

Postal union urges secret strike ballot

Mark Skulley

The push for a new enterprise bargaining agreement at Australia Post could lead to legally protected strikes and "postage free days" in coming weeks.

The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union will today lodge an application to conduct the largest secret ballot since the Rudd government's new Fair Work laws came into force on July 1.

It will ask almost 18,000 CEPU members at Australia Post to approve a range of industrial action, including 24-hour stoppages.

Talks on a new agreement stalled about 18 months ago over the increased use of casual rather than full-time employees, having company-paid doctors evaluate injured workers and maintaining shift penalties, overtime and take-home pay.

CEPU national president Ed Husic claimed last night that Australia Post management still had the Howard government's Work Choices' laws "on life support".

"We also want the ability to protect and enforce all of our members' conditions via the independent umpire, Fair Work Australia," Mr Husic said.

"Australia Post refuses to agree to this, dragging these matters before the federal courts, where they can outspend their workers out of their rights. For our members these extra conditions are the only way they are able to maintain living standards and pay their bills."

But Australia Post spokesman Alex Twomey said his organisation was "disappointed by the union's actions, considering we had been negotiating in good faith on a generous [enterprise bargaining agreement] that delivers job security and wage increases".

Australia Post argues that employees covered by the award are protected by a clause which provides for job security through redeployment and retraining rather than forced redundancies.

But Mr Husic said the aim was to send a "loud and clear" message. If the secret ballot succeeded, it would still take several weeks to conduct the ballot and to give the required notice for industrial action.

The row comes as Australia Post has applied to raise the price of the basic postage stamp from 55¢ to 60¢ and to increase business charges from early 2010.