Keeping abreast of the oil industry dispute has been a difficult business. The situation was a complex one and changed from day to day, sometimes from hour to hour.

As I speak now, the striking oil refinery maintenance men have returned to work. This gives us an opportunity to consider in some kind of perspective a most damaging dispute which a few union leaders embarked upon without regard for the consequences of thousands of individual Australians and their families.

The central issue was a simple one. Was the umpire's decision going to be accepted or respected? One side had shown a willingness to accept the principle of arbitration and the umpire's verdict. The other side had repudiated that verdict. As a consequence, a strike by about 1000 men held Australia to ransom.

It is not widely understood that the Federal Government's firm action in the oil dispute created the industrial climate for last week's return to work. The Government insisted that the dispute should be settled by arbitration. At the same time, it prepared to have Federal Parliament recalled to enable it to implement special measures to prevent the strike grinding to a halt.
The Prime Minister was not seeking the recall of Parliament for the sake of a debate. The urgent legislation which we planned would have been revealed in the second reading speech on the day of its introduction.

It is perfectly clear that the Government has essentially achieved its objectives. The strike appears to be over. Oil supplies are expected to return to normal soon. On Mr. Justice Moore's initiative, taken within the climate created by the Government, the dispute is being returned to the Arbitration Commission.

Most important, the principle of arbitration has been retained. We must hope that from this week, the union leaders will not persist in rejecting the Judge's rulings.

The oil strike caused a great deal of damage and inconvenience, especially in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. It occurred because the union leaders involved refused to accept the umpire's decision - in this case, Mr. Justice Moore's "interim decision" pending the hearing of the full union case.

Until last week, Mr. Hawke as President of the A.C.T.U. was not prepared to recommend a return to work. Such a recommendation could have been made under the same terms and conditions as have now occurred. It was always clear that the hearing of the unions' full claims would proceed as soon as there was a full resumption of work. What altered the situation compared with the earlier occasion was the Prime Minister's statement concerning the recall of Parliament.
In other words, the unions are returning to the umpire’s table under the terms and conditions that existed when they left it. Thus, it has been an abortive and fruitless enterprise on the part of a few union leaders which had already begun to involve many thousands of Australians in significant hardship and which would, if it had continued, have involved the whole nation.

Australia has a system of arbitration for very good reasons. It is an unhappy fact of life not only in Australia, but also in other countries, that unions and employers often see each other as adversaries. Therefore, we have established a system of industrial law, based first upon conciliation and second upon arbitration.

This practice has served Australia well, but it depends upon a willingness of both parties to accept the judgment, the decision of the umpire. That is an Australian tradition which by and large we have been proud to follow.

We need to remember also that the arbitration system in particular protects weak unions and weak employers. If it is by-passed, if it is destroyed, then industrial law will become the law of the survival of the strongest. Having in mind the damaging effect of a strike by a thousand men in the oil industry, what does one expect Mr. Laurie Carmichael to be able to achieve in control of the new Amalgamated Metal Workers’ Union with a total membership of 180,000 and an income of $3 million a year?

Let us hope that Mr. Hawke is unsuccessful in his bid to smash the arbitration system and create another record year of strikes and wages lost to Australia’s work force. Under his
leadership of the A.C.T.U., wages lost through industrial disputes in Australia have doubled in two years, from $23 million in 1969 to more than $45 million last year. Since 1967, the figure has increased more than sixfold. The worker cannot be expected to shoulder the consequences of such continued militancy.

Abandonment of the arbitration system and adoption of such spectacular confrontation tactics injure the wage earner who is called out on strike or is stood down as a result of that strike. At the same time, it sets back the national effort to improve productivity, the only way that real wage increases and living standard advances can be achieved.

The Government refuses to see Australia’s arbitration system wrecked. We are committed to arbitration and the rule of law as the best way of ensuring that industrial justice is done, that the employee and employer both get a fair go, and that the nation and all working people within it make genuine, material progress in the years ahead.

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