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We are living in a dog-eat-dog world

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CAN you tell me which union represents petrol station

attendants?

Do you remember the last receptionists' strike?

Do you know who hairdressers can turn to when they've got a problem?

If you can answer any of these questions, you know too much about industrial relations for your own good.

Most people know very little about the vast, but invisible, army of service workers under threat from John Howard's new workplace laws.

When people think about industrial relations, they see militant building workers, striking teachers and, at a pinch, maybe brawny factory workers and truckies.

They associate the industrial relations system with unions and union members.

Yet, less than a quarter of Australian workers are union members and most work in businesses where unions have little influence.

Many union members have quite a lot of natural bargaining power because of their skills.

Construction workers are militant because their skills are crucial, they work in groups, and the cost of stoppages is enormous.

Prison officers and police are strong.

Think of the chaos if they were to walk off the job.

But highly visible workers are a fairly small minority.

The big numbers these days are in hospitality, cleaning, retail, security, clerical and administration.

Most of them don't belong to unions and have little bargaining power.

They're also generally the lowest paid and worst treated. Many are casual.

Some are long-termers; some are students who are only working in the industry for a year or two.

Most workers in this invisible army are absolutely dependent on workplace laws for a fair go at work.

They get sick leave and annual leave only because the law requires it.

If they are serving behind a counter at 3am, they get penalty rates because their employer has to pay them.

Many of them depend on penalty rates for work at unsocial hours to enable them to earn a living because their base rate of pay is extremely low.

All this is wiped out by **John Howard's** new industrial relations laws.

Workers can be forced to trade these rights away and, in most cases, it is an unequal bargain.

Horror stories are emerging, such as Spotlight workers forced to trade away penalty rates for a 2c an hour rise in the basic rate.

These stories are the tip of the iceberg.

With the protection of the law stripped away, many workers feel powerless.

Most don't want to be the centre of national media attention, no matter how badly they are treated.

I've encountered many appalling stories already, such as clothing workers in my electorate who have been turned into phony contractors, who supposedly rent the machines in the factory.

The big-business lobby supports individual contracts because they deliver flexibility in the workplace.

I'm all in favour of flexibility, but I'm also in favour of people getting a fair go.

Some workers will be able to get by under the law of the jungle, but many won't have the bargaining power.

When your boss has the power to sack you at any time, for no reason, you're likely to be on the back foot.

Business leaders, who earn millions of dollars a year, wouldn't know what it feels like to work hard all day for \$15 or \$20 an hour.

This debate is about the values that will guide our country in the new century.

It's about the future of our kids, because they're the ones who'll be growing up in a dog-eat-dog world.

Do you want a US-style society, in which the privileged and powerful earn millions and a huge army of service workers can barely earn enough to survive, no matter how hard they work?

I certainly don't.

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