

# Battlers rise up on IR 'reform'

It is a great relief to return to Australia and find the Labor Party speaking with one voice, even if all it is saying is will Mark Latham please go away. Actually that's not quite fair; Labor is also fairly unanimous about the need to oppose John Howard's industrial relations legislation.

This is indeed a subject on which all sections of the party can agree: left and right, workers and aspirationalists, traditionalists and trendies. The difficulty for the beleaguered parliamentary party is that the running is being made not by the movement's political wing, but by its industrial base.

It's not that Kim Beazley isn't trying; for once there is genuine passion in his condemnation of a government which, in the past, he has frequently allowed to get away with murder (in the case of asylum seekers, almost literally). But his best efforts are being drowned out by the pre-emptive strike launched by the ACTU and its battle-hardened secretary Greg Combet.

Combet's attack and the modest advertising campaign that has accompanied it are not only spot on (claims by Howard and others that they are misleading are themselves lies) but have been devastatingly effective. Perhaps for the first time, the battlers who have naively believed that a conservative government could be trusted to look after their interests are having serious doubts.

Howard has been forced to take personal control of the struggle for hearts and minds (not that he was reluctant - the destruction of organised labour has been an obsession since his school-days) and release his own

advertising under the benign headline: MORE JOBS, HIGHER WAGES, A STRONGER ECONOMY.

Well, up to a point. Given that Howard and his ministers are, for the first time, unwilling to guarantee that no one will be worse off, one can only assume that the results will be little short of catastrophic for a large proportion of the workforce.

Howard's assertion that his plan is simply evolutionary, a natural progression from what has gone before, is equally absurd. If the destruc-

the precedent with his GST campaign many years ago, and he's not about to embrace more honourable standards now.

Given the public resources at his disposal, he will probably win the initial publicity battles and even when the changes become law many employers may hang back from exploiting the draconian new powers at their disposal, at least in a period of high employment and severe skill shortages; at first the victims will be confined to the weakest and least articu-

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by Mungo MacCallum



tion of the Industrial Relations Commission, a fundamental of Australian society since federation, and its replacement with an employer puppet preposterously called the Fair Go Commission (shades of 1984) is not a radical change, then Howard is a genuine liberal and I am a Dutchman.

It is worth noting, incidentally, that the government advertising campaign is yet another gross misuse of taxpayers' money; the legislation for Howard's revolution is not even drafted, let alone enacted by parliament. The so-called 'factual information' (shortly to be enhanced by a wildly emotional electronic campaign) is not about informing the public of changes to their entitlements and obligations, but about softening them up for the assault, when it finally comes. However, Howard set

late. But as time goes on increasing numbers will find that they are in fact losers, and that they have been conned yet again by Honest John.

They will be at least tempted to turn back to Labor. Beazley and his colleagues may finally have an opportunity to persuade them to do so.