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Unions tip first IR laws `victim'

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UNIONS have warned Australia can expect the first ``victim'' of new industrial relations laws as early as today.

With the Federal Government's workplace reforms coming into effect today, the **ACTU** is urging the Opposition to ease up on the AWB scandal and refocus on IR.

ACTU president **Greg Combet** warned that unfair sackings were only a matter of time.

``It's likely somewhere around Australia tomorrow somebody is going to be sacked unfairly . . . they'll be the first victim of the new laws,'' he said yesterday.

``The really significant thing is that the balance of power in the workplace is shifting sharply to the business community, to the employer. And under the laws business will have a lot more power to cut people's pay, basically, get rid of their overtime pay, their penalty rates for shift work and a whole host of other employment rights.

``This will take some time to flow through, but it's clear already that there are a number of employers planning on using the new laws to get their labour costs down."

As politicians returned to Canberra for today's resumption of Federal Parliament and a visit from British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Mr Combet said he had not been impressed with the Labor Party's approach.

``I want to see a greater focus in Parliament on the industrial relations questions now they are coming in," he said.

``I'm not undermining or understating the fact that the Wheat Board is important.

``It's showing up some great failures in our public policy position on Iraq and on the credibility of the Government and the Prime Minister.

``But industrial relations is critical for Australian working people. It's in every workplace and community across the country and there's no doubt

that Labor needs to focus on it."

Australian Industry Group chief executive Heather Ridout said it was in employers' interests to retain good staff, while Prime Minister John Howard said he was preparing for a barrage from unions over the start of the IR laws.

WorkChoices aims to push workers into the federal industrial system and increase the use of individual contracts.

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