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Protest week gears up

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BIG business would soon join the push to cut penalty rates and overtime, the **ACTU** predicted yesterday.

On the eve of a week of protests against the Howard Government's new WorkChoices laws, **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said the early sackings and changes to workers' conditions had been largely confined to small and medium-sized businesses.

But Mr Combet predicted large companies were gearing up for their own assault.

Speaking on the Ten Network's Meet the Press yesterday, Mr Combet said nationwide protests this week would build support for the **ACTU's** campaign to stop the changes.

``It's important still to have a protest movement as part of any such campaign," Mr Combet said.

Leaving for Indonesia yesterday, Prime Minister John Howard said he respected union members' right to protest.

``They have the right to lawfully and peacefully put their point of view and, providing it is done within the law, I offer no criticism," Mr Howard said.

``I respect the right of people to argue their case, provided it is within the law and provided it also respects the rights of others and doesn't interfere with the right of other Australians to go about their business and to operate their businesses and to do their work."

But Mr Combet attacked the Government, saying it had changed its rhetoric over the workplace relations laws and now admitted that many workers would be worse off.

He said the Government was now arguing that the changes would create a greater good for the Australian economy.

``They've dropped all their garbage about how people aren't going to be worse off and people aren't going to lose their penalty rates, because the evidence is clear that's what's going to happen," Mr Combet said.

``They've shifted to . . . their real position: some people have got to cop it in the neck, a lot of people have got to lose their penalty rates for working overtime or working on public holidays . . . so more people might be able to be employed by employers.

``There's no evidence to be saying that because you knock off some people's penalty rates (and) cut their take-home pay you're going to create some extra jobs."

The **ACTU** leader also contended that Australia's low jobless rate had been created by the commodities boom and the Chinese economic revolution rather than the Government's changes to workplace laws.

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