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# Union set to take DHS to tribunal

**By Noel Towell**  
Public Service Reporter

The main public sector union is threatening to take legal action in its dispute with the government's biggest department over the "casualisation" of its workforce.

Fairfax Media reported last week that the massive Department of Human Services was planning to spend \$30 million developing a "temporary and flexible workforce", despite shedding at least 2400 permanent staff.

The department is facing a \$66 million loss this financial year blamed on a burgeoning workload, natural disasters and a delayed redundancy program, which was supposed to bring its wages bill down.

DHS, which provides frontline services Centrelink, Medicare and the Child Support Agency, will cut

1340 jobs next financial year, according to the budget papers, after shedding 1078 jobs in the second half of last year.

It has defended the changes, saying it needed the temporary workers to give it a "surge capacity," to improve waiting times for its various services.

A DHS spokeswoman said on Monday the new recruits would be put to work coping with a surge in demand for services.

"The Department of Human Services will engage additional staff to help with surges in our workload as they occur, to better meet caller demand during peak periods," she said.

But the Community and Public Sector Union says it will fight the job cuts. The union's national

secretary Nadine Flood said the department was already understaffed and workers were struggling to deliver quality frontline services.

"DHS is under real pressure, with call wait times blowing out to 90 minutes and over 100,000 unprocessed new claims," Ms Flood said. "While the extra \$30 million and the drop in the efficiency dividend in the budget are welcome, these are not sufficient to fix the long-term staffing problems in DHS."

The union leader said she wanted to see permanent jobs

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preserved at DHS rather than rising numbers of casuals and temps.

"CPSU members are advocating for permanent jobs in the department and are deeply concerned by their move to introduce casuals," Ms Flood said.

"This is important work and the people doing it should have the same employment rights as other staff."

The union said it was prepared to escalate the dispute to the industrial umpire if was not settled.

"We are still talking with DHS about this dispute and are keen to resolve it sensibly," Ms Flood said.

"But if the department doesn't see reason, we will have no hesitation in escalating this dispute to Fair Work."

"We have also briefed the minister's office on the department's action and sought their assistance in resolving this matter."