



TRANSCRIPT

EMPLOYER GROUPS LAUNCH IR CAMPAIGN

ACCI Deputy President Tony Howarth on ABC Radio's PM Program - WR Ad Campaign - 8 August 2007.

Reporter: Nick Grimm

MARK COLVIN: You've seen the union advertising campaign against WorkChoices, and several versions of the Government's defence.

Today a coalition of employers' groups joined the fray, with a warning that the nation can't afford to take a backward step on industrial relations reform.

The new campaign was launched a day after the Federal Government pulled its latest series of workplace legislation advertisements from our TV screens.

That was triggered by claims that an actor in one of the ads had himself been a bad boss who'd underpaid young workers in his painting business, including his own son.

Nick Grimm reports.

EMPLOYER ADVERTISEMENT: It hasn't been easy, but over the past two decades Australia has undergone workplace reform.

NICK GRIMM: It's not a TV commercial likely to win advertising industry awards for its creativity, yet neither does it provide much fodder for the satirists out there always on the lookout for material to lampoon.

But if you're unsure about its message - the scary music is a dead giveaway.

EMPLOYER ADVERTISEMENT: But what will happen if workplace reforms are scrapped? It will be like trying to unscramble an egg.

NICK GRIMM: They call themselves the Business Coalition for Workplace Reform. And according to the people who've sponsored the campaign set to be launched on the Australian public, experiments with focus groups have shown it will be effective in shaping opinion in the lead-up to the federal election.

MICHAEL CHANEY: We have found that the advertisements do resonate with the public.

NICK GRIMM: Michael Chaney is from the Business Council of Australia.

MICHAEL CHANEY: They believe this is a very valid way for business to be speaking out on the issue, that the message it conveys about the link between workplace flexibility and economic prosperity is an important message. And importantly, by the way, also that they don't see the ads as political.

NICK GRIMM: The Business Council is one of 19 employers' organisations that have stumped up the cash to pay for the advertising campaign - they say to provide an intellectual antidote to the misinformation peddled by the anti-WorkChoices campaign run by the union movement.

Tony Howarth is from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

TONY HOWARTH: The issue is a very public one, the union movement has made it that way, and portrayed employers in a negative light, such as wanting mothers to abandon their children and come to work under fear of being sacked, or regarding their staff as sitting ducks in some shooting gallery.

We cannot allow the community to get such false impressions. It must be rebutted.

Put simply, with the amount of advertising already done by unions and governments, and the importance of the issue, this is the business campaign we had to have.

NICK GRIMM: This new campaign will no doubt be welcomed by the Prime Minister, who earlier this year appeals to bosses for just such a public show of support for his workplace changes.

However, a number of employers groups - including the Australian Industry Group and the National Farmers' Federation - have declined to take part in what they regard as an advertising campaign that could be perceived as politically partisan.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow believes that's an undeniable fact.

SHARAN BURROW: Well this is an exercise in naked self-interest.

We've got profits at record levels, executive salaries are through the roof. And it's not surprising that big business wants to hold onto what they've got from John Howard's unfair IR laws.

NICK GRIMM: The employers groups behind this campaign make much of the fact that they're trying to compete with a \$100-million anti-WorkChoices campaign paid for by unions.

For its part, the Federal Government is estimated to have spent more than \$80-million advertising its workplace changes over the past two years.

However, the Business Coalition for Workplace Reform won't say just how much they plan to spend. But Sharan Burrows estimates they have around \$7-million in the coffers.

SHARAN BURROWS: Business got \$4-million from taxpayers' money to promote WorkChoices, against the interests of working Australians. Now they're spending a further \$7-million to promote the laws that actually allow them to push down wages and conditions. It's in their interests to keep WorkChoices.

NICK GRIMM: Prominent advertising buyer and media commentator, Harold Mitchell, argues that the Business Coalition will have to spend a lot more than that, a minimum of \$3-million to \$4-million for at least four weeks if it wants to get its message out.

HAROLD MITCHELL: Two answers: if it's to be over a long period of time you can take a lower level and it's quite some months, and it's probably at the level of \$2-million to \$3-million a month, but for some four or five months; but if it's to be a short campaign, high impact, nationwide, usually a figure of \$3-million to \$4-million for at least four weeks.

So we're talking about something like \$12-million to \$14 million, 15-million. Anything less than that, you're probably wasting the money.

MARK COLVIN: Media advertising buyer, Harold Mitchell, ending that report from Nick Grimm.