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No worker to be worse off, vows Beazley

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KIM Beazley has promised that no worker will be worse off under his plan to scrap the Howard Government's individual **employment** contracts and lashed big business for wanting to "tilt" **workplace** laws in its favour.

The Opposition Leader also predicted that **industrial** relations would be the central issue at next year's election for the first time since 1929.

In an interview with The Australian, Mr Beazley yesterday hit back against criticism of his decision to scrap AWAs by the Business Council of Australia and other **industry** groups.

He attacked the council's support for individual contracts, claiming these would lead to lazy businesses "seeking short-term profit gains" by cutting wages and conditions, rather than trying to boost productivity.

In an echo of **John Howard's** 1996 promise that no worker would be worse off under Coalition **workplace** reforms, Mr Beazley has given a similar commitment, despite a lack of detail over Labor's alternative policies.

"I can certainly say that the policies that we will be pursuing will be to ensure that outcomes are to the advantage of the employee," Mr Beazley said.

"So if you have a situation where outcomes are going to be to the advantage of the employee, then they are not going to be worse off."

Before the 1996 election, Mr Howard fended off a Labor campaign against his **industrial** relations policy by pledging: "Under a Howard government, you cannot be worse off, but you can be better off -- I give you this rock-solid guarantee." With his new **workplace** laws, the Prime Minister has revised the pledge, saying his guarantee is his record.

Mr Beazley's declaration sets the stage for a ferocious debate over **industrial** relations in the lead-up to next year's federal poll. By referring to the 1929 election, he has also raised the spectre of former conservative prime minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, who lost office and his seat after trying to abolish the Arbitration Court and seize **industrial** relations powers of the states.

``It is my firm view that this will be the first election since 1929 where **industrial** relations is at the heart of it," Mr Beazley said.

He said a Labor government would reinstate the national wage case to increase minimum wages. But Labor's prime interest was to promote collective bargaining in the **workplace**, in which unions would have bargaining rights.

Mr Beazley yesterday also replied to a complaint from **BCA** president Michael Chaney about his plan to abolish AWAs, disputing the claim that his policy would move the nation's wage system away from a focus on productivity improvements.

In a letter to Mr Chaney, he said much debate on Labor's policy had been confused because of an implicit assumption that AWAs could lift productivity in ways collective agreements or individual contracts under common law could not.

But he said this assertion was not supported by ``real-life" evidence.

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``While AWAs do not offer unique ways to improve productivity, they do offer unique ways to reduce wages and conditions of working Australians -- and for this reason I do not believe they have a place in a modern, flexible and fair **industrial** relations system," Mr Beazley wrote.

The **BCA**, which represents Australia's 100 biggest companies, has urged Mr Beazley to reverse his policy decision on AWAs, claiming it harms Labor's economic credentials. But Mr Beazley told Mr Chaney, the National Australia Bank chairman: ``Just as a return to centralised wage fixation would be inappropriate because it does not give employees the incentive to work with employers to increase productivity, a return to a system of individual contracts and reduced minimum standards undermines the discipline for employers to drive profit growth through productivity gains."

In his interview with The Australian, Mr Beazley said big business wanted AWAs because ``it tilts the whole thing in their favour".

``There is absolutely nothing for the ordinary worker," he said.

He predicted the bulk of workers would back Labor's alternative **industrial** regime, which would reinstate the central umpire and promote enterprise agreements.

Labor yesterday used parliamentary debate to raise further allegations that the Government's AWAs had allowed another firm, office supplies manufacturer Esselte, to roll back a range of employee conditions.

Opposition **industrial** relations spokesman **Stephen Smith** said Esselte

workers were offered AWAs with a pay increase of \$11.25 an hour above the minimum rate.

But the company's scrapping of penalty rates for weekend work meant a pay cut of \$65 a week or \$10,000 over three years.

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