

US low wage 'victims' to talk about distress

THE ACTU hopes to showcase the worst of the capitalist system when it takes a group of American minimum wage workers on a national speaking tour of Australia next week.

It is part of a growing campaign being engineered by trade unions against Prime Minister John Howard's industrial relations reforms.

ACTU president Sharan Burrow told a union conference in Wollongong yesterday the move followed growing concerns the new laws were being used to weaken safety nets and drive down minimum wages.

"Minimum wages in this country are being driven down to produce an impoverished two-tiered system such as the ones operating in countries like the United States," Ms Burrows said.

"These ordinary workers will tell their stories and they are heartbreaking.

"There are stories of being forced to work two and three jobs to make ends meet, stories of having no health care and stories about desperation.

"We will not have that kind of society in Australia and the current Your Rights At Work campaign is about a simple act of democracy at the next election because workers face a stark choice."

Ms Burrows said polling in recent months that showed the Howard Government would struggle to win the next election was due in part to the union campaign, but she said the real reason was the huge groundswell of community protest.

"In recent months ordinary Australians have made Howard blink," she said.

Private polling by the ACTU has shown that 43 per cent of people who will change their vote from the Coalition to Labor at the federal ballot later this year nominated industrial relations as the top reason for the change to their voting patterns.

"Health and education will be the other two important issues- for voters, but IR is clearly the vote changer," Ms Burrow said.

Conference delegates were also addressed by teenager and former Chili's restaurant worker Tenika Setter. Supported by her parents Stephen and LeeAnne, Tenika spoke of being forced to pay out of her own pocket if people "did a runner", of not being paid if there were no customers and losing all her holiday entitlements, shift penalties and overtime after being forced to sign an Australian Workplace Agreement. She received a resounding ovation from delegates after telling them she had decided to speak out on behalf of future generations of young workers.



Speak out: Sharan Burrows says the new industrial relations laws will produce an impoverished two-tiered system similar to that in the United States.