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Unions promise IR war

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UNIONS have vowed to fight an overhaul of workplace laws that could cost them millions of dollars in government fines.

The warning of widespread industrial action came as Prime Minister John Howard defended the new system yesterday after the Government's release of almost 500 pages of regulations spelling out how the laws will work.

The regulations give Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews unprecedented power to monitor strike action and workplace deals.

They also prescribe \$6000 fines for workers who ask for protection from unfair dismissal, or \$33,000 for unions that do the same.

But union leaders yesterday dismissed the threat of stiff penalties, saying they would fight tooth and nail in workplaces across Australia.

A TV campaign attacking the changes is to begin this week, and nationwide strikes are also planned.

``I am not going to pay a fine for doing my job. I am not going to pay a fine for asking for people to be treated fairly," **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said yesterday. ``I can't predict where disputes will break out, but I anticipate, unfortunately, there will be disputes where we have to defend people's pay and their jobs."

Mr Combet attacked the decision to release the regulations over the weekend, accusing the Government of burying bad news under a mountain of Australian gold medals at the Commonwealth Games.

But Mr Howard said details of the changes had been on the table for months.

``There is nothing in this that breaks new ground," Mr Howard said.

``It's not the detail, it's the legislation. The detail was contained in the legislation that passed the Parliament at the end of last year."

Opposition Leader Kim Beazley said the Government had not been honest

about the scope of the workplace changes during the 2004 federal election.

Labor would make the industrial relations overhaul a core issue at the ballot box next year, Mr Beazley said.

``The Government doesn't have a mandate for these changes," Mr Beazley said.

``They made no promises about this at the last election. What this is aimed at is reducing wages. It is hitting the most vulnerable workers and making it harder for them."

Mr Andrews said regulations giving him access to regular reports on industrial action and workplace deals were not unusual.

``We think that in some circumstances a shorter time frame for reporting, namely a week, is more appropriate than a month," he said.

``People would be criticising me if they were asking me about what was going on and I did not know."

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