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New research confirms insecure work is a health and safety risk to workers: unions

New research showing casual workers are 50% more likely to be injured at work is solid proof that insecure work leads to unsafe working environments, say unions.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said the new report by Safe Work Australia confirmed evidence given to the Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work chaired by former Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, which found casual, labour hire and contract workers were less likely to speak up about occupational health and safety risks.

The report, *Australian Work-related Injury Experience by Sex and Age, 2009-2010*, found that casual workers (those without leave entitlements) reported 54 injuries per million hours worked compared with a rate of 35 for those with leave entitlements.

It also discovered that high rates of injury occurred in the accommodation and food services industries, which have high levels of casual work.

Ms Kearney said one of the characteristics of a secure job was a healthy and safe workplace.

“The fear, vulnerability and powerlessness experienced by workers engaged in insecure work mean they are less likely to raise health and safety concerns, they accept poor conditions and exploitation, and therefore face greater risks of injuries and illness,” she said.

“The Howe Inquiry spoke to labour hire workers, for example, who told them they felt unable to report bullying, injuries, or any OHS risk, for fear that exercising their rights would lead to the loss of shifts or the loss of a job altogether. Simply, these workers often don’t receive the training, or even up-to-date information about health and safety policies and procedures.

“Similarly, workers compensation outcomes for those engaged in insecure work compare unfavourably to those of their colleagues who enjoy secure employment. Casuals and labour hire workers may find opportunities to return to work after an injury are limited or non-existent.

“It makes no economic sense to continue to let these workers fall through the gap and risk forcing them out of the workforce completely.

“We are also not surprised at the findings that women are more likely to be injured at work than men, with women much more likely to be in casual employment. Women account for 55% of the casual workforce and 25.5% of all female employees are casual compared to 19.7% of males.”

Ms Kearney said among the recommendations of the Howe Report, *Lives On Hold*, was for governments to conduct research into the health effects of insecure work and identify the associated social costs.

“Both the OECD and World Health Organisation have found that insecure work has negative impacts on workers’ safety in the short term, and the associated uncertainty and anxiety damages the health of workers in the longer term,” she said. “The continued growth of insecure work will over time contribute to a widening of health inequalities, which is unacceptable.”

Media contact:

Rebecca Tucker ph (03) 9664 7359 or 0408 031 269; mphillips@actu.org.au