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Monday 24 April 2006

The Sydney Morning Herald

Government accused: next workplace changes will put young at risk

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Publication: Sydney Morning Herald (4, Mon 24 Apr 2006)

Edition: First

Keywords: **industrial (1), Workplace (5), Kevin (1), Andrews (1), union (1)**

LEGISLATION; YOUTH: AN OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

FOUR Federal Government moves will weaken safety protection for workers, with vulnerable groups such as the young most prone to being hit hard, according to one of the nation's leading researchers on occupational health.

The **industrial** relations laws will expose young workers to more risk because many will no longer be protected by awards and their bargaining power will be further reduced by an increase in the use of contracts, according to the professor in the school of organisation and management at the University of NSW, Michael Quinlan.

A second wave of **workplace** changes the Federal Government has planned for occupational health and safety legislation also looks set to water down laws protecting workers, he said.

"If the legislation is weakened, then more vulnerable groups like young workers will suffer most from those changes," he said. Allowing private companies to buy workers' compensation insurance from the Federal Government agency Comcare could threaten the viability of the state systems with large safety inspectorates, he said.

And the Government's recent dismantling of the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission had compromised the watchdog's independence, Professor Quinlan claimed.

Its successor, the Australian Safety and Compensation Council, has been moved into the Department of **Workplace** Relations.

"It's much closer to ministerial fiat than the old body," he said.

Kate Walshe, a spokeswoman for the **Workplace** Relations Minister, **Kevin Andrews**, said Professor Quinlan was wrong about the laws weakening bargaining power. Employees aged under 18 had to have the written consent of a parent or other "appropriate adult" before signing a

workplace agreement. Employees could appoint a bargaining agent, including a **union** official, to help them with agreement-making, she said. Proposed changes to safety laws were aimed at enhancing consultation between employers and employees, she said. Productivity Commission analysis showed the effect of businesses leaving workers' compensation schemes was unlikely to be significant, she said.

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