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# THE AGE

## Warning over IR 'domino effect'

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REDUCE workers' conditions if you want to stay competitive - that is the stark choice employers face under the new federal **industrial** relations laws that come into effect next month, according to the State Government.

Attorney-General Rob Hulls has warned employers could be forced to cut the pay and conditions of workers if their competitors slashed conditions under the new laws.

He said employers had already expressed concern about the domino effect of the new laws.

"(Employers) don't want to be put in a position where they are not competing on a level playing field. Good employers are going to be under pressure to lower conditions to compete," he said.

Mr Hulls told The Sunday Age that Victoria's Solicitor-General, Pamela Tate, SC, would spearhead Victoria's High Court challenge to the new federal **industrial** relations laws.

The challenge, expected to be lodged in the next two weeks, will be heard in May with a similar joint challenge from other state governments.

The Bracks Government has already passed legislation establishing a **workplace** rights advocate to monitor working conditions in Victoria under the **industrial** changes.

"The **workplace** rights advocate has the power to promote **employment** practices and for those employers who want to abuse their workers, it will have the right to name and shame companies," Mr Hulls said.

Brian Corney, a director at **Industrial** Relations Victoria, will be the acting **workplace** rights advocate until Mr Hulls decides on a permanent appointment.

Ian Hanke, spokesman for federal **Employment** and **Workplace** Relations Minister **Kevin Andrews**, said Mr Hulls was playing politics.

"Instead of trying to deceive people, Mr Hulls should be out there living up

to his word and selling up the benefits of a national (**industrial** relations) system with the minister, as he said he would," Mr Hanke said.

Employer and business groups have also been preparing for the **industrial** changes. The Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and **Industry** has called on businesses to attend briefings about "what the WorkChoices changes might involve and more importantly, what they might mean for their business".

The chamber encouraged employers to "come to grips" with the new WorkChoices changes or they would be "potentially leaving themselves exposed to pressure from competitors".

David Gregory, general manager of **workplace** relations at the chamber, said he had briefed about 2500 businesses on the new laws.

He said many businesses were looking for ways to make their businesses more streamlined and straightforward.

Mr Gregory also said he expected some businesses to package salary entitlements into one overall salary package that reflected accrued benefits, including penalty rates and annual leave loading.

**Workplace** law firm Australian Business Lawyers has released information outlining the changes. Partner Paul Ronfeldt said many businesses were unprepared, particularly white-collar employers who had not realised the changes could affect them.

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