

## FEDERAL POLITICS NEWS

# Sharper teeth for new building watchdog

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DEPUTY Prime Minister Julia Gillard has responded to wildcat strikes in the resource industry by toughening proposed legislation shaping a new building industry watchdog.

But the amendments will not meet the demands of Coalition and independent senators who are set to block the bill in the Senate.

The controversial Australian Building and Construction Commission, which unions want abolished, has the power to take swift legal action against workers who defy court orders, but its replace-

ment would have lost this power under legislation to be put to the Senate.

Ms Gillard said yesterday the amendment will allow the new inspectorate to take appropriate action for contempt of court. A further change would also see the Minister for Workplace Relations able to direct the watchdog on its allocation of resources.

"It comes as no surprise that the sort of situations and locations the government has in mind include the recent unlawful industrial action occurring in northern Western Australia," Ms Gillard said in a statement.

The ABCC is investigating an

illegal strike by thousands of construction workers at Woodside's Pluto project in Karratha, Western Australia, who had defied an order by Fair Work Australia to return to work.

Business groups said the illegal strike highlighted the need for the ABCC to be kept on.

However, opposition workplace spokesman Eric Abetz yesterday rejected the new amendments.

"She is still trying to emasculate the [ABCC], turning it into an inspectorate where she will have the ability to issue directions," he said.

Family First Senator Steve Fielding said the government's amend-

ments were a sham. "The best thing the government can do is to take this bill and throw it on the scrap heap and leave things the way they are," he said.

The union movement has mobilised strongly against the ABCC's coercive powers, which include the ability to jail workers who refuse to attend interviews. The Labor government had promised to abolish the commission by February 1.

ACTU secretary Jeff Lawrence said unions wanted the legislation passed and did not expect the government to accede to the demands of the opposition or Family First.