Unions call for new national public awareness campaign on dangers of asbestos

A major new public awareness campaign on the dangers of asbestos is needed, say unions.

ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence said this week’s national Asbestos Awareness Week is a timely reminder that up to 20,000 Australians will be affected by asbestos-related diseases over the next two decades, but more needs to be done to highlight the dangers of the deadly substance.

The continuing threat to public health posed by asbestos means there also must be a redoubled effort to safely manage and remove it from workplaces, homes and community buildings, says the ACTU.

The ACTU welcomes the recent announcement by the Federal Government of a national Asbestos Management Review to examine asbestos handling, removal, education, reporting and public health issues.

Last week’s report by the NSW Ombudsman not only gave a snapshot of the extent of the problem, but backed calls by unions for a co-ordinated plan and agency to deal with the eradication of asbestos as a national level.

Mr Lawrence said a survey conducted by Victorian asbestos disease support and advocacy groups that found almost three-quarters of respondents feared they had been exposed to asbestos at some stage highlighted the need for co-ordinated action.

“Australia has an unenviable record of one of the world’s highest rate of asbestos related diseases and a legacy of asbestos containing materials in many workplaces and buildings, including houses,” Mr Lawrence said.

“Unions have a strong record of campaigning for the banning and removal of asbestos, better treatment and compensation of victims, and effective punishment for corporate neglect on this issue.

“The use of all forms of asbestos in Australia has been banned since 2003, including its import and export. But, because of the legacy of its use, we have not solved the problem of asbestos exposures – for either people at work or in the general community.

“To eliminate deadly asbestos related disease in Australia we must decrease and eventually eliminate all exposures to asbestos.”

Mr Lawrence said the new Asbestos Management Review, headed by former ACTU Assistant Secretary Geoff Fary, was an important and welcome development, and consistent with calls by unions and advocacy groups for a national approach.

Media contact:
Mark Phillips ph (03) 8676 7266 or 0422 009 011; mphillips@actu.org.au

For interviews with Geoff Fary about the Asbestos Management Review, phone 0419 972 653.