

Sunday, 1 January 2012

Speak Up for health and safety: new campaign begins to inform workers of their rights

A new national awareness campaign begins today to inform workers of their rights and employers of their obligations under harmonised health and safety laws.

Australian unions have launched the Speak Up campaign so that workers have a say in making sure their workplaces are safe and healthy.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Michael Borowick said it was important that workers understood they would have enhanced rights to elect their own health and safety representatives under the harmonised occupational health and safety (OHS) system that begins in most states and territories today.

“Workers need to know that when they are confronted by a health or safety issue in their workplace, they don’t have to deal with it alone,” Mr Borowick said.

“They have an iron-clad right, under law, to elect their own health and safety representatives. These reps act as watchdogs within the workplace, making employers comply with the law well before regulators have to become involved.

“They have rights to stop work and demand improvements when there are health or safety concerns.

“Employers who interfere with the work of health and safety reps, or refuse to allow them to properly represent their workmates, are breaking the law.

“Importantly, unions can offer a wealth of expertise, know-how and training to back up those reps, and make sure they can perform the roles they have been elected to, and to provide workers with assistance to make their own workplaces safer.

“Health and safety is a fundamental industrial issue and a major priority for unions, who have a long and proud history of delivering healthier and safer workplaces for Australians, frequently in the face of employer and business resistance. Over the last 160 years unions have campaigned tirelessly to reduce injury and illness within the workplace, and many of the current rights and conditions have been fought for and won by unions.

“It is no coincidence that workplaces with a union presence are far more likely to be safer than those without unions. Collectively, with the support of a union, workers are far more able to speak up about health and safety than they can individually.”

Alongside the distribution of Speak Up campaign materials in workplaces around Australia, a new website, www.safeatwork.org.au, has also been launched.

The website will be a hub of information for workers and OHS reps about common health and safety issues, rights and obligations, tips for safer workplaces, legislation, and news. Workers will also be able to post questions about health and safety and get advice from union experts.

Media contact: Mark Phillips ph 0422 009 011; email mphillips@actu.org.au