



# Miners say good IR system needs less regulations

David Marin-Guzman  
Workplace correspondent

Resources employers have called on the Morrison government to cut regulation in high-paying sectors as part of its push to encourage harmonious workplaces, as unions demand that the government dump its anti-union bill first.

Employer groups welcomed Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter's new reform paper yesterday on how industrial relations could better support workplace co-operation as a much-needed discussion.

Australian Mines and Metals Association CEO Steve Knott said it was "well past time to develop a system that meets the needs of a modern workforce".

"As a starting point, regulatory burden should be eased in high-paying sectors where employees more often than not choose their employer," he said.

He said staff in resources and energy were becoming more highly skilled and their work less homogeneous, while collective approaches had given way to greater individual motivation.

"By contrast, Australia's IR system has barely evolved since it was first designed in the early 1900s," he said.

"It remains preoccupied with 'us and them', 'capital vs labour' principles, reflective of a bygone era where one in two employees were trade union members."

However, Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus said discussions on co-operation couldn't happen with the government's continuing attacks on unions, even though unions had "lots of ideas" on the subject.

"In order for there to be co-operation there must be mutual respect," she said. "If the government really wanted co-operation they would stop their union bashing, withdraw their Ensuring Integrity Bill and sit down with employers and unions to find the common ground needed to take our coun-

try forward.

"This is the leadership that is needed and it all starts with respecting working people."

The government's discussion paper, released after its bill to disqualify unions and union officials was defeated

last week, aims to collate a set of "best practice examples" for employers to create harmonious workplaces. It will also seek to remove any impediments to co-operation "without jeopardising protections".

University of Newcastle Professor Mark Bray, who co-authored a book on the subject cited in the paper, said the minister was "absolutely correct" that co-operative workplaces produced better national economies and agreed there was a "huge lack of co-operation in Australia".

However, he said co-operation was a "slippery term" and would mean different things to the Coalition and Labor.

"You can't just focus on management and individual employees – you've got to focus on how employee voice is organised."

He said the IR system institutionalised an adversarial approach as it had been centred around arbitration and enterprise bargaining.

However, he said managers were also taught the adversarial approach at work and many believed co-operation was "issuing the orders and employees complying".

"They acquire this competitive, adversarial and in some ways god-like notion of what they're supposed to do – everything's up to them," he said.

"To get them thinking 'I need to talk to people before I make a decision' – and not just consult but sometimes share decision-making with them – is a very alien thing for most managers in Australia."

Union delegates also shared the blame as they often learned an adversarial approach in union training

programs or from other delegates.

"It's another reason why they need third parties to come in and help them to learn," Professor Bray said.

Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox welcomed the paper's focus on employers and employees working together to improve productivity, which he said was too weak and a key reason for low wage growth.

"There is of course no 'one size fits all' solution, but it is important to identify case studies that other businesses can learn from."