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Workplace stick already used to beat staff: ACTU

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HOURS after the Federal Government's new workplace laws took effect yesterday, unions said some employers had already used it to exploit workers.

Three permanent kitchen installers in Melbourne who were dismissed and rehired as casuals late last week, with a \$9000 pay cut, were among the first victims, said the **ACTU** secretary, **Greg Combet**.

"This is no coincidence. If it wasn't for WorkChoices they would have been able to claim unfair dismissal. They would have been able to claim damages or get their job back. If they were truly redundant they would have been able to get redundancy pay."

Not so, said their employer, Miles Williams, managing director of Installex. "I know the timing is shit, but it has nothing to do with WorkChoices."

Mr Williams said the commercial arm of the business - a separate company - had no work available, so he had offered the men casual work in the domestic arm. "Domestic rates are less," he said.

He acknowledged that casual workers were not entitled to sick leave, annual leave and public holidays but despite all that the men had accepted his offer, he said.

The Minister for Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews, yesterday defended scrapping the unfair dismissal laws. "We make no apology for changing the unfair dismissal laws. 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 ten, fifteen thousand dollars' worth of so-called 'go away' money to get rid of a problem."

Yesterday Mr Andrews appointed a one-time unionist, Hugh Armstrong, a former furniture removalist, Mike O'Hagan, an economist, Judith Sloan, and a former charity executive, Patrick McClure, to help set minimum pay.

The four will act as commissioners, under Professor Ian Harper, on the Fair Pay Commission, which has taken over responsibility from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for setting the national minimum wage.

The commissioners will gather information on the pay and conditions of low-paid workers, the needs of employers and the effects of the minimum wage on the unemployment rate before setting a new rate next year.

The secretary of the Australian Services Union, Linda White, said Mr Armstrong, the union's former secretary, would consider the needs of working people seriously, but she said he had been distant from the unions for a decade.

THE COMMISSIONERS

Professor Judith Sloan, economist and company director

Mike O'Hagan, built his removal business into a multimillion-dollar concern. On the Reserve Bank's advisory board.

Patrick McClure, outgoing head of Mission Australia

Hugh Armstrong, former secretary of the Australian Services Union

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