

Labor pressed by unions and resources sector
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By Michelle Grattan

A LABOR Left convener, Doug Cameron, has called for unions to be given better access to greenfield resource sites to ensure agreements are enforced, as union power in relation to these projects shapes up as a major issue in the government's review of the Fair Work Act.

Senator Cameron, a former secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, said that unions had strongly complained to the recently established caucus committee on spreading the benefits of the mining boom about this lack of access.

As it considers its review of the Fair Work Act, the government is caught between the resource sector's protests that it is being held hostage by the unions - which can take protected strike action if an employer refuses to bargain for an agreement - and the unions' demands for more ability to see agreements are enforced.

ACTU secretary Dave Oliver said unions needed better access. "We need better and regular access to the employees," he said. These remote sites, he said, had multiple contractors and restrictions on times of access, which could be confined to meal breaks. It was difficult to visit multiple mess huts in the meal break.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard at the weekend talked up workplace relations as an election issue and said that in its decisions "we won't make it harder to represent working people".

"We won't enter a race to the bottom in our region on wages. We won't make it easier to cut pay or strip conditions like penalty rates or public holidays," she said. "And we won't bring back a culture of confrontation."

Workplace Minister Bill Shorten will release the report on the Fair Work Act within weeks. The government is sounding out some stakeholders beforehand but will have extensive consultations after the report is out. It will not announce its response until after those discussions.

Earlier this month, Resources Minister Martin Ferguson lashed out at unions over wage deals in the resources sector which he said would endanger Australia's competitiveness and be unsustainable over time. The Australian Mines and Metals Association has thought Mr Shorten had some sympathy for their complaints.

Senator Cameron said: "I'd be opposed to any diminution of union rights on the greenfield sites.

"The government should take further steps so that once agreement is reached, there is access for unions to ensure the agreement is complied with," he told *The Age*.

"Establishing greenfield agreements with good wages and conditions and ensuring they are complied with is an important issue for caucus. If anyone should understand that, it

would be Bill Shorten, a former union official." He said the mining companies were making huge profits from these mines and "they have a social obligation to ensure workers engaged there are not exploited and that requires union access to the sites".

But the chief executive of the Australian Mines and Metals Association, Steve Knott, said that under the Fair Work laws unions "have significantly more access to workplaces than ever before. To suggest otherwise is blatantly misleading."

Ms Gillard said yesterday industrial relations would "be one of the single biggest issues for the forthcoming election campaign". Under Labor there would always be "fairness and decency for working Australians".

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