



PREPARE FOR A WORLD OF WILDCAT STRIKES AND UNION BULLYING

The Coalition took its foot off the pedal of industrial reform, now we'll go backwards

STEVE KNOTT

To our nation's credit, ever since Federation we've held well-placed concerns about the rights of workers. In elections past, this has seen fierce debates about industrial relations among candidates.

Yet, while every federal election has the potential to change the direction Australia is headed, there has not been an election in recent memory where one of the major parties is seeking a clear mandate to completely flip the chessboard on industrial relations.

The radical reforms that underpin the ACTU's Change the Rules — Change the Government campaign have had little scrutiny during this election period as new taxes, climate change, border security and issues of trust take centre stage. But make no mistake, this radical industrial relations reform agenda would be the cornerstone of any future Shorten ALP government.

The central notion of the union movement's change campaign is that today's industrial relations system — implemented by the Rudd government, co-authored by the ACTU and later bolstered by Bill Shorten when he was industrial relations minister — is broken, fundamentally unfair and unbalanced against the interests of working people.

This narrative, loose with the facts and laden with highly emotive slogans, has been strategically

and very effectively building under the guise of the ACTU's Marxist revolutionary saviour Sally McManus, who in March 2017 famously said she had "no problem" with people breaking "unjust laws".

At the beginning of this political term, not many would have predicted the union movement could so convincingly build an argument against the Fair Work system, which emphatically re-

regulated Australian's industrial relations environment in the interests of unions just a short time ago.

The great success of the ACTU's campaign has been to wedge many in business and government into the odd position of forgoing any future-focused reform agenda of their own and instead defending the present legislative framework against an even more extreme alternative.

Hats off to McManus in this regard, but she did have some help.

Since being elected in 2013 the Coalition has hardly made a strong name for itself as a reformist government in the area of industrial relations, pursuing relatively minor improvements to the Fair Work laws and squandering any opportunities for more meaningful reform presented by the Productivity Commission's 2015 review.

The government's preference to present a small political target is somewhat understandable given the Australian business community's reluctance to run a counter-ACTU campaign highlighting the benefits of deregulating industrial relations.

To mount such a campaign, employers and their representative groups need only look to Australia's economic performance when John Howard left office in 2007.

For a start, unemployment was at 3.9 per cent and real wages had grown more than 16.5 per cent during Howard's term in office, after a dismal 1.3 per cent rise under 13 years of the Hawke-Keating ALP governments.

Further, in the 3½ months after new laws exempted them from the shackles of onerous unfair dismissal laws, small and medium businesses went on a hiring spree, employing more than 100,000 Australians in new jobs.

Instead of arguing these points, most in business today find them-



selves defending the Rudd-Gillard government's industrial relations system, which they had spent the better part of a decade arguing was

fundamentally flawed and failing modern Australian workplaces.

This apathy no doubt will embolden a change of government to deliver their union constituents an industrial relations system styled in a 1970s environment.

This is the real agenda of the ACTU-ALP campaign.

Imagine the return of the industrial relations club, including strikes at any time on any matter, pattern bargaining across industries, ambit claims, union bargaining fees, and employer and union representatives "battling things out" before a so-called independent industrial relations tribunal called Fair Work.

As this confrontation unfolds, the rest of the world will leave Australia behind in seizing business opportunities in a fast-changing global marketplace.

I've been involved in the resources and energy industry for almost four decades. Technology, new skills requirements, generational change, shifting employee expectations and other "future of work" trends are seeing our sector's workplaces change and evolve more rapidly than ever.

Such change has nothing in common with the narrative being peddled by the ALP and ACTU during this election campaign, a narrative seeking to divide Australians along class and ideological lines in pursuit of their self-serving agenda.

Our nation desperately needs an industrial relations system promoting more productive and more competitive workplaces fit for Australia's place in the world in 2020 and beyond.

This can be achieved only through long-term, ambitious and sensible policymaking that casts aside vested interests for the good of the nation.

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