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Spotlight exposed issue for leader

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IT WAS the spotlight on Spotlight that swung **Kim Beazley's** thinking. The fabric chain had offered new employees contracts that axed a raft of conditions, for an extra two cents an hour.

Under the individual contracts, known as Australian **Workplace** Agreements, staff lost protected award conditions such as their penalty rates, breaks, overtime and public holiday pay.

Annette Harris, who had worked at a Spotlight store in Coffs Harbour for two years, was offered one of the contracts on her return from unpaid leave. Under the new agreement, she would have lost about \$90 a week in penalty rates. After the ensuing uproar, she was reoffered her job at her old pay rate.

When Prime Minister **John Howard** was asked about the 57-year-old's plight, his response was that some pain was necessary to create jobs.

Mr Beazley said yesterday that Spotlight's move prompted him to promise to abolish AWAs if he won government.

"Spotlight changed my mind," he told ABC radio. "That was proof positive . . . that these things are poisonous and there's no saving them."

Mr Beazley also highlighted the case of Melbourne grandmother Karen Palmer, who The Age last week revealed was sacked by a Coolaroo wire manufacturer for being "a liability". She had recently returned to work after a **workplace** injury.

Labor said Ms Palmer lost her unfair-dismissal rights and job security as a result of the Government's laws.

Mr Howard says people on AWAs earn on average 13 per cent more than those on collective **workplace** agreements, which are often negotiated with the help of unions. He has predicted his **workplace** changes will drive **unemployment** lower in coming months.

The Government's **Employment** Advocate, Peter McIlwain, last month revealed that every AWA in a sample of 250 had removed at least one protected award condition. There have been 6263 contracts registered under the new laws.

Caption :PHOTO: No sweetener: **Kim Beazley** takes tea in Canberra with sacked worker Karen Palmer, who has lost her job after 14 years.
PICTURE: REBECCA HALLAS

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