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Unions demand the return of old laws

Author: Ewin Hannan, Dennis Shanahan
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THE **ACTU** leadership has increased pressure on Kim Beazley to further wind back John Howard's industrial relations laws, calling on Labor to reinstate union rights in the workplace.

Backing the push by NSW unions to increase the number of minimum working conditions, **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said Mr Beazley should enshrine the legal right of workers to collectively bargain and the right of workers to be represented by unions.

Mr Combet said unions wanted Labor to re-establish an Industrial Relations Commission with the power to set minimum working standards and to intervene in disputes.

But the Opposition Leader fended off further concessions yesterday after the Prime Minister accused him of giving in to union bullying to save his job.

``Labor will be fleshing out its industrial relations policy as we move forward in the interests of middle Australia," Mr Beazley said last night.

Mr Howard accused Mr Beazley of a frontal assault on people eager to improve their lot. He asked: ``Why does he want to destroy the living standards of those hundreds of thousands of aspirational Australians on AWAs?"

He said Mr Beazley changed his position on workplace agreements because he had been ``mugged by a bit of reality, and the reality is pronounced `NSW unions'." The ``merry men" in NSW unions ``said to the Leader of the Opposition, `Kimbo, if you don't front up and abolish AWAs, we're going to roll you'," Mr Howard said.

Mr Combet, who was speaking in Melbourne, said the union movement's position would be finalised when the **ACTU** Congress met in October, but welcomed calls by Unions NSW secretary John Robertson for Labor to commit to the reintroduction of about 10 conditions over and above the five allowed under the new workplace laws.

``John Robertson is part of the union movement and an important participant in the leadership of the union movement," Mr Combet said.

``He is really articulating something that many others would think and needs to be contributed to the debate."

He said unions wanted Mr Beazley to embrace a series of basic principles including ``a decent and fair safety net of employment conditions".

``Obviously, we're contemplating something that is wider than the Howard Government's five minimum standards," he said.

``Over and above the safety net, we want employees to have an enforceable right to collectively bargain.

``We want an independent tribunal to be watching over the minimum standards and the pay standards and also to have the power to resolve disputes.

``And we also want people to have a guarantee of being treated fairly and not being sacked indiscriminately, as is the case under the new IR laws. Our final principle is we wish people to have a proper right to be represented by a union, if that's what they choose."

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