

# Unionists to fight all way to prison

Brad Norington

AUSTRALIA'S most senior union officials are ready to go to jail if necessary to fight the Howard Government's workplace changes and say they will refuse to pay expected fines for breaches of new laws.

ACTU secretary Greg Combet said yesterday he was so angry about what he regarded as looming breaches of civil rights that he would involve himself personally in union resistance.

"I'm not above the fray," Mr Combet said. "I don't think you can expect others to be on the front line and not be there. I intend to be there."

The comments by the ACTU leader follow his declaration that unions would resist "every step of the way" federal government changes that are to severely curb their operations.

Mr Combet said new laws would make it a criminal offence — in breach of international labour conventions — for union officials to do their job. Unions, he said, would not pay fines and "some of us will go to jail".

Under the changes, union officials face fines of \$33,000 if they try to discuss with employers issues such as trade-union training leave, union right of entry or provisions limiting use of contract labour that are to be banned from employment agreements.

They face jail terms for trespassing without legal permits and if they refuse to hand over requested documents to government authorities.

Unions also face costly damages actions that could bankrupt them. Refusal to pay damages could land officials in jail.

Mr Combet said he did not believe the Government would win community support for its union crackdown and public opinion would favour unions if it came to conflict.

"We are going to do our job sensibly and peacefully," he said.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron said he would continue to seek conditions prohibited in agreements and was not willing to use his members' dues to pay government fines.

Asked if he was prepared for jail, he said: "I am certainly prepared to do it. I would not relish it at all, but if it is about protecting the rights of the union movement it would not be the first time."

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union leader John Sutton accused the Prime Minister of igniting a "class war" by acting for big business.

"I accept there will be people going to jail in the period ahead," Mr Sutton said. "All the struggles necessary to build the union movement 100 years ago will have to be fought again."

Mr Sutton, who is national secretary of the CFMEU's construction division, faces a particularly difficult battle ahead because his union is the Government's prime target.

Following the Cole royal commission's final report 2½ years ago, the Government introduced last month its Australian Building and Construction Commission, with strong policing power.

CFMEU officials who refuse to give evidence or hand over documents face jail.

Mr Howard said yesterday that his Government's changes would affect unions by putting greater reliance on the individual capacities of employees.

But he added: "It doesn't destroy unions, it doesn't stop people joining unions or having unions negotiate for them."