



Labor urged to detail its industry bargaining plans

Sector-wide proposal

David Marin-Guzman

Business has urged Labor to be upfront about how far it will go in its plans for industry-wide bargaining and strike rights, fearing they could spread to high-paying sectors.

Labor has said it will hash out its pledge to strengthen existing powers for multi-employer bargaining if it is elected through broad and lengthy consultations with unions and employers, but has not gone into detail.

Australian Mines and Metals Association chief executive Steve Knott said Labor had told him in talks about its bargaining plans that its "priority" would be low-paid sectors.

However, he said "it remains unclear if the ALP plans to extend their 1970s type industry bargaining agenda more broadly throughout the economy".

"This lack of detail is of concern to resources and energy employers, who pay and treat their employees well, as they seek to survive and prosper in a highly competitive international marketplace," he said.

He said Labor's promised post-election consultation "provides little comfort to employers" as "the actual legislation is primarily driven by the government of the day".

"Given the pervasive influence of the ACTU's extreme anti-business

rhetoric, the lack of detail surrounding the ALP's industrial relations policy agenda is of concern to all businesses."

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westcott welcomed Labor's offer of consultation but said "there remain significant unanswered questions".

"A sector-wide bargaining system would only empower the big unions at the expense of workers by undermining the tried and tested enterprise bargaining system established by Labor in the 1990s."

The Labor Party changed its platform at a party conference in December to allow industry bargaining "where enterprise bargaining has failed or is failing".

Employers and union leaders have speculated this could extend to high-paying industries such as resources, where gas giant Esso has failed to reach a replacement agreement for more than four years and unions' attempts at arbitration have collapsed.

When asked whether industry bargaining would go beyond low-paid workers last week, Bill Shorten said "I'm not convinced that we need to have, you know, everyone going into industry bargaining", but he did not rule it out for higher-paid workers.

The Fair Work Act already allows unions to seek authorisations for low-paid workers to bargain and strike at a sector-wide level but the provisions have never been successfully used.