

NATIONAL

## Thousands rally in IR protest

June 29, 2006 – 3.30am

Almost 40,000 workers today called on the Howard Government to roll back its industrial relations reforms in what unions say is the largest protest rally ever staged in Sydney's suburbs.

Teachers, police officers, nurses, truck drivers and firefighters were among those who gathered at Blacktown Showground, in Sydney's west, as part of today's national day of action.

Carrying banners, waving flags and chanting loudly, the workers, many with children in tow, caused traffic chaos in surrounding suburbs.

But their message was simple and peaceful - "Howard's IR reforms have to go."

Addressing the gathering, Unions NSW secretary John Robertson said the Government was stripping away 100 years of hard-won workers' rights.

"It used to be if you worked hard, you had a job, but that's been stripped away," he told the cheering crowd.

"These laws are a direct attacks on hard-working Australians who are trying to to pay off a home, provide for their kids' futures and have a bit of economic security."

Unofficial police and union estimates put crowd numbers at Blacktown at almost 40,000, although authorities were unable to confirm the number.

Around the state, unions said at least 15,000 workers converged on regional centres such as Newcastle, Wollongong and Bathurst.

### **Firefighters 'lose protections'**

Firefighter Chris Windsor said he was there with his colleagues because they stood to lose 70 of their 85 standard working conditions under WorkChoices.

"The Government has taken away almost all the protections for firefighters and their families," he said.

"Firefighters who are injured or even killed on the job will now have to fight for their entitlements with their own private lawyers."

A Sydney TAFE teacher, who did not want to be named, said she had attended the rally for her students.

"They are about to enter a workforce that will not offer them the same rights that I was. I am scared for them but I'm also shocked they are not more aware of what's going on," she said.

Coral Levett, a nurse at St George Hospital, agreed.

"Not enough people realise just how much these changes affect us," she said.

"More than 60 per cent of nurses work in public hospitals and they are forcing current workers into terrible shifts with no penalty pay to make them resign so

they can hire a cheaper workforce.

"This will end up hurting health care for everyone."

### **Fired for speaking up: child-care worker**

One of three workers to address the rally, Joanne Lee, said she had been unfairly sacked.

"I voted for Mr [John] Howard at the last election but I did not vote for him to take away my rights," said the former Liberal voter and child-care worker.

Ms Lee said she was fired two days into a new role with Cubby House Australia, where she had worked for 15 years, because she had spoken up about worker's rights.

Although the NSW Premier's Department encouraged the state's public servants to support the action, not all workers were given the green light and some could face having their pay docked.

### **Garbos 'suffering under reforms'**

Paul Weston is one of 100 waste collectors from Gosford and Wyong councils, on the NSW Central Coast, attending the Sydney rally.

He was to tell the gathering how 50 of his colleagues lost their jobs under the industrial relations reforms.

He said the councils were preparing to cut the garbos' overtime rates, leaving them \$340 a week out of pocket.

### **Teachers walk off the job**

The NSW Education Department could not confirm how many teachers were absent, but NSW public schools had skeleton staffing today.

However, public schools remained open with teachers available for supervision to assist parents attending the rally.

But not all workers have been given the green light to attend, with Australia Post threatening disciplinary action over unauthorised absences.

Mr Robertson said in a statement before the rally that the Federal Government was "throwing workers' rights in the bin".

"These laws are a direct attack on hard-working Australians who are trying to pay off a home, provide for their kids' futures and have a bit of economic security," he said.

"It's in the suburbs and regional Australia that the impact of these laws will be felt - stripping away job security, penalty rates, time with family and wage rates."

### **Battle for ordinary Australian life: Beazley**

In Melbourne, Federal Opposition Leader Kim Beazley has described the campaign against the workplace reforms as a battle to retain ordinary Australian life.

He told tens of thousands of workers at a rally in the central city today that Labor would rip up the laws once it was in office.

He was joined by Victorian Premier Steve Bracks, ACTU leader Sharan Burrow, and other union and political leaders at the rally.

The centre of the Victorian city was brought to a halt as thousands of workers converged from four directions.

"This is a battle for ordinary Australian life," Mr Beazley told the rally at Bourke Street Mall.

"This is a battle for Australian families. It's also a battle for basic dignity in the workplace."

Mr Beazley applauded workers attending the rally, praising them for standing up for their rights, which he said were under threat in the workplace.

"You are the people that made this nation what it is," he said.

"You are the builders of this nation. You are the true Australian patriots."

He estimated the crowd at 150,000 and said they were the delegates of millions more Australians opposed to the workplace reforms.

"When we get into office in 18 months time, we will rip up these laws," he said.

"Then we are going to put in place laws based on true Australian values."

Mr Bracks told the rally the protesters were standing up for old and young workers as well as overtime penalty rates and holiday conditions, under threat by the federal industrial relations reforms.

"This is a time when the family budget is under pressure," he said.

"This is a time when we need support. This is a time when we don't need job insecurity."

Ms Burrow told the rally unions would make industrial laws the No. 1 issue at the next federal election.

"We are going to talk about this 'til there is no other issue but decency and fairness in workplace rights as the next election issue," Ms Burrow said.

She said the new laws had hurt workers and were designed to help big business.

"Even the economists who have got any guts are on your side ... they know without collective bargaining rights that labour productivity is wrecked," she said.

### **WA protestors rally**

About 10,000 angry West Australians turned out today to protest.

Waving banners, blowing whistles and chanting anti-John Howard sentiments the crowd made their way through the streets of inner-city Northbridge before heading towards Perth's main shopping precinct, the Murray Street Mall.

Unions WA secretary Dave Robinson said the turnout sent a strong warning to the Howard Government.

"It is clear that this is such an issue that bites so strongly with people," he said.

