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ACTU targets 'scumbag' employers

Author: Tony Barrass, Ewin Hannan, Additional reporting: Ryan Emery

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ACTU president **Sharan Burrow** will lead a ``scumbag'' bus tour around Perth today targeting major Australian companies she claims are undercutting workers' rights.

The stunt -- attacking Qantas, the West Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and two construction companies -- came as the divide between Labor and the Government over the future of workplace laws intensified in that state and its thriving mining industry. Last night the state's two main rival mining unions admitted that a federal Labor government would help increase their membership in the northwest.

The union movement is selling tickets to Ms Burrow's travelling show, which will include a local comedian. The group plans to protest against John Howard's industrial relations agenda and claim the companies are using the planned changes to attack workers' wages and conditions.

The attack by the union movement on some of the nation's biggest employers comes just days after federal Labor leader Kim Beazley, who shared the stage with Ms Burrow at Wednesday's union rally in Melbourne, defended his relationship with unions, declaring: ``I row my own canoe.''

Business yesterday accused Labor of misleading voters by claiming that common-law contracts -- its alternative to Australian Workplace Agreements -- could deliver the same flexibility to employers and employees negotiating pay deals.

Employers said individual agreements under common law enshrined award conditions and did not allow the tradeoff of any inefficiencies.

Mr Beazley has promised to abolish AWAs but said workers who want to remain on individual contracts can enter into agreements under common law.

``With what John Howard has done to the AWA system there's no saving it,''' he said yesterday. ``If you want an individual contract, your best bet is to go onto the common law arrangements, common law individual contracts, which at least are fair.''

But Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Peter Hendy said Labor was misleading voters by claiming an individual agreement under common law had the same flexibility as an AWA.

``An AWA allows you to negotiate with respect to things like penalty rates and various inflexibilities that are in the award system. An individual contract under common law can't do that. It has to be on top of the award.

``The common law agreement cannot override the base of the award. It has to be on top of it. If the award says you have to be paid penalty rates, you can't trade that away. That's what an AWA allows you to do.

``That's why, despite the rhetoric of recent times, people on AWAs on average get higher remuneration because they have made tradeoffs for these various inflexibilities."

The spat came as Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union WA secretary Kevin Reynolds admitted that his union was keen to lift its presence in the Pilbara and throughout the northwest resources sector.

He said even high-paid workers with in-demand skills would be better off under collective agreements. When asked if his union wanted a higher profile in the state's north, he said: ``How many f..king times do I have to tell you. Yes!"

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