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Market rules ... all but the bosses

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Analysis

THE charge that has constantly dogged the Howard Government in its determined push to overhaul Australia's **workplace** system is that it is on some kind of ideological mission to get unions.

The regulations attached to the Government's new laws -- released quietly at the weekend in the midst of the distracting Commonwealth Games -- will only reinforce that perception in the eyes of many.

This is because of the heavy-handed role provided for the Minister for **Workplace** Relations in the new structure.

If the Government's position is accepted, then the system which comes into force a week from today is meant to be very much a deregulated, do-it-yourself regime with minimal interference.

That is, employers and employees are meant to handle their own negotiations, and the right for unions to be involved in representing workers is up to the employees themselves.

There is a barrage of legal machinery available to employers for much speedier resolution of **industrial** lawlessness than in the past if unions start making trouble. Apart from some sectors, unions are on the whole pretty quiet these days anyway.

But the Government has taken upon itself to play a very strong **union** policing role under its new laws.

Every week the old, now toothless Australian **Industrial** Relations Commission will be required to tell the minister for **workplace** relations **Kevin Andrews** about every application for protected legal strike action that comes its way, right down to the case number and exactly who is involved.

So no matter how big or small a company might be, its dispute will cross Andrews's desk and be checked by his ministerial bureaucracy. Andrews will get advance notice on whether to activate special new powers at his disposal to shut down a strike, regardless of the commission approving one

in a legal bargaining period.

Andrews will also get the power to see every wage agreement that is approved and come down heavily against those he believes are out of order.

That's a strange way of letting the market sort itself out.

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