



Coalition agrees to scrap AWAs, with conditions

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The Federal Opposition has proposed a compromise with the Government over Australian Workplace Agreements, vowing to accept the abolition of the controversial agreements if Labor lets workers stay permanently on transitional individual contracts that it has proposed to replace AWAs.

Labor's industrial relations Bill, which will be introduced to Federal Parliament next week, scraps AWAs but allows workers to be employed on similar individual agreements under so-called transitional arrangements which expire at the end of 2009.

In a clear sign that the coalition is prepared to distance itself from the unpopular WorkChoices legislation, it is prepared to accept AWAs becoming extinct as long as Labor's temporary alternative — interim transitional employment agreements — were allowed to run indefinitely.

Shadow industrial relations minister Julie Bishop said if ITEAs were proved to have the same features as AWAs that existed between 1996 and 2005 — individual contracts subjected to a no-disadvantage test — then the biggest impasse between the Government and the Opposition on IR could be bridged.

"Take out the 'T'. Make them Individual Employment Agreements," Ms Bishop said. "We want to see what Labor is proposing with ITEAs. It could well be that they are pre-WorkChoices AWAs in which case we can look at making them permanent, rather than transitional."

Although Ms Bishop said the coalition was reserving final judgment until it saw the Government's IR transition Bill, she said the Opposition may also split the Bill in the Senate to

allow the non-contentious elements to be passed.

This would allow passage before April of measures including establishing 10 minimum national employment standards (up from four), revival of a no-disadvantage test for all workers and the referral of awards to the Industrial Commission for simplification and rationalisation.

Whichever strategy the coalition chooses, the Government is unlikely to get its way on abolishing AWAs while the Liberals and Nationals command a Senate majority.

This changes after July 1, but even then Labor faces potentially tricky negotiations with minor party senators.

At a special meeting of coalition MPs and senators in Canberra yesterday, it was resolved to fight for the retention of statutory individual agreements.

Former IR minister and principal architect of the WorkChoices regime Kevin Andrews told the meeting the coalition had a philosophical obligation to fight for the right of employees to negotiate directly with employers. South Australian Senator Simon Birmingham said the coalition should not only abandon WorkChoices but AWAs as well.

He said that the two were inextricably linked to an IR system that had proved to be electoral poison.

After the meeting, WA Senator David Johnston said: "We are prepared to die in the ditch over individual statutory workplace agreements."

Fellow WA Senator Mathias Cormann said: "I believe the Australian people need us to win this battle."

But the tough talk did not move Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

"It remains unclear whether the Liberals will vote for or against the

transition Bill, which I will introduce to Parliament next Wednesday," Ms Gillard said.

"What is crystal clear is that WorkChoices and Australian Workplace Agreements, by any name, were firmly rejected by the Australian people at the last election."



Compromise: Julie Bishop wants permanent agreements.