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Unions say new IR law makes underclass

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ACT unionists have vowed to maintain a vigorous public dialogue as the Federal Government's Work- Choices legislation is implemented next week, believing the changes are aimed at establishing a permanent "underclass" in Australian society. ACT president of the powerful Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union Sarah Schoonwater said yesterday, "This is not just an attack on unions. This is an attack on society as we know it.

This is an attack on the very social fabric of our society." She blamed Prime Minister John Howard as much as Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews, who continued to stoutly defend his package yesterday. Union networking would extend to youth, Ms Schoonwater said, noting that membership had remained steady throughout the stormy debate about the Work- Choices changes.

"We need to continue to win people's hearts and minds on this campaign," she said. "It's not just about trying to abolish unions. It's about trying to create an underclass in society and that's a Howard dream agenda: to create not just a working poor, but a welfare poor as well.'

' She believed that as the economy turned, "as it will in three years' time", that people would be "desperate" to pay their debts. "The question we've got is, 'How will you live on \$12 an hour?'" Stopping short of calling for a campaign of civil disobedience, Ms Schoonwater said a union decision to withhold payment of potential fines of up to \$33,000 would have to be made in reference to other union branches.

ACTU secretary **Greg Combet**, who announced a new television campaign beginning on Sunday, has said he does not intend to pay any fines imposed on him. Expressing the fear that the new sedition laws could be used against unionists, Ms Schoonwater said, "This is a dictatorship ... people could get locked up for taking industrial action or including things in certain [workplace] agreements.'

' Mr Andrews branded the Combet civil-disobedience call "colourful" and suggested "people should go and take a deep breath and sit down". "Employers and employees want to be able to agree about the terms and conditions of their employment," he said. "That's what people want.

They want to get on with their life and do that. "There is nothing in this legislation that people need to worry about in the ordinary course. But, if somebody wants to seek to abuse the bargaining process for other purposes, that's currently something which is being discouraged and it's been discouraged in this legislation.'

' The minister took particular aim at the claim by Mr Combet that the Government could override an employee-employer agreement for five weeks' annual leave as opposed to the normal four. "That is wrong and it's absurd," he said. The claim by Opposition industrial relations spokesman Stephen Smith that workers could be forced to cash out their annual leave was wrong, too.

"Any cashing out ... can only be done at the request of the employee," Mr Andrews said. Opposition Leader Kim Beazley attacked the suggestion that the Government had a mandate for the changes, saying, "They made no promises about this at the last election.

They did not set down one single line of what they subsequently introduced." Previous industrial relations legislation had been rejected more than 40 times in the Senate, and the new package was developed after the Government won control of the upper house at the last election. Mr Beazley ridiculed the Andrews suggestion that some household incomes could grow by as much as \$22,000 over time under the new deal.

"That is such rubbish," Mr Beazley said. "What this is aimed at is reducing wages." Mr Howard rejected accusations that the extent of the fines, embodied in regulations made public at the weekend, was not previously known.

"Look, there is nothing in this that breaks new ground ..." he said.

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