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Unions push ALP on safety net

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UNIONS will demand the Labor Party double the number of minimum standards enjoyed by employees to include a guarantee of public holidays and part-time work for parents.

Childcare workers, aged-care staff and other service industry employees could also secure big pay rises under a proposal to offer a ``supplement'' to award rates on the order of the Industrial Relations Commission.

In a new safety net to be unveiled at the **ACTU** congress this month, unions have outlined a plan to deliver workers up to two years' parental leave for mothers and fathers and the right for parents with preschool children to work part-time. The policy document, obtained by The Australian, details the new legislated minimum unions will push for the ALP to enshrine in law if it wins government.

The **ACTU's** demands will increase the pressure on Kim Beazley to explain to business groups how far the ALP will go to expand the stripped-down legislative minimum the Howard Government has introduced under the Work Choices regime.

Work Choices has cut the number of minimum conditions for workers from 20 to five -- a minimum wage, four weeks' annual leave, 10 days' sick leave, 12 months' unpaid parental leave and an averaged 38-hour week.

The unions' new safety net of 10 conditions would add a right to information and consultation in the workplace, fair notice of termination, retrenchment pay and a statutory guarantee that workers' entitlements

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will be paid in the event of company failure.

``These conditions would be guaranteed to every worker,'' the **ACTU** policy document says. ``While they may be improved through bargaining or the award system, they could not be traded off or removed.''

However, the union's demand does not include a specific reference to penalties, overtime or loading, which were included among the old regime's 20 conditions.

Union sources said the reason for the omission was that details of these provisions could be covered under the award system.

The **ACTU's** new minimum standard regime would include a limit on unreasonable overtime for workers, no cashing out of annual leave and a minimum of 11 public holidays a year.

As Opposition Leader, Mr Beazley has pledged to "rip up" the individual employment contracts introduced by the Government but has not offered details on the new set of minimum standards the ALP would offer to workers.

Opposition industrial relations spokesman Stephen Smith said last night he would look "very closely" at the **ACTU's** policy on minimum standards and other matters. "To summarily dismiss or hastily respond to the **ACTU's** contribution to this important national debate would be foolish," he said.

In another concession to business, the **ACTU** has also flagged it may support a national industrial relations system.

The union proposal to "supplement" workers' pay would grant the Industrial Relations Commission power to deliver industry-based payments in sectors where wages set by the market or bargaining were substantially higher than award wages.

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