a message to bosses and supervisors: it's okay to do or say just about whatever you like to workers, they're just another business cost, and expendable input of labour," he said.

"And they send a message to workers: you'd better butter up your boss, because if you step out of line you're on your own."

Mr Beazley said there was no independent research to support government claims of a link between employment protection laws and employers hiring more staff, and an unfair dismissal tribunal would restore to workers a right to remedies when they were sacked unfairly.

The Labor leader said the tribunal's chief remedy would be reinstatement rather than compensation, and it would be required to expedite hearings, using simpler processes and workplace hearings to minimise business disruption.

He said the tribunal, which would

have branches in every state, would be required to resolve 90 per cent of claims within 90 days. Ambit, speculative or vexatious claims would be discouraged by prohibiting contingency fees, discouraging the use of expensive lawyers and allowing the tribunal to award costs against applicants.

Mr Beazley pledged that a Labor government would abolish Work Choices prohibitions on what terms and conditions could be negotiated in workplace agreements and would re-establish fairness as one of the criteria in setting minimum wage rates.

But he hedged on the future of Australian Workplace Agreements. He said that he backed the right of workers to collectively bargain and reject individual contracts that cut pay and conditions and undermined collective bargaining and union representation, but stopped short of the pledge made by his predecessor, Mark Latham, to scrap them.