



Work laws buried

But unions warned against grab for more pay

Stefanie Balogh

UNIONS have been put on notice to restrain their demands for excessive pay increases as Australians grapple with a brave new world of workplace rules.

The former Howard government's electorally unpopular WorkChoices regime was yesterday consigned to history, replaced by Labor's new Fair Work regulations.

The changes mean workers get back minimum standards or safety net conditions, and collective agreements will be preferred over individual agreements.

A new industrial relations umpire, Fair Work Australia, gets more teeth to enforce good faith bargaining, and small businesses will no longer be exempt from unfair dismissal laws.

Australian Council of Trade Unions president Sharan Burrow said workers were celebrating because WorkChoices was finally dead and buried.

"The new laws mark a historic turning point and will provide workers with a raft of stronger rights and protections in the current economic downturn, and in better times ahead," Ms Burrow said.

Unions are expected to test the limits of the new laws over the next six months. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union has signalled it wants to pursue 4 per cent pay rises across 1300 manufacturing agreements and hit some companies with claims for 6 per cent increases.

But Australian Industry Group chief executive Heather Ridout yesterday called for wage restraint, particularly during the global recession.

Australian Mines and Metals Association head Steve Knott said it would be "grossly irresponsible" for the new laws to be exploited by overzealous unions.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan also put unions on notice.

"I think everybody in this environment needs to exercise restraint," Mr Swan told ZUE.

Deputy Prime Minister and Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard said the laws were "what the Australian people

voted for in the 2007 election".

She said she believed young people in particular would benefit from the changes.



VALE ... Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard puts the final nail in the WorkChoices coffin yesterday.