

## FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS POLICY

12TH OCTOBER 2005

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**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE** [10.10 pm]: During the next few months Prime Minister John Howard plans to implement his hostile takeover of the industrial relations system, a takeover that he failed to put before the people at the last Federal election. It is a takeover that he has no mandate to carry out. Mr Howard plans to use his muscle to introduce a new American-style industrial relations system for Australia that strips away the most basic of worker's rights, driving down wages and conditions for ordinary working people.

Despite the dulcet tones of the Prime Minister's taxpayer-funded advertising campaign, and his moral rectitude about family values, Australian working people are not stupid and the latest Newspoll clearly shows that they do not trust John Howard on the important issue of industrial relations.

The first major industrial relations attack was passed into law last month by the Government's new Senate majority. The Building and Construction Industry Improvement Act applies to any worker in the construction industry; including off-site preparation work, fabrication, installation and repair work, as well as on-site construction work. The new Australian Building and Construction Commission has the power to fine and gaoil unions and individual workers, and denies workers even the most basic right: the right to silence.

However, one thing this new bevy of anti worker legislation does not address is another very basic right: worker safety. And if ever there was a right that should be legislated and cast in stone it is the right of every worker to go to work and then go home again to their family intact. Recent serious injuries and deaths in the construction industry demonstrate that occupational health and safety still does not rate as a high priority for some employers.

Last month a young sheet metal work apprentice, Cameron Ayliffe, went to work on a major construction site in Newcastle. Before he had even had his morning smoko he was crushed when part of the construction work collapsed on him. It was only after his workmates took matters into their own hands that he was taken to hospital, where he was admitted with horrific injuries and in a critical condition. That young man owes his life not to John Howard's so-called workplace reforms, but to his workmates.

The union on site—the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union [AMWU]—has been helping to care for this young man and his family. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union [CFMEU] has also been involved in helping workers on the site. Yet those are also two of the unions that have been specifically targeted by the Federal Government's new construction watchdog for special roughing-up.

Another recent example of the failures of the Howard Government in tackling the dangers faced by workers in the construction industry is at the Caltex Oil Refinery. For the past four years workers involved in shutdown work and upgrading construction work at Caltex have been exposed to gas leaks. The gas is hydrogen sulphide, a poison used during the refining process. Make no mistake: this is not a substance to be ignored. Hydrogen sulphide is a gas that affects the central nervous system. With sufficient exposure it is lethal. Even in smaller doses it causes nausea, severe headaches and unconsciousness, among other problems. Workers who were exposed to this gas at the Caltex site in 2002 were hospitalised for more than a week, and some have not been able to return to work yet as a result of their exposure.

In the past two weeks this sinister problem has again occurred. More than 20 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union have been taken by ambulance to local hospitals suffering from the effects of exposure to hydrogen sulphide. More than 400 workers have been forced to evacuate the site, yet management has not been able to identify either the cause or the source of the leak.

While John Howard is out of control attacking workers and unions such as the AMWU and the CFMEU he has shown no zeal for regulating the industry and removing rogue employers who put the safety of their workers a very poor second to their own bottom line.

Workplace safety is the most basic worker's right. If John Howard were serious about workplace reform and family values he should start by making sure that mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, go home from work to their family at night safe and in one piece. Every worker in Australia knows the truth about John Howard—his agenda is driven by ideology, not real concern for Australian families.