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Majority rules: unions urge Beazley to get tough on IR

Author: Mark Skulley and Adrian Rollins

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ACTU secretary **Greg Combet** has thrown his support behind Opposition Leader Kim Beazley's pledge to introduce collective bargaining rights in Australian workplaces, as the federal government stepped up its parliamentary attack on Labor's industrial relations policies.

Mr Beazley's stance on collective bargaining rights - a move that could create new duties for employers to negotiate with unions - has been overshadowed by the backlash over his plan to abolish individual Australian workplace agreements (AWAs).

The move raises the prospect of a Labor government introducing United States-style workplace ballots, which would require an employer to negotiate with a union that has the support of more than 50 per cent of a workforce.

As federal parliament resumed yesterday, Prime Minister John Howard and Mr Beazley told their party rooms that industrial relations would be the key battleground leading up to the next election.

Mr Howard accused Mr Beazley of capitulating to the unions in pledging to scrap AWAs.

"There was a meeting between Mr Beazley and Mr [John] Robertson of Unions NSW, and out of that came the big flip-flop of the Leader of the Opposition that has resulted in his absurd attack on the aspirations of hundreds of thousands of Australians," Mr Howard said.

Business also attacked Labor's move with Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Peter Hendy saying it was a "bit rich" for local unions to want collective bargaining rights on top of what was still a highly regulated industrial system.

"This is a right that exists in the US system that doesn't have the award

system and a centralised [industrial] commission," Mr Hendy said. "Is **Greg Combet** saying he wants to get rid of the award system?"

Mr Combet is pressing for collective bargaining rights to be adopted as official **ACTU** policy - and thereby a key influence on Labor policy - at the peak union body's congress in October.

Mr Combet has yet to win union support for the policy, but he said yesterday that Mr Beazley's pledge on collective bargaining rights - included in speeches over the weekend - was an "important commitment" which stood to have greater impact than the abolition of AWAs.

"We will have a policy to ensure that employees have an enforceable legal right to collectively bargain," Mr Combet said. "It's the nature of that policy that's under consideration."

He said the eventual union policy would take a "uniquely Australian approach" after taking into account the US, Canadian and British models for collective bargaining rights.

In the US, workplace ballots are conducted to recognise union representation in a workplace, while in Britain ballots deal with collective bargaining rather than unions.

Mr Howard flagged to coalition MPs that one of his key lines of attack against Labor would be an appeal to "aspirational Australia", those who were prepared to work hard and wanted their extra efforts rewarded.

"We stand for aspirational Australia, we stand for people to work harder and earn more if they want, whereas Mr Beazley, the only job he's interested in saving is his own," a party-room spokesman quoted Mr Howard as telling the meeting.

Mr Beazley told the Labor caucus that he was happy to take on the government over IR policy because it was an argument Labor would win.

"Kim said that, on the weekend, he'd laid out a clearer cut course on industrial relations," a caucus spokeswoman said.

The spokeswoman said there had been no dissent at yesterday's caucus meeting, but Mr Beazley faced internal disquiet over his AWA policy reversal and the way it was handled. Mr Beazley's pledge over collective bargaining was also part of his weekend speeches

Senior colleagues and political allies, treasury spokesman Wayne Swan and industrial relations spokesman Stephen Smith, both admitted they had not been consulted by Mr Beazley before he made his decision.

Mr Smith said the Labor leader told him of his decision "about 10 days ago", when the evidence was clear that AWAs were being used to undermine workers' pay and conditions.

"In the light of that compelling evidence, Mr Beazley told me he'd decided we should abolish AWAs and he no doubt consulted with all the necessary colleagues," he said.

Opposition sources said the lack of consultation added to the impression that Mr Beazley's change of stance on AWAs was aimed at placating NSW Labor and unions, a key support base but also a recent source of criticism.

Mr Howard went on the attack, repeating his allegation that Mr Beazley had capitulated to unions in pledging to scrap AWAs.

But it went largely unnoticed that, on Saturday, Mr Beazley told the Queensland state ALP conference that he would replace Work Choices with "laws to uphold the right of every worker to bargain collectively and to be represented by a union".

On Sunday, he told the NSW ALP conference that there was one way to ensure workplace flexibility and fairness and "that's by giving Australians a right to collective bargaining."

"I stand before you today and make this commitment," he said.

WHAT THEY SAID

I have a message for the people of Australia who are enjoying the enhanced benefits of Australian workplace agreements: the Leader of the Opposition is after your aspirational prosperity. We stand for aspirational Australia, we stand for people to work harder and earn more if they want . . .

Prime Minister John Howard

You do not support family values if you do not support decent holidays. And this government has walked away.

Opposition Leader Kim Beazley

This shows that Kim Beazley is basically a weak leader. When he was under some pressure from the unions who were running a campaign against him he has simply caved in and buckled at the knees.

Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews

Forty per cent of the new AWAs abolished public holidays and more than one in five of the new contracts contained no pay increase during the life of the agreement. And bear in mind these agreements can now last for five years.

ACTU secretary **Greg Combet**

BOMBER COMMAND

Kim Beazley's plans to roll back Work Choices legislation

* Australian Workplace Agreements

Scrap in favour of enterprise bargaining agreements and awards, although common law contracts will continue

* Unfair dismissals

Restore protections to workers at firms with fewer than 100 workers

- * Awards and minimum conditions

Restore penalty rates for working on public holidays and expand the legislated set of minimum conditions

- * Foreign workers

Make bosses who want migrant workers prove they have not fired locals from similar jobs in the past 12 months

- * Right to collective bargaining

Considering law requiring employers to negotiate with unions if a workplace majority wants that

- * Fair Pay Commission

Abolish it and return minimum wage to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, with more emphasis on fairness rather than cutting unemployment

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