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The poor have the most to lose

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MONDAY, March 27 is looking like being a very bleak Monday for Victorian workers and their families.

The Howard Government is using the Commonwealth Games as cover to sneak in 290 pages of WorkChoices regulations.

Victorians should be alarmed by these complex, unfair changes, which will not have been subject to public scrutiny before they kick in on Monday.

The regulations, released on the weekend, confirm the worst fears of the Victorian Government. **John Howard's** changes are extreme, unfair and will hit ordinary working families.

These changes will make it harder for many Victorian workers, who will have to look to the tip jar to pay the bills.

The Howard Government has used blanket media coverage of the successful Commonwealth Games to hide a low blow to the very people working hard to deliver an event that is clean, well-catered for and safe.

Low-income earners such as cleaners, catering staff and security guards have the most to lose under WorkChoices.

Cleaners face wage cuts as evening shift loadings, night shift allowances, overtime meal allowances and toilet cleaning and uniform allowances are all removed.

A cleaner could face a wage cut of \$9687 a year.

Hospitality workers stand to lose overtime and weekend penalty rates. They could also lose meal and uniform allowances.

The changes could see the wages of a hospitality worker drop by \$7052 a year.

As more detail emerges, WorkChoices appears more bloody-minded and extreme than first thought.

We now learn that employees who are concerned about job security will face a \$6000 fine if they dare ask their employer for a fair process before they are dismissed.

That's right. There is a \$6000 penalty just for asking your employer to treat you fairly.

One of the extraordinary changes announced on the weekend is a requirement that every time an application is made to take protected **industrial** action around the making of a new agreement, the independent umpire has to notify big brother in Canberra.

These changes risk Australia becoming like the US, where the economy is fuelled by an underclass of working poor, a place where there is no safety net and where family life for many low-paid workers has to fit around a 24/7 corporate culture, with just two weeks of annual leave.

But where the Bracks Government can step in and help Victorian families we will.

This Government refuses to endorse a divisive, mean-spirited policy that delivers a low wage, low-tech and low-trust economy.

That is why we have introduced legislation to protect the **employment** safety net for Victorian public sector workers.

As a result of these changes nurses, teachers, firefighters and other public sector employees can get on with their very important work without fearing that Canberra is going to take away their **employment** entitlements.

VICTORIAN workers concerned about how WorkChoices will affect them should contact the **Workplace** Rights Advocate on 1300 882 648.

I would particularly urge those workers who are being asked to sign a new individual **employment** agreement to contact the advocate as a matter of urgency.

Victoria, along with other states, has filed a High Court challenge to be heard in May.

We believe these extreme changes are unconstitutional as well as unfair.

ROB HULLS is Victorian Attorney-General and **Industrial** Relations Minister

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