



Employers push for workplace reforms

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The CEOs of the big four employer groups are urging the government to resurrect dumped parts of its industrial relations bill during this term of parliament, including on workplace agreements and minimum award conditions, so it can focus on “more transformational” reforms after the election.

The so-called “gang of four” – the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian Industry Group, the Master Builders Association and the Australian Mines and Metals Association – are seeking to make the reforms a key issue for discussion at a meeting with unions and the minister planned later this month.

While the employer groups have strongly opposed the government’s proposed criminalisation of underpayments, it is understood they are open to the harsher sanction as a trade-off with unions to get further reforms passed this year.

The Morrison government was forced to dump the vast majority of its IR changes due to opposition from crossbenchers, Labor and the Greens.

In a joint letter to Industrial Relations Minister Michaelia Cash last week, the employers said those changes, including reducing complexity in agreement making, six-year workplace deals for mega projects and pandemic-related award flexibilities, cannot wait until after the next election and were an “utmost priority” as the nation emerges from the downturn.

“The employer groups collectively urge the Morrison government to pursue these modest and incremental IR reforms during this term of parliament,” they said.

“They represent the right policy approach for the immediate objective of



The big employer groups are keen to revisit the omnibus IR bill. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

assisting Australian workplaces and the economy out of the pandemic and would further set up our nation to consider more transformational workplace reforms in the next term of Parliament; those that would seek to align Australia’s IR system to the 21st-century modern business environment.”

Employers are expected to raise the issue at a June 25 meeting of the statutory IR consultative committee, which includes the minister, employer groups, the ACTU and key unions.

Some of the award flexibilities they say are worth “re-prosecuting” include allowing employers to offer extra hours to part-timers without attracting overtime penalty rates and to be able to direct staff to undertake different duties.

They argue that reducing complexity in agreement-making, including a 21-day approval deadline, is “one of the key policy triggers the Morrison government can activate in the post-pandemic environment to support jobs, productivity and wages growth”.

However, unions have hardened

their attitude against further IR talks with the government after participating in several months of talks over consensus reforms last year.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus said unions had discussed “all components of the bill, at length, with employer groups and reached constructive compromise positions on several of them”.

“Despite this lengthy process and the compromise it created, the federal government ignored the recommendations we put forward and opted for the most extreme positions favoured by the radical employer groups,” she said.

She said that while the wage theft legislation would have been an improvement in some areas, it “needlessly weakened” existing wage theft laws in Victoria and Queensland.

Following the failure of the IR bill, the Fair Work Commission has been considering its own changes to awards to assist the hospitality and retail sectors but they have been delayed to accommodate union and employer discussions.