



Unions boss to fight for secure post-Covid jobs

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ACTU secretary Sally McManus has declared unions will resist any attempt by the Coalition to use proposed industrial relations changes to reduce workers' rights, as the government confirmed plans to allow the same pay and conditions to be set for the construction phase of major projects.

In an address to the National Press Club on Wednesday, Ms McManus will urge the government and employers to build on the co-operation achieved during the pandemic and work with unions to halve the number of insecure jobs over the next decade.

"This consultation and co-operation must not only belong to the pandemic, it must become business as usual again in Australia as it makes us better as a country," she will say, according to an advance copy of her speech.

Ms McManus wants employers and governments to prioritise permanent employment. And she is calling for governments not to give contracts to companies, such as labour hire firms, that do not prioritise secure work.

She says unions would rather not spend early 2021 in the trenches trying to stop legislative changes that threaten the "foundations of that which protects the rights of working people: their security in retirement (and) Australia's unique social safety net".

"When the government issued the invitation for the national

talks, the Prime Minister asked both sides to put down their weapons," she will say.

"We were happy to agree, but the truth is we haven't been carrying weapons; we have been holding a shield for the past few decades, trying to protect what Australian workers have in our laws and institutions that provide fairness and dignity at work.

"If we need to, we will be ready to fight and defend the rights of workers," Ms McManus will say.

Ahead of the tabling of the government's industrial relations

omnibus bill in parliament next week, Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter confirmed it would propose allowing "life-of-project" greenfield agreements aimed at generating more investment and employment in mining.

Employer and union sources said the government was proposing to allow the same wage and conditions to be set for the construction life of new major projects worth more than \$500m. It would also be permitted for projects of lesser value if they were deemed to be of national significance and would create jobs.

Australian Mines and Metals Association chief executive Steve Knott said investors would often scratch their heads as to why agreements had a maximum four-year duration when applied to projects that took an average of six years to build.

"It makes no sense and is a very real barrier to securing a final investment decision," he said. "This

simple but important change will significantly boost Australia's

ability to secure new project investment in the ultra-competitive post-COVID global market."

Employer and union sources said the Coalition was proposing to introduce "loaded rates" for awards covering workers in retail, hospitality, restaurants and licensed clubs, while the Fair Work Commission would generally be required to approve agreements in 21 days.

Ms McManus will say that unions would rather be working with employers and the government on the big issues that help to grow the economy and strengthen the safety net, including driving down unemployment, improving wages, increasing workforce participation through free childcare, supporting dignified retirement incomes, and planning for good high-skilled jobs in Australian manufacturing.

"Setting a target and measuring our progress on insecure work should be one of the data points that we use to gauge the economic health of the nation," she will say.