"If not for them, then 'what have I left for my kids' and it resonates very deeply with a lot of people."

He said the size of the crowd exceeded expectations.

The sentiments expressed by the crowd was a "small reflection" of the wider community.

"We know that for each voice of ours, there is probably 100 or so behind us in support," he said.

West Australian Greens Senator Rachel Siewert said research released by the

Australian Institute of Management today showed 65 per cent of business owners, chief executive officers and managers had little or no understanding of the WorkChoices laws.

"These changes are making life harder for Australia's working families," Ms Siewert said.

"Jobs are less certain, hours are less sociable, and there is less in the pay packet to show for it."

Mandurah couple Matt and Michelle Lay said they had travelled the 75 kilometres to Perth to attend "for the future" of their seven-month-old daughter Addison.

"If my wife goes back to work, she should have suitable conditions," Mr Lay said.

Mairi Walsh, 41, from Karawara, said if people just sat at home and said nothing the Government would "think we all agree with these rules".

"Since we didn't get to vote in the IR laws at the last election, we have to vote in other ways," Ms Walsh said.

Glenda Jamerson, 53, said she believed the IR laws attacked the very fabric of society.

"I am working and I am here for my children who are working and my grandchildren that will be working," Ms Jamerson said.

Unofficial union figures had the number of people at the rally at 15,000 while police put the figure at between 8000 and 10,000.

### **Unions helped asbestos victims: Banton**

Earlier, asbestos campaigner Bernie Banton told the Sydney rally he was staggered by the turnout.

"This is a groundswell opposition against [Prime Minister John] Howard and his changes," Mr Banton told the crowd.

"Let's tell him and [Treasurer Peter] Costello that we don't agree with no rights for the worker."

Mr Banton paid tribute to the union movement, saying it had worked with asbestos-related disease sufferers to force building materials company James Hardie into signing a \$4.5 billion compensation deal.

"Without the union movement, we'd have never been able to strike a deal," he said.

"Without the unions to stand up for the everyday man we could not have made it, without them we would not have had a chance to get asbestos victims' compensation."

The peaceful protest embarked on a two-kilometre circular march through Blacktown.

### **Rescued miner protests**

Rescued Beaconsfield miner Brant Webb was among about 2000 workers who turned out in Launceston today to protest against the IR changes.

About 40 current and former employees of the Beaconsfield Gold Mine led the rally through the northern Tasmanian town.

Australian Workers' Union national secretary Bill Shorten also attended the rally, telling workers the Beaconsfield mine rescue showed what could be achieved when people worked together.

He said the Government's new IR laws served only to divide workers, ABC Radio reported.

Workers gathered at the Albert Hall, where they were to hear from several union representatives.

Mr Webb and colleague Todd Russell were trapped almost a kilometre underground for 14 days after a rockfall on April 25 at the Beaconsfield mine.

Fellow miner Larry Knight, 44, died in the accident.

### **Fear campaign misses point - Andrews**

Militant unions are running a fear campaign that distorts the Government's IR laws, federal Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews says.

Mr Andrews said today's protests across the nation were the product of a fear campaign run by militant unions.

Instead of putting people out of work, the reforms would give them flexibility, he said.

"Far from this campaign that says that people are going to be driven out of jobs and wages are going to be driven down, the reality is that we're looking for every worker we can find in Australia," Mr Andrews told Sky News.

"What people want is flexibility in terms of their work and family balance and their other interests in life.

"That flexibility can only be achieved by having the sort of workplace laws which we've put in place.

"What Kim Beazley wants to do is to rip up that very flexibility, the flexibility that more than half a million Australians on workplace agreements, individual agreements, have got, and take them back to the one-size-fits-all of the old award system."

Mr Andrews said many Australians had benefited from the flexibility available through the changes.

He said earlier he was unconcerned by reports that major Australian companies were shunning the reforms.

A survey by Fairfax newspapers revealed firms including Telstra, NAB and resources giant Woodside had chosen to opt out of the new workplace provisions.

Mr Andrews said the results showed they were not extreme.

"You've got large companies saying that the agreements that we've got in place will continue to run, and we expected that to be the case," he said.

"This is really the continuation of a reform that began a decade ago and it isn't the extreme thing which the unions are claiming it is."

### **Media, unions misrepresenting WorkChoices - Hendy**

A union scare campaign and misrepresentation by the media were contributing to community unease about the new industrial relations laws, an employer group said today.

But rallies around the country in the union movement's national day of action protesting against the changes had failed to attract even 10 per cent of union membership, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Peter Hendy said.

"Today's so-called day of action is actually a day of inaction," Mr Hendy told reporters.

"Reports we have received from on the ground and in the media would suggest that significantly less than 150,000 people participated in today's rallies by the ACTU.

"That means that the ACTU has failed to scratch together 10 per cent of its own membership to turn up to their so-called day of protest."

He said the people would eventually find the changes were not worth worrying about and that they were currently battling against unions and media mishandling.

"There's no doubt that we've got the mother of all scare campaigns going on with respect to WorkChoices," Mr Hendy said.

"That's why you expect to see results in various surveys that suggest some people are uneasy about the changes being made.

"What they're actually reacting to is the media campaign.

"It's not actually the implementation of WorkChoices in the workplace that's scaring people, it's the misrepresentation in the media campaigns of the ACTU that's scaring people."

Mr Hendy admitted it was against the law for workers to attend rallies without prior permission from the employers.

"Under the rules, if you walk off a worksite without previously arranging leave, that would be effectively an industrial action and you may face penalties because of that," he said.

"That's the law.

"The point is that the ACTU has 1.9 million workers in the union movement.

"If they can't even scratch together even 10 per cent of their membership to protest what they regard as the end of the world, I don't know that they have an effective argument to be putting."

**AAP**

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