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Union accuses firm of bugging delegate's office

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EXCLUSIVE

A COMPANY at the forefront of the Federal Government's new industrial relations laws has been accused of bugging a union delegate's office during talks for a new workplace agreement.

The discovery of the device comes as three Melbourne kitchen installers became the first workers to be sacked under the WorkChoices laws, which came into effect yesterday.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union says it discovered the listening device at automotive parts manufacturer Dana Australia, which was the target of a union campaign last month for threatening to cut workers' wages by 5 per cent, and new employees' wages by 20 per cent.

The bug, which fits into the palm of a hand, is believed to broadcast on an FM frequency and has a range of up to 60 metres.

It was found last Wednesday on the window sill of a shop steward's office, where union members met to consider a wage offer made by management.

AMWU state secretary Dave Oliver said he was concerned the company, whose United States parent company filed for bankruptcy earlier this month, was adopting American union-busting strategies.

He also suggested it could be a new tactic for companies under the workplace changes.

"Welcome to the new IR environment of John Howard's world," he said. "John Howard has legislation in place now where it is illegal to even orally pursue a claim that is prohibited in agreements and we're concerned that employers are trying to act like policemen for John Howard."

Mr Oliver said he would give the bug to police to investigate a possible breach of the Surveillance Devices Act 1999, which allows for jail terms of two years or a maximum \$108,000 fine.

Dana Australia managing director Bob Day said union members had not shown the bug to management, and ruled out any suggestion that management was spying on its workforce.

Mr Day said the company would co-operate fully with any police investigation, particularly as it was concerned about industrial espionage.

"Dana policy is to act equitably in terms of our behaviour with employees and anybody who was involved in it would be suffering the most severe disciplinary action possible, including termination, if found to be involved in it," he said.

A police media spokesman confirmed that Moorabbin detectives were investigating the discovery of a listening device found in an engineering firm.

Victorian Attorney-General Rob Hulls said any suggestion of bosses bugging union delegates was "outrageous conduct" and "totally inappropriate".

He said he would raise the issue of workplace privacy next month at the meeting of attorneys-general in Canberra.

Meanwhile, three Melbourne workers at Altona Gate company Installex, which installs kitchens and does fit-outs for exhibitions, were sacked as permanent employees and offered work with the same company as casuals or independent contractors.

Installex director Miles Williams said the timing had nothing to do with the new laws, which exempt small business from unfair dismissal laws and redundancy pay. He said the men were made redundant and paid out their entitlements because they were employed under an agreement for commercial construction sites and work had "become sporadic".

He said they were offered casual or contract jobs on the domestic side of the business.

But **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said the workers would lose about \$25,000 a year moving from permanent work, through a combination of an hourly rate pay cut, a loss of entitlements such as sick leave, and a requirement to lease back and run their work cars at their own cost.

"This is exactly what we've been warning about," Mr Combet said.

"We don't believe it's a coincidence that this has happened on day one of the laws. It's only possible to make this change because of the new laws and here we have a graphic example of how it's possible to terminate people and re-engage them on inferior pay and employment conditions."

Workplace Minister Kevin Andrews dismissed union claims that workers would be sacked without recourse under the new regime, arguing unfair dismissal laws had been "widely abused" over the past decade.

Unions will hold a rally on June 28 to protest against the laws, which an **ACTU**-commissioned poll of 1000 people found were supported by fewer than one in four Australians. It found 59 per cent of voters in 24 Coalition-held marginal seats felt the laws were reason enough to vote against the Government at the next election.

Caption :PHOTO: Unionist Dave Oliver holds a bug.

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