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Wednesday 16 November 2005

Herald Sun

Workers' message is loud and clear

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Publication: Herald Sun (004,Wed 16 Nov 2005)
Edition: 1 - FIRST
Keywords: **ACTU (1),Greg (1),Combet (1)**

MORE than half a million Australians yesterday rallied against new work laws, as union leaders warned of more strife and declared government fines would not frighten them.

About 150,000 jammed Melbourne's CBD in the biggest protest the city has seen.

Unions said more than 500,000 joined the protest nationally, in capital cities and regional centres.

But Prime Minister John Howard was unbowed by the show of opposition, saying workers would look back and wonder what all the fuss was about.

``The sky won't fall in. Weekend barbecues won't be abolished. Parents will still spend Christmas Day with their children," Mr Howard said.

The protesters included tens of thousands of construction workers who face \$22,000 fines for walking off the job.

The Government's construction watchdog, the Australian Building and Construction Commission, said it would follow up any tip-offs of illegal strike action.

``The ABCC will investigate any complaint made to it by an employer or any other person about possible unlawful industrial action," commissioner John Lloyd said.

But **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** said unionists would defend workers who were singled out.

``Just as we supported the maritime workers when they were targeted, we will support building workers to the hilt," Mr Combet said.

He said the passage of the new laws through the Senate would trigger a relentless campaign to overturn them.

The laws will allow unions to be fined \$33,000 for requesting prohibited items in agreements, such as unfair dismissal protection.

Mr Combet said he would refuse to pay fines for standing up for workers' rights.

``We must look the Government in the eye and stare them down," he said.

``I will be asking other union leaders to adopt the same stance."

Protesters braved wind and cold in Melbourne, but rain held off during the massive rally.

Tens of thousands of manufacturing workers and teachers were joined by contingents of public servants, health workers, wharfies and cleaners.

They gathered at Federation Square for a Sky Channel hook-up with more than 300 venues across the country, before marching to Carlton Gardens.

Victoria Police Supt Tim Cartwright estimated the crowd at about 150,000.

But the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry said protesters were in the minority, with 95 per cent of workers turning up to work.

The Government's workplace changes will create a new set of minimum employment standards, overhaul unfair dismissal rules and promote individual contracts.

Mr Howard said opposition to his reforms could not be measured by the turnout at such protests.

``There have been absurd exaggerations, scaremongering claims, made about these changes which in the fullness of time will be proved wrong," he said.

Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said the rallies were the product of a union scare campaign, that likened the changes to fascism.

``I believe it has been irresponsible. It has certainly been hysterical and Australians will ultimately judge it that way," Mr Andrews said.

But Opposition Leader Kim Beazley, speaking in Brisbane, said new laws would push families to breaking point.

``My first act as prime minister of the nation will be to stand on the steps of Parliament and rip these laws up," he said.

The Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry said the protest would have cost at least \$30 million statewide.

But the Master Builders Association of Victoria said it would have cost \$30 million in that industry alone.

Construction union state secretary Martin Kingham said more than 10,000 building workers rallied in Melbourne and up to 50,000 walked out across the country.

But Mr Kingham said he would be surprised if employers dobed in workers to face \$22,000 fines.

``This rally will sort out amongst our employers who genuinely wants to work with the union and who wants to play the other game," he said.

``My prediction is there will be no employers in the Victorian construction

industry who are going to do in their own workers."

Construction worker Tony, who refused to give his surname because of the threat of prosecution, marched with his son Zane, 11.

"We just want a fair go. We just seem to be having all of our rights taken away from us," he said.

Childcare workers Michelle Walker and Stefanie Rocchi said individual contracts were being used by big private sector companies to drag down wages and conditions.

"They intimidate so much that people just sign and be done with it, because they are scared to lose their jobs," Ms Walker said.

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