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## Union bid to put brakes on business

The Australian, Australia

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PM PUSHED ON ENTERPRISE BARGAINING

# Union bid to put brakes on business

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Unions are pressing Anthony Albanese to use a jobs and skills summit as a springboard to urgently legislate major changes to the nation's enterprise bargaining laws, including removing the ability of employers to unilaterally apply to terminate workplace agreements.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus said the federal government, unions and employers "have to think big" and use the summit in September to strive for agreement on changes to bargaining ahead of Labor introducing an industrial relations bill into parliament before the end of the year.

"It's this generation's responsibility to build a system that works for now," Ms McManus told The Australian. "We have effectively still got a system that's 30 years old, and we have got to accept that it's not working."

Employers and unions believe reinvigorating the enterprise bargaining system will drive higher wages and productivity growth. Just 14 per cent of all employees are covered by a current enterprise agreement, while an additional 23 per cent are likely to

be on expired agreements.

Ms McManus said changes to the Fair Work Act's "better off overall test" sought by employers were "essentially small-minded tinkering", while the ability of companies to unilaterally apply to scrap agreements "has got to be fixed".

"It's been a big wet blanket on bargaining right around the country for a long period of time and just incredibly unfair for the workers' side of bargaining," she said.

"When you leave a whole set of laws for a whole decade or longer and you make no changes, and you have employers spending all their time and all their resources on lawyers working out how to poke holes in it, you have a law with holes all over it and it's been used and abused.

"In order to fix bargaining, there has to be more than tinkering and this needs to be a matter of urgency. We need to get this job done and the sooner we can get it in parliament the better."

The ACTU push came as a major split emerged within the

Coalition on the summit, with Acting Opposition Leader Sussan Ley calling for the event to be cancelled while opposition Treasury spokesman Angus Taylor asked for a seat at the table.

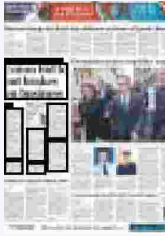
"The challenges Australia faces on jobs and skills are well-

known. Labor's announcement of a summit, not this month, not next month but the month after does nothing to address these challenges," Ms Ley tweeted.

"Let's save everyone the trip to Canberra and just get on with skilling Australians."

Mr Taylor, however, welcomed the government's focus on keeping unemployment levels low. "If the government is serious about building genuine consensus behind the summit and the resulting white paper, they must ensure parliamentarians from all parties, including the opposition, have a seat around the table in September," Mr Taylor said.

Steve Knott, chief executive of the Australian Resources and Energy Employer Association, said the issue of terminating agreements was a "pin prick in an



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orange". "Businesses across every sector in the economy are struggling to find people to run their existing operations let alone think about future investments and growth projects," he said.

"The option for either unions or employers to apply to terminate an expired enterprise agreement has been a feature of the Fair Work Act since 2009. Applications opposed by other parties are extremely rare and only occur during heavily protracted bargaining.

"In those rare applications, the Fair Work Commission must consider the application and the bargaining context on its merits and make an independent

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assessment. There is no evidence base or merit behind the ACTU's push to restrict this option to be available to unions only."

Mr Albanese said the government would attempt to broker a deal between unions and business on improving the enterprise bargaining system, with the focus of the September jobs and skills summit to be on increasing productivity.

"Quite clearly, it's not working as effective as it could, and both employers and unions are saying that," Mr Albanese said. "So where we can get co-operation, that's a

good thing. There was some progress made by the process that was set up by the former government, and then legislation appeared that didn't reflect the discussions that had taken place.

"We want, wherever possible, for employers and unions to work together. They have a common interest and it's called the national interest."

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott said the summit was a chance to "end the deadlock on workplace relations, restore the Hawke-Keating enterprise bargaining system to lift productivity and let

Australians earn more".

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Andrew McKellar said raising the target for permanent skilled migration intake up to 200,000 for at least the next two years would be critical to address the worker shortages that could not be filled by Australians in the short term.

Mr Albanese said the summit of about 100 leaders from business, unions and governments would discuss how a policy blueprint could ensure Australians are trained for the "jobs of the future".

The discussions would form the basis of an employment white paper that would be developed by Treasury over the next 12 months.

Mr Albanese said the government would look at how the migration mix could best fit in with plans to address skills shortages but also ensure locals were being adequately trained.

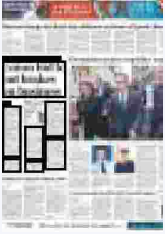
"We do have some short-term skills shortages that will always need to be filled by temporary migration. That will continue to play a role," Mr Albanese said.

"But one of the things that we can consider, that I've spoken about, is how is that for some par-

ticular professions, that have been short of supply for such a long period of time, we continue to rely on temporary migration rather than more permanent forms

"We have a global labour market. We need to acknowledge that. And we need to make sure that we have better pathways as well to a permanent residency in Australia for people to give us the skills that they need."

He said lowering energy prices through renewables was the key to increasing production in manufacturing. "One of the things that is happening, and what makes our future, I believe, very bright, if we just seize the opportunity, is that clean energy is cheap energy," he said. "We have access, better than anywhere in the world. We are the best country in the world for solar. We're one of the best for wind."



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Anthony Albanese and Treasurer Jim Chalmers in Canberra on Monday: 'We want, wherever possible, for employers and unions to work together'

AAP