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IR changes to get royal nod today

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Key parts of the federal government's sweeping **workplace** changes, including the establishment of the body for setting minimum pay and conditions, are set to become law as early as today.

The Executive Council headed by Governor-General Michael Jeffery is expected to give royal assent today to the legislation, which will bring the Work Choices Act into force.

Government and legal sources said the government would seek approval for parts of the legislation to become law, including the creation of the Fair Pay Commission, exempting businesses employing 15 or fewer workers from redundancy pay and the creation of a national regime regulating the **employment** of school-based apprentices and trainees.

The government wants the commission to bring down its first decision reviewing minimum pay and conditions in the spring of 2006, but it has yet to name its members apart from the chairman, economist Ian Harper.

A spokesman for **Workplace** Relations Minister **Kevin Andrews** yesterday declined to comment on when the legislation would gain royal assent.

Mr Andrews had flagged that parts of the legislation would be in place before Christmas but that most of it would operate from March.

The new laws seek to create a national **industrial** system that overrides those of the states. Trade unions and the Labor states have vowed to challenge the law in the High Court.

Legal sources said a separate High Court challenge over parts of the Work Choices Act that deal with registration of unions was planned by the Queensland branch of the Australian Workers **Union**, led by Bill Ludwig.

Under Mr Ludwig, the AWU has long been the dominant **union** in Queensland, and also the biggest single bloc within the state branch of the ALP.

Australia's dual federal-state **industrial** relations system allows unions to register under both state and federal **industrial** legislation.

The AWU's membership coverage in Queensland is much wider than in other states because it has secured broader eligibility rules under the state **industrial** relations system than under the federal system.

Changing the system of state registration could erode the AWU's coverage of an estimated 50,000 members in Queensland, threatening its influential role at the centre of local labour politics.

A spokeswoman for Mr Ludwig yesterday declined to comment on a possible High Court challenge.

The challenges by the Labor states and another by Unions NSW are expected to be lodged as soon as possible, but might not be decided until late 2006 or early 2007.

KEY POINTS

- * The Work Choices Act is expected to gain royal assent today.
- * It seeks to create a national system that overrides those of the states.
- * High Court challenges are likely to be mounted.

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