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ACTU targets marginal seats with fighting fund

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The trade union movement will conduct an aggressive grassroots campaigns in marginal federal electorates as it gears up to spend more than \$10 million fighting the government's proposed Work Choices package.

The **ACTU** campaign committee's first meeting of the year tomorrow will thrash out how to spend the money over the next two years through a mix of television advertising based on fresh opinion polling, legal challenges and more mass protests.

Greater emphasis will be given to targeting marginal coalition seats as unions confront the major challenge of bringing debate over the hottest political issue last year firmly back on the agenda after the summer break.

While the laws are not due to come into force until the end of next month, **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** claimed a "whole pile of spivs" in law firms and industrial relations consultancies were already advising employers how to slash labour costs under the new regime.

He said one unnamed Melbourne manufacturer was pushing for a 5 per cent pay cut, a cut in long-service leave, abolition of rostered days off and for new employees to be paid 20 per cent less than existing ones.

"It's very cocky employer posturing," Mr Combet told The Australian Financial Review. "But that's just one instance. There's plenty of other things going on that lead you to believe there's going to be plenty of industrial tensions over these issues."

Federal opposition IR spokesman Stephen Smith said that Labor aimed to ensure that Work Choices was "one of the living standard issues of the next election campaign".

"It's not so much where we're placed in February-March of 2006, it's where we're placed in September-October 2007," he said.

Mr Combet declined to detail the finances of the union campaign, but it raised an initial \$8 million last year and unions have pledged to contribute \$5.50 over the next two years for each of Australia's 1.9 million union members, raising about \$10.5 million more.

"A lot of unions are raising more than that," he said. "We're asking for voluntary contributions and people are prepared to contribute more."

But the union movement faces its own internal debate as the **ACTU** thrashes out a formal workplace policy, which will be a crucial reference point for the ALP's IR platform at the next federal election.

The final **ACTU** policy will be struck at its biennial congress to be held in Melbourne in October.

Mr Combet said the greater openness of the economy - to international competition, trade liberalisation and the pursuit of competition policy by governments - meant "decentralised bargaining is here to stay". "We want to have a look at similar economies and cultures and see what might be the best way for workers to have an enforceable, legal right to collectively bargain," he said.

The system was changing in "profound ways and we're not going to be pretending that the clock can be turned back".

But Mr Combet faces a battle over the shape of **ACTU's** final policy on bargaining rights, with one sceptic being influential Unions NSW secretary John Robertson, who has commissioned his own research in the US, Canada and Britain.

Mr Robertson argues that - while the right to bargain collectively is the key issue for unions - there are problems with those rights being recognised through workplace ballots.

"In the US, you end up campaigning around the legitimacy of the union as opposed to bargaining and getting an outcome for the membership," he said. "You can spend years and years front-end loading campaigns for recognition ballots just to get the union recognised."

"In the UK, they've got a system and there are ballots but the fact is they [unions] are still not winning the majority of ballots."

Mr Robertson said unions had to ensure the campaign against Work Choice was broader than the union movement.

Unions NSW plans regional community forums and getting 29 regional campaign committees to build community relationships.

Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Brian Boyd said his affiliates wanted more national days of protest this year "sooner rather than later".

Caption :PHOTO: The right to bargain collectively is seen as the key issue for unions. Photo: ARSINEH HOUSPIAN

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