

Australia to fall behind on collective bargaining

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WORKERS in Australia will have higher minimum wages but none of the collective bargaining rights that exist in Britain and the US when the Howard Government's sweeping workplace changes are introduced.

Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews will also be handed unique powers to intervene in the affairs of workplaces compared with ministers in other Western democracies.

Griffith University industrial relations professor David Peetz said yesterday that procedures including secret ballots before strikes, prohibitions on some clauses in enterprise agreements and limits on union officials entering worksites would heavily restrict unions.

"In many respects we'll have legislation more antagonistic to workers' interests (than in Britain and the US)," Professor Peetz said.

The US passed the National Labour Relations Act in 1935, which creates a right to collective bargaining and requires employers to bargain in "good faith". Employees are covered by collective agreements that bind all if more than half agree.

Under the British Employment

Relations Act, businesses are required to recognise unions and negotiate with them if they cover more than half of the workforce.

Professor Peetz said that the Howard government legislation was aimed at constraining collective bargaining. And, unlike other countries, bargaining across a number of companies, known as "pattern bargaining", would be prohibited.

"No one would try and make pattern bargaining illegal in the US or Canada," Professor Peetz said.

Chris Briggs, a research fellow at the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Teaching, said Australia would be unique compared with the US and Europe by not recognising the right to bargain collectively.

Mr Briggs said that US workers had little workplace protection but at least had bargaining rights.

He said that US companies also could not offer individual contracts to workers on collective agreements, unlike provisions in Australia.

ACTU industrial officer Cath Bowtell said that British workers would have much more generous conditions as far as maternity leave, recognition of family responsibilities, carers' leave and unpaid pre-school leave for parents were concerned.