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Spike in IR deals ahead of new laws

Author: MEAGHAN SHAW, WORKPLACE EDITOR

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Employers are advised to wait

THOUSANDS of businesses have established new workplace deals with trade unions ahead of the implementation of the Federal Government's industrial relations laws next month.

Nearly 3400 union-negotiated agreements were certified in the second half of last year after Prime Minister John Howard announced his Government's industrial relations plans. This was more than double the 1450 certified by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission during the first half of the year.

More than 700 agreements, including non-union agreements, have been certified this year.

ACTU secretary **Greg Combet** attributed the rush to a union campaign started in November 2004 to negotiate three-year agreements to protect workers' pay and conditions ahead of the legislation.

He said that many companies wanted certainty and did not want to be guinea pigs for the new laws. "They want to get on with their business, make sure their workforce is organised, that pay and conditions are equitable and that there's a decent agreement in place," Mr Combet said.

Unions recently have struck agreements with a range of large companies, including National Australia Bank, Kraft, Nylex, Murray Goulburn Co-operative, Linfox, One Steel, Nestle, Inghams, Qenos and News Ltd.

A spokesman for federal Workplace Minister Kevin Andrews attributed the spike to the building industry, which had many agreements expiring in October. He said construction companies rushed to renegotiate agreements that would comply with the Government's new national construction code and guidelines to be eligible to tender for Commonwealth projects.

"It's got nothing to do with WorkChoices," he said.

The WorkChoices legislation was passed in December but the bulk of it will not come into effect until late next month. Regulations underpinning the legislation will be introduced to Parliament next month.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Peter Hendy advised companies to wait for the new laws.

"We think the new legislation will give them more opportunities for flexible productivity agreements," he said.

Table :

UNION-NEGOTIATED AGREEMENTS

2005

March quarter 675

June quarter 776

September quarter 1308

December quarter 2083

Total 4842

2004

March quarter 1261

June quarter 1258

September quarter 1091

December quarter 552

Total 4162

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN INDUSTRIAL

RELATIONS COMMISSION

DONE DEALS

National Australia Bank, Kraft, Nylex, Australian Arrow, Murray Goulburn

Co-operative, Linfox, Toll (Victorian distribution sites), OneSteel,

Nestle, Parmalat, National Foods, Coles (retail warehouses), Bonlac,

Inghams, Sarah Lee, Mobile Lube, Qenos, News Ltd

SOURCE: NATIONAL UNION OF WORKERS AND OTHER UNIONS

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