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CBD gridlock the aim as unions prepare for rallies

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Mass challenge to wage dock laws

MASS union rallies predicted to gridlock central Melbourne this week will be the first test of new powers to dock the wages of workers taking unlawful industrial action.

Unions predict up to 150,000 people will converge on the city centre from four meeting points on Wednesday, creating havoc for cross-town traffic.

"It'll be the whole kit and caboodle jammed down," Victorian Trades Hall secretary Brian Boyd said, warning people to reschedule appointments in the city that morning. "I'm unabashed," he said of the inconvenience. "I do want to gridlock the city to make a point to John Howard."

But the union movement admits numbers might be down on last November's record crowd of up to 210,000 due to new powers forcing employers to dock the wages of workers who take unlawful industrial action.

Under the new laws, an employer must dock a minimum of four hours' pay from a worker who takes unlawful action, and a whole day's pay if they miss more than four hours' work. Employers can be fined up to \$30,000 for breaching the WorkChoices Act - but whether they let authorities know of unlawful industrial action remains to be seen.

Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry workplace spokesman David Gregory said a few businesses had made inquiries about their rights and obligations under the act.

While some would refuse leave to workers to attend the rallies across the country, others would allow workers to organise leave in advance or to change shifts so they could attend, or allow only delegates to go, Mr Gregory said.

Australian Business Lawyers partner John Stanton warned employers to check the sick leave rules that apply to their workplaces and demand a medical certificate, if required, of workers who call in ill. Mr Stanton said employers who were pressured by unions or workers to release people from work should approach the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to seek orders preventing or stopping unlawful industrial action.

Mr Boyd said the building industry had threatened to dock workers' pay and he was concerned about a rash of victimisation across a range of industries.

"But overall, if we're fair dinkum about our opposition to these laws, we have to rebel against them and against any threats from employers," he said.

Mr Boyd rejected suggestions that mass rallies were an outdated industrial tactic and said they empowered workers who then knew they were not on their own in their workplace. "You can call me old-fashioned, but I believe having a lot of people on the streets scares the conservatives," he said.

ACTU secretary **Greg Combet** said rallies were an important part of the union movement's arsenal and complemented other grassroots and workplace campaigning. He said local activist committees were mobilising in marginal seats and would increase activity over the next 12 to 15 months. The **ACTU** also has internet campaigning, and television and radio advertising.

"Mobilising people to rallies and protests is an important part of any campaigning," he said. "You've got to give people the opportunity from time to time to come out and demonstrate their opposition to the laws and fight for what they want."

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