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Hotels in rush to sign up workers

Ewin Hannan | June 29, 2009

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EMPLOYERS have struck 40 non-union workplace deals covering 5000 luxury-hotel employees over the past six weeks as companies rush to lock out unions before the introduction of new industrial relations laws this week.

Employers yesterday revealed that 40 major luxury hotels across the country had signed workers to non-union agreements that are expected to remain in force until 2012.

The Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union accused the hotels of trying to subvert Labor's election mandate by signing up thousands of employees "during the dying days of Work Choices".

LHMU national secretary Louise Tarrant said the 40 agreements covering 5000 workers had been rushed through in six weeks, compared with just four non-union deals that had been struck in the sector in the past 16 years.

Australian Hotels Association chief executive Bill Healey accused the union of laying the groundwork to try to impose industry-wide settlements on major hotels once the new laws became operational from Wednesday.

Mr Healey said the union intended to use the low-paid bargaining provisions in the new act to apply the same terms and conditions on multiple employers.

"I think this will be a test of the new laws," he said. "We'd be very concerned if, at the first hurdle, the government's intentions were undermined."

According to literature sent by the LHMU to its members, the union says it intends that hotel workers be the first to use the provisions of the Fair Work Act.

"Under the new laws, a majority of workers can require their employer to negotiate in good faith with them," a union campaign update says.

"Because most hotels have never negotiated a workplace agreement, the new laws aim to make getting an agreement easier by allowing one agreement to cover many hotels.

"These new laws give hotel workers a rare opportunity to change the industry. If hotel workers act quickly, you will be able to negotiate a new national deal for workers from hotels across Australia."

The Rudd government was last year forced to rebuke Ms Tarrant after she said she would use the new laws to seek industry-wide pay settlements. Ms Tarrant later retracted the comments.

Mr Healey said the union's recent tactics and comments showed it was still intent on launching "a co-ordinated pattern bargaining campaign once the new workplace relations laws come into effect".

"The union is attempting to use the new laws to impose industry-wide agreements on the major hotel sector, despite what the government has previously told them," Mr Healey said.

Ms Tarrant said "if anyone is doing pattern bargaining, it's the AHA". "They have put a non-union template agreement throughout the industry," she said. "How can they accuse us of pattern bargaining when they are doing it themselves?"

"The AHA should look in the mirror. What they have done is very crudely and cynically abuse the trust of the Australian community and the luxury hotel workforce by pushing through non-union agreements in the most tawdry way, stopping employees getting the benefits of the new legislation for the next three years."

She said the union would consider using the low-paid bargaining stream but "we're not out there in the industry with a five-point template that everyone should sign up to".

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