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# Caucus crashes IR row

Steven Scott

Acting Prime Minister Julia Gillard has left open the door for Labor backbenchers to suggest changes to the government's planned workplace relations reforms, in a move designed to dampen growing caucus angst about the extent of concessions to employers in Labor's policy.

Unions are stepping up lobbying of backbenchers over the planned reforms, with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Unions (AMWU) and Unions NSW both meeting MPs yesterday and today to call for changes, including better access to arbitration of wage disputes, broader rights to strike and tougher minimum employment standards.

In a sign of growing internal angst about the scope of the reforms, one caucus member asked Ms Gillard yesterday whether there could be further changes to the reforms after the legislation had been reviewed by a committee of industrial relations legal experts from employer groups and unions, known as COIL, from October 7 to 17.

Ms Gillard said there would be two "comprehensive sessions" of

a broader backbench committee on workplace relations "to make sure there was caucus input", a caucus spokesman said.

The meetings are scheduled for October 20 and November 10.

Ms Gillard told the caucus the parliament might sit more weeks in December if it needed extra time to pass legislation.

She had also set up a smaller "ad hoc" caucus group of eight MPs to discuss the IR bill.

**Unions NSW also began targeted lobbying of MPs from that state.**

Ms Gillard also announced the appointment of career public servant Marion van Rooden to a 12-month role overseeing the establishment of Labor's new IR bureaucracy Fair Work Australia.

Meanwhile, AMWU national secretary Dave Oliver and workers from hearing implant manufacturer Cochlear met marginal seat holders yesterday to push for measures to force employers to the bargaining table.

Cochlear has repeatedly refused to bargain with employees

wanting a collective union agreement. But Mr Oliver said they could face the same fate under the government's planned IR reforms, which do not allow Fair Work Australia to arbitrate wage disputes.

While the reforms included "good faith bargaining" provisions, it was unclear how these would be enforced.

"Cochlear workers were quite prominent in the election campaign and they were used as an example of why we need rights restored for workers," Mr Oliver said. "Cochlear workers have a right to a collective agreement."

A delegation from Unions NSW also began targeted lobbying of MPs from that state over its concerns with the planned reforms.

In a recent policy document, Unions NSW pledged to campaign against Labor if it allowed workers to cash out annual leave and did not drop plans to exempt high earners from awards.

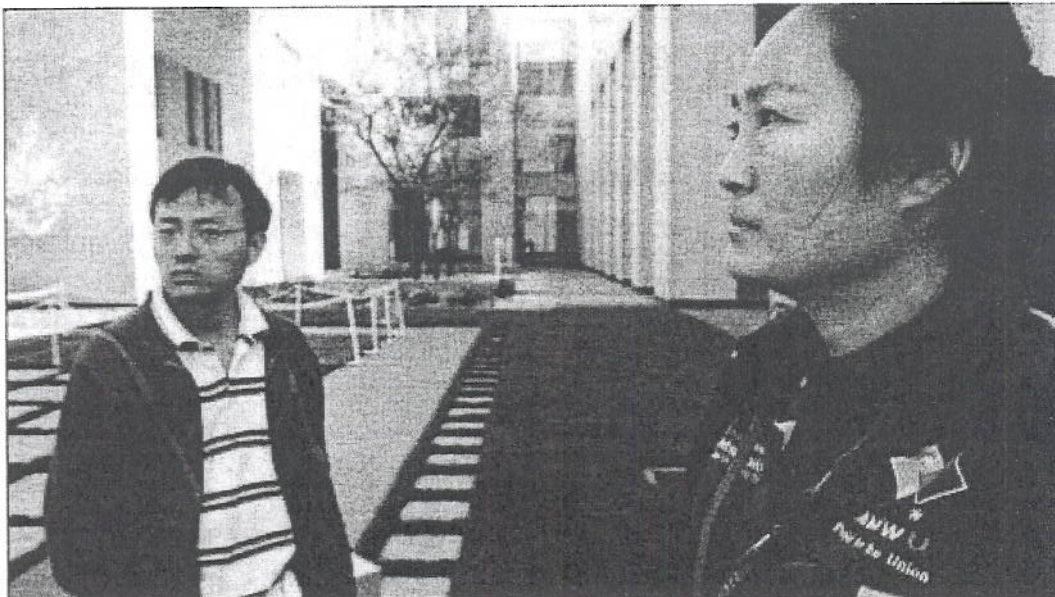
The peak union group from NSW also wants more generous conditions for parental leave, annual leave and redundancy pay, as well as a new unfair contracts jurisdiction.

CAUCUS

Ad Hoc caucus

COIL

FWA



Now hear this . . . Cochlear workers take their case to Canberra yesterday.

Photo: GLEN McCURTAYNE