



12 APR, 2022

Coalition still committed to IR reforms

Australian Financial Review, Australia

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Workplace correspondent

The Coalition will try to revive the enterprise bargaining system and strike-proof major resources projects if it is re-elected.

The Morrison government has confirmed it is still committed to reforms in the policy areas of its “omnibus” industrial relations bill that it was forced to jettison last year in the face of Labor and crossbench opposition.

The dumped changes included relaxing requirements for approving collective agreements, extending workplace deals for major projects to eight years, simplifying extra hour requirements for part-time workers, and criminalising underpayments.

However, it is understood the changes would not necessarily be in the same form as they were in the bill.

Industrial Relations Minister

Michaelia Cash said that “the government is committed to our policies that allow businesses to create jobs, improve productivity and drive wages growth”.

“It was disappointing that our full suite of critical and sensible reforms introduced in the bill did not gain the support of the Senate,” she said.

“Despite Labor’s opposition to sensible reform, the Morrison government will continue to stand up for job creators in our economy – from the small

business in Burnie, to the major resource projects in the north-west of Western Australia.”

She said the government was “determined to do everything possible to make running businesses, particularly small businesses, simpler and more cost-effective”.

However, Labor’s industrial relations spokesman Tony Burke said: “Labor and the parliament rejected the government’s IR bill because it sought to cut the pay, conditions and job security of workers. Now they want to bring it back from the dead? This announcement should send a chill down the spine of every worker.”

The reforms were partly responding to the demise of enterprise agreements, which now represent less than 15 per cent of the workforce.

While the government’s omnibus bill shied away from major changes to the system, it would have given greater

weight to employer and employee views when approving an agreement as better than the award, included non-monetary benefits in the better off overall test (BOOT) and removed “hypothetical” rosters from the assessment.

Part-timers covered by hospitality and retail awards would have been able to agree to work extra hours without overtime while employers involved in deliberate and systemic underpayments could have faced jail time.

New projects worth at least \$500 million could have been covered by eight-year greenfield agreements, which would have prevented industrial action mid-project.

Australian Mines and Metals Association CEO Steve Knott said: “The resources and energy industry warmly welcomes the Morrison government’s commitment to more practical, commonsense industrial arrangements for the construction of new major projects.”

He said more than 350 major resources and energy projects were in various stages of feasibility and commitment that could create more than 100,000 jobs over five years.

Business Council chief executive Jennifer Westacott said: “The workplace relations omnibus legislation would have made sensible and very modest changes to the system which would have revitalised the EBA system that sees workers earn more.”

Unions hotly campaigned against almost all the omnibus bill reforms, claiming they would make bargaining for better pay even harder and eight-year greenfield deals would have locked in inferior rosters or conditions.

Mr Burke claimed that Scott Morrison would “have another go at cutting your take-home pay” if he won the election, while Opposition Leader Anthony

Albanese would deliver more secure jobs, better pay and a fairer system.

Key points

Changes would now not necessarily be framed as in the defeated omnibus bill.

Labor’s Tony Burke says the plan will ‘send a chill down the spine of every worker’.