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# THE AGE

## Workplace: it's the power of one

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· Minister gets wider role

WORKPLACE Minister Kevin Andrews has handed himself sweeping powers to monitor every workplace in the nation, forcing the Industrial Relations Commission to send him weekly reports on any application to take strike action.

He will also be able to strike out any clause that he does not like from a contract between a worker and their boss and will have broad emergency powers to order employees back to work.

The extent of his reach is revealed in hundreds of pages of regulations released yesterday, which flesh out precisely how the Howard Government's new industrial relations landscape will work.

Under the regulations, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission must send weekly reports to the minister about every workplace that has applied to take industrial action. The Office of the Employment Advocate must report to him every three weeks on all employment agreements approved.

The new regime takes effect next Monday.

**ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said Mr Andrews was "giving himself the power of Joseph Stalin", saying he was enlisting the commission as a spy agency reporting to the Kremlin.

"They are compelling the institutions to keep them informed so they can step in at any time. Kevin Andrews will have the power to interfere in every single workplace across Australia," he said.

But Mr Andrews said the laws were significant but fair and would boost wages, as he decried the Opposition's "head in the sand" attitude to change.

"The Productivity Commission said in a recent report that if we continue this sort of reform in Australia then it can lead to an increase in household income of up to \$22,000," he said.

Flagging an emergency meeting for unions to plan the next phase of their

fight against the new regime, Mr Combet also tipped a campaign of civil disobedience. "I am not going to be intimidated from trying to protect people from unfair treatment - that's our job, even though it's being made illegal," he said. "And I for one will not be paying fines for doing it."

Pressed on whether he would go to jail rather than pay, he said: "Let's see how that unfolds."

The laws include fines of \$6000 for an individual or \$33,000 for a company for merely asking for workers to have some protection against unfair sacking in their employment contracts, among other clauses banned from agreements.

A spokesman for Mr Andrews insisted the laws did not give the minister more powers, saying he already received monthly reports from the commission about bargaining, industrial action and unions applying for permits to inspect workplaces.

"Instead of being monthly, it is now going to be reported on a weekly basis," he said.

Prime Minister John Howard rejected Labor's claims that its victories in the Tasmanian and South Australian elections were fuelled by anger over federal industrial relations laws.

"Industrial relations did not figure during the campaign. It's only figured after the results," he said.

But Opposition Leader Kim Beazley insisted they had played a part, as he branded the latest volley of rules "regulations of infamy". "Those are 400 pages of undermining family life in this country," he said.

The laws will abolish state industrial relations systems, change the way minimum wages are set, exempt businesses with up to 100 staff from unfair dismissal laws, and encourage individual workplace agreements, among other initiatives.

They also ban a range of union-friendly clauses in workplace agreements. Unions will no longer be able to ban a company from signing workers on individual Australian Workplace Agreements, restrict an employer from using contractors or ask companies to pay for union training.

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