



Australian Council of Trade Unions

MEDIA RELEASE

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Increase in workplace deaths means health and safety laws need to be strengthened: new data

A sharp rise in work-related fatalities last year shows that proposed new workplace health and safety laws need to be strengthened, not watered down, say unions.

There were 177 fatal injuries in workplaces in 2008-9, according to newly released statistics from the national regulatory body, Safe Work Australia. This is an 18% increase from the previous year.

With Federal and State workplace ministers due to meet today to decide on the form of new national workplace safety laws, the ACTU says the welfare of employees must be the highest priority.

ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence said the increase in fatalities was disturbing at a time when proposed changes to Australian workplace safety laws would result in a weakening of protections and rights.

“A double-digit increase in workplace fatalities in one year is shocking,” Mr Lawrence said.

“Each of these victims is someone’s partner, parent, son, daughter or friend.

“The Federal, state and territory governments will make significant decisions about new national health and safety laws today.

“If any evidence was needed that requirements for employers to provide a safe workplace need to be toughened, this is it.

“We urge the federal and state governments to make workers’ safety their highest priority.”

A breakdown of the statistics reveals that worker fatalities rose by 14% to 151 in 2008-9, while deaths of bystanders increased by 37% to 26.

Agriculture, forestry and fishing and mining were the industries where there were the biggest increases.

Mr Lawrence said that the push by big businesses to weaken health and safety laws would put workers at risk. Mr Lawrence said the objective of the new laws should be to raise safety standards, not to reduce business red tape at the expense of workers’ lives.

But the draft laws would compromise or reduce protections for many workers, including millions in NSW and Queensland who will be particularly affected by the loss of workers’ rights to take court action and a reduced onus on employers.

In a final submission on the laws, the ACTU raised concerns that they would place a range of barriers, some undemocratic, in the way of health and safety representatives from effectively performing their role.

Unions believe workplace accident victims in all states and territories should be able to initiate legal action, and the onus should be on an employer to prove they had provided a safe workplace, rather than the reverse.

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