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## Academics blast IR law changes

Author: JOSH GORDON and PAUL ROBINSON

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Canberra urged to rethink entire package

THE Government's industrial relations laws have come under attack from academics, who warn they are complex, punitive, poorly thought out and could trigger a historic jump in income inequality.

A day after hundreds of thousands of workers rallied around the country, a group of 151 academics - including 61 professors and associate professors specialising in industrial relations, business, management, labour economics and law - have urged the Government to rethink the entire package.

"We often debate our ideas vigorously and do not always agree," the academics said in a submission to the Senate committee examining the changes. "But on this bill, we share grave, common concerns."

The submission argues that, far from deregulating the labour market, the changes will add a complex and unfair new layer of regulation.

The bill would increase confusion, foster industrial litigation, severely limit scope for industrial action, curtail workers' ability to join a union, lead to a long-term loss of basic conditions and erode family life, the academics' submission said.

There was little to prove government claims the changes were crucial to the economy, their submission warned. "Available evidence indicates the longer-term impact on labour productivity may be perverse. The bill is based on a series of assumptions that are not supported by evidence."

A spokesman for Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said the Government rejected the academics' claims.

"They are factually incorrect when they say income inequality has been growing in Australia," the spokesman said. "(These) 151 academics are no substitute for the commonsense proposals."

Other academics also attacked the changes yesterday.

University of Sydney industrial law professor Ron McCallum said that the

despite its free-market rhetoric, the Government had proposed a system riddled with harsh regulations dictating what unions, businesses and workers could do.

"Good legislation is clear and simple and gives discretion to courts, tribunals and administrators to operate," Professor McCallum told the National Press Club. "This legislation is almost afraid of discretion. It's complex, it's not trusting us to be adults and at the end of the day it's not trusting the free market where that free market goes against ideological forces."

Meanwhile, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission convened a case to determine whether it should hear evidence about a pay rise before the Government's new workplace laws come into effect next March.

The **ACTU** told the commission that the Federal Government was promoting an economy that delivered average pay rises of 16 per cent to chief executives but froze the wages of low-paid workers.

**ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said ordinary workers had achieved average pay rises of just 4 per cent last year, while chief executives had won "golden handshakes, golden sign-on" perks and pay rises amounting to salary increases of more than 16 per cent. The Government had backed rises for the "top end of town" but opposed the ability of low-paid workers to claim one last general wage rise through the commission, he said.

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Letters, Kenneth Davidson

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