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NEXT MEETING: BOARD MEETING

To be advised

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The Fair Work follies take us back to the 70s

Julia Gillard's public sector approach threatens jobs

JULIA Gillard has proclaimed January 4-9 Fair Work Week to celebrate the start of her new industrial relations system. For foundation members of her new industrial relations club there is certainly a great deal to be pleased about. Ms Gillard has breathed life into the moribund union movement, giving officials easy access to workplaces where the majority of staff have no interest in what they are selling. She has rejuvenated the arthritic idea that workers in an industry should be paid the same across the country, regardless of an individual business's capacity to pay. And in Fair Work Australia she has created a new version of the old industrial court that supervised generations of industrial mayhem. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics there were 1519 industrial disputes in 1987. In 2007 there were 135. The new agency will administer the industrial rules and arbitrate disputes, generating business for public sector union officials as well as the representatives of the 20 per cent or so of the private sector workforce that is unionised. And with its creation, Ms Gillard has given ambitious unionists a new source of employment. All of the six Fair Work commissioners appointed this week have union or public sector backgrounds.

But for everybody else the merriment will be muted. For all Ms Gillard's talk about ending the excesses of the Howard government's melodramatically demonised Work Choices policy, she has done much more, rebuilding the industrial relations edifice it took the Hawke, Keating and Howard governments a generation to demolish. And in creating employment for union apparatchiks she has put the jobs of millions of workers at risk. Perhaps the main reason why the Australian economy grew so strongly for the past 20 years and has defied the increase in unemployment that has engulfed the US and Europe is the flexibility of the labour market. This especially applies in retailing and hospitality, the two largest employers of low-skilled workers, where standard terms and conditions will now apply. And as The Australian recently reported, business fears unions using their newly privileged position to push for wage increases that are not funded by productivity improvements. At the other end of the employment market, unions are already trying to force themselves on the highly paid and largely independent workers who produce vast amounts of export income in the minerals and energy enterprises of Western Australia.

But the economic costs of industrial action will not occur to a union culture dominated by public sector officials unfamiliar with the idea that employers have to make a profit to pay wages and who assume taxpayers exist to serve their interests. This is certainly the situation in NSW, where public sector wages have increased by 4.3 per cent this year, nearly twice the budgeted figure. While none of this will bother members of the Fair Work club, it will terrify small businesspeople and everybody who remembers the destructive industrial relations culture that existed into the 1980s. In saying Tony Abbott wants to bring back Work Choices, Ms Gillard is reprising an issue from the last election but the next one will also be fought on a hated industrial relations policy - hers. (SOURCE/EXTRACT: *The Australian*, 18.12.09)

Unions to open IR front in poll battle

THE union movement plans to re-ignite the industrial relations debate ahead of next year's election campaign.

The ACTU has advertised for five campaign co-ordinators based in each of the mainland capital cities "to build on the work started with the Your Rights at Work campaign at the last federal election".

Your Rights at Work become a potent political brand ahead of the last election as controversy raged over the Howard government's industrial laws.

The Australian understands the new ACTU campaign will play on fears of job insecurity by emphasising unions' role helping workers who lose jobs with entitlements.

But the opposition signalled a tough response to increased union militancy.

"It's becoming a traditional Christmas again with the advent of Julia Gillard," Coalition workplace relations spokesman Eric Abetz told *The Australian*, pointing to a sting of industrial action. "We've got aircraft engineers threatening to strike, we've got Australia Post, we've got the rail workers up in Queensland"

Shadow special minister of state Michael Ronaldson said the unions were not serious about electoral finance reform.

"Labor promised a new system of election campaigns ... which removed the big-money influence of both business and unions," he said, calling the positions "little more than an in-kind donation to the Labor Party valued at more than a quarter of a million dollars". (SOURCE/EXTRACT: *The Australian*, 18.12.09)



MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY AND PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR



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