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Workers worse off, figures from law firm show

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Labor has seized on a document prepared by a law firm that advised the federal government on its new **workplace** laws to question claims by Prime Minister **John Howard** that individual **workplace** agreements give workers higher pay rises.

In Parliament yesterday, Mr Howard referred to May 2004 Australian Bureau of Statistics figures showing that employees on Australian **workplace** agreements (AWAs) earn, on average, 13 per cent more than employees covered by certified agreements.

"I have a message for the people of Australia who are enjoying the benefits, the enhanced benefits, of AWAs: the Leader of the Opposition is after your aspirational prosperity," he said.

But Labor's **industrial** relations spokesman, **Stephen Smith**, tabled in parliament a document apparently produced by law firm Freehills which said the average annual wage increase under AWAs was just 2.5 per cent in the 12 months to June 2005. This was 1.5 per cent below the wages outcomes given for all agreements and 1.8 per cent lower than the increases under **union** agreements, according to the document, which Mr Smith said was from a Freehills presentation in February.

"Isn't it the case that the government's own hired legal gun says that AWAs will deliver lower wages than collective agreements?" Mr Smith asked Mr Howard.

Meanwhile, Griffith University professor of **industrial** relations David Peetz said the government was using "bodgy statistics" by comparing the average weekly earnings of all employees on AWAs with those on collective agreements.

AWA employees worked a longer week on average, partly because there

was a higher proportion of full-time workers on AWAs, he said.

AWAs were also concentrated at senior levels of the public service and in high-paying industries such as mining, electricity, gas and water, communications and finance, he said.

"When you look at hourly rates of non-managerial employees, they are a much better indicator," Professor Peetz said.

On these figures, AWA wages outcomes are lower than for collective agreements, particularly for women.

The ABS data from May 2004 showed non-managerial workers on AWAs received an average of 2 per cent less than workers on registered collective agreements, Professor Peetz said. For women on AWAs, hourly earnings were some 11 per cent less than those on registered collective agreements.

In a Senate budget estimates committee hearing last month, Federal **Employment** Advocate Peter McIlwain revealed that of the 6263 AWAs lodged with his office since the Work Choices legislation began, every one of the 250 analysed by his office excluded at least one award condition.

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