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Now that was a demonstration worthy of any Australian prime minister's attention

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WORKPLACE PROTEST - SKETCH

SOMETIMES - not often - you can walk away from an event feeling that you have seen history forming.

That is how it was yesterday when a huge Melbourne crowd, primed by indignation and buoyed by unity, effectively told Prime Minister John Howard to pick up his proposed workplace laws and walk quickly over the hill and out of sight.

But this was no angry mob chanting hackneyed catch cries for the television cameras. It was a vast - some said the biggest - communal gathering in which all sectors of society and age groups assembled to hear and be heard on workers' rights.

The message was very clear and could only be misunderstood if wilfully misinterpreted - proceed with this legislation only if you are prepared for the fight of your political life, and have your bags packed at the next federal election.

A brisk breeze did little to cool the mood of the thousands who spread from Federation Square south over Princes Bridge, east and west along Flinders Street, and north up Swanston Street. A long way north, in fact.

They heard key speakers condemn Mr Howard's workplace legislation as an assault on democratic rights and that other nebulous but easily imagined condition - the Australian way of life.

ACTU president **Sharan Burrow** caught the mood early, describing the turnout and the occasion as "the start of something".

"For more than 100 years Australia has had an industrial relations system that has given working people a share of the benefits of the economic prosperity in the good times, and ensured there are decent protections for people when times get tough," she said.

"This is the system the Federal Government's workplace laws will destroy." Not surprisingly, this was a recurring motif, reprised by most speakers as good reason to get cross.

In that sense, Ms Burrow warned, all Australians had an obligation to both past and future. They should not allow the sacrifices of previous generations of workers to be insulted by legal erosion, she said.

"And we must NOT be the first generation of Australians that leaves our kids with fewer rights at work than we inherited. And we won't be."

Premier Steve Bracks had no trouble detecting and responding to the zeitgeist. He was one of many who seemed to sense the time was right to realign Labor governments with traditional union support.

Warming quickly, he invoked fairness and justice as qualities that should be fostered by legislation, not dismantled.

"What people are saying to Canberra is this: we want a strong economy, yes we do, but we want that strong economy to give a dividend back to working families across Australia."

Then it was time for commitments that, any other day, might have seemed extraordinary. His Government would fight the legislation in the High Court if necessary. "We'll protect every worker in this state on the same award conditions they have now," he said.

And, should the legislation clear both houses of Parliament, the Bracks Government would appoint a workplace rights advocate "who'll report on these arrangements when they come in and we will expose these arrangements around Victoria, to show the effect when awards expire".

Deputy Labor leader Jenny Macklin assured them that Labor in Canberra would tear the legislation up. "We'll go to the next election with each and every one of you to throw this legislation out," she said.

Kim Beazley appeared on the giant screen and, it was suggested by some commentators, took the one real chance to attack the Government he had been offered. He didn't waste it, and was quite explicit: "This legislation is gone with the election of a Labor Government."

Trades Hall Council secretary Brian Boyd said Mr Howard regarded workers as his enemy. **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** was more Lincolnesque. The proposed laws, he said, were "motivated by ideology, the articles of Liberal Party faith, the prejudices of the Prime Minister".

Accusations of government conspiracy kept coming - but perhaps nothing was more persuasive than footage of two old-timers recalling union battles and their part in establishing basic workplace relations.

One hot topic as the rally marched towards Carlton was whether Mr Howard had seriously, perhaps fatally, miscalculated the Australian community.

Some thought he had, and said he would soon find out.

Caption :PHOTO: Swanston Street bulged with protesters yesterday as thousands turned out to demonstrate their discontent with the proposed workplace laws. PICTURE: JOHN DONEGAN

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