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'We'll stop this city'

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TRADES Hall boss Brian Boyd has vowed to bring Melbourne to a standstill tomorrow with 100,000 unionists clogging city streets.

He said the industrial relations rally -- the third in 12 months -- would converge from four different directions to create maximum gridlock.

``We'll be shutting down the Melbourne CBD and making sure it doesn't move for at least three or four hours," he said.

The threat came as **ACTU** boss **Sharan Burrow** argued that wage cuts under the Hawke Government had benefited the nation.

And a report by a leading economic forecaster said individual contracts could be worse for the economy than collective wage deals.

In comments seized on by the Government, Ms Burrow said real wages had fallen during the Hawke government accord with the unions because workers realised the need for reform.

``They went down because working people actually worked for their country," she said on Adelaide radio.

The Government described the statement as ``bizarre", with Prime Minister John Howard saying Ms Burrow had conceded the Coalition parties were better economic managers.

Police warned drivers to stay out of the city until noon tomorrow and said there would be disruption to public transport.

Marchers will congregate at Southern Cross railway station, Federation Square, Trades Hall and State Parliament before marching to the city's heart.

Protesters will converge at the Bourke St Mall where Opposition Leader Kim Beazley is to address the crowd from a makeshift boxing ring.

Premier Steve Bracks will also speak, along with Ms Burrow and Mr Boyd.

A Eureka flag signed by descendants of the original Eureka flag members has been given to Trades Hall as a centrepiece of the Melbourne protest.

The Trades Hall secretary said unions were at war with the Howard Government over its IR laws, which were harming ordinary workers.

Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said the push to shut the city down showed the damage that Labor and unions could do together.

``These extreme tactics underline for all Australians the risk posed by Kim Beazley's plans to again put unions front and centre in Australia's workplaces," Mr Andrews said.

Economic forecaster BIS Shrapnel said in a report that collective agreements delivered the biggest boosts to productivity, and the shift to contracts could harm some firms.

Labor said the report was an indictment of the Government's system.

``BIS Shrapnel have correctly identified that the Government's industrial relations changes have little to do with improving the productivity problems facing Australian business and our national economy," Opposition IR spokesman Stephen Smith said.

``Nor do they do anything to address the skills shortages being felt across the economy."

He said the big productivity gains had come from the move to enterprise agreements.

BIS Shrapnel senior economist Michael Hassan argued that the new system did not tackle Australia's skills shortage.

He said the shift to contracts harmed firms by undermining trust between bosses and workers.

And the new system appeared to concentrate on how to cut up the pie or economic gains rather than how to make the pie bigger, he said.

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