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Uproar as new workplace era starts

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The union movement re-committed itself yesterday to a collision course with the Government as the new era in workplace relations took effect. As the parliamentary wing of the labour movement attacked the Government for introducing a system that had not been put before the people at the last election, the industrial wing pledged a fight to the death. **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** vowed, "We are going to fight these laws for as long and as hard as we can ...

There will be further mass mobilisation during the course of the year ... the Howard Government is ruthless, it has no principles whatsoever in trying to force companies to implement the Government's ideological agenda." In Parliament, Opposition Leader Kim Beazley said that Prime Minister John Howard had broken a promise from the 2004 election campaign, when he had said that existing provisions on the number of "allowable matters" in industrial disputes had "worked pretty well".

Under the new legislation, those matters have been markedly reduced. Mr Beazley asked, "Isn't it the case the Government's legislation which takes effect from today breaks that promise and reduces the 20 allowable matters to five so-called minimum standards which do not include overtime, penalty rates, shift allowances, leave loadings or casual loadings - those which make ordinary Australian workers capable of sustaining their mortgages?" Mr Howard replied: "No promise has been broken." Polling conducted for the **ACTU** among 1000 voters in 24 Coalition- held marginal seats and released yesterday found that: 72 per cent supported unfair-dismissal laws.

59 per cent believed the package was "a strong reason" to vote against the Government. 66 per cent believed that the laws were a threat to every working family. Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews dismissed the polling, saying, "The ultimate judgment will be made by the Australian people and it won't be made on the basis of what a particular poll says or what latest piece of advocacy they hear on behalf of the unions or anyone else for that matter.'

' Mr Howard said, "I think the public will pay on performance, just as they have over the last 10 years when we have seen real wages go up by 16.8 per cent." Mr Beazley and his spokesman on industrial relations, Stephen Smith, pursued the Government over unfair-dismissal laws, which no

longer apply to businesses with less than 100 employees, Mr Beazley noting the new deal specified "operational reasons" as a criteria for dismissal. "Doesn't this just mean that, from today, Australian employees can be sacked, sacked unfairly, for any reason or no reason?" he asked.

Mr Howard replied, "No. The truth is that today marks the introduction of legislation that will continue the process of economic reform that is so necessary to maintain the economic growth of this country." Mr Andrews said, "We believe that in the decade or so that they've been in operation they have been widely abused, they lead to a ridiculous situation where small and medium business every day around Australia are paying \$10,000 to \$15,000 worth of so-called 'go-away' money to get rid of a problem.

That's not good policy, it's not good law and that's why we've changed it." Mr Smith disputed claims about the continuation of real wage rises, re-emphasising that the Government had opposed rises to the minimum wage under the former National Wage Cases, replaced from yesterday by the Fair Pay Commission. "If the Prime Minister had had his way since he has been in office, the minimum wage would currently be \$50 a week or \$2600 a year lower than its current \$25,188 per annum," Mr Smith said.

Mr Andrews denied the suggestion that yesterday marked the end of union representation of Australian workers. - with AAP

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