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New Victorian anti-bullying laws welcome but employers cannot shirk responsibility

New penalties for workplace bullying to be introduced by the Victorian Government are welcome but employers must be accountable for providing safe workplaces in which bullying does not occur in the first place, say unions.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said employers, governments and workers had a shared responsibility to make workplaces safe, secure and free of harassment and an important signal would be sent by this week's introduction to the Victorian Parliament of tougher stalking laws, which would mean bullies could face up to 10 years' jail.

"These laws will hopefully help deter people from undesired behavior but it shouldn't suggest to employers that it's no longer their job to provide a safe workplace for all employees," Ms Kearney said.

"Every workplace should have policies and procedures to deal with bullying and harassment, as it's essential for employers to provide a safe and harassment-free environment for all their workers."

Ms Kearney said she hoped the increased penalties would deter people from bullying, but she wanted the Government to also send a strong message to employers that holding individual bullies to account would not absolve workplaces of their obligations.

"Bullying is a scourge in the workplace which unions are determined to wipe it out," she said.

"We must all work together to stop it occurring, but employers cannot shirk their responsibility and turn a blind eye.

"Serious bullying should be treated as a crime, but it is also an occupational health and safety issue - everyone is entitled to a safe and secure workplace free of harassment and discrimination.

"Ultimate responsibility for providing a safe workplace is with the employer and in no way should new laws absolve them of that responsibility, or of their liability.

"Criminal sanctions alone will not necessarily change a poisonous workplace culture."

Ms Kearney said she hoped other states would watch the impact of Victoria's new law, named 'Brodie's Law', and consider strengthening their own legislation.

Victoria's amendments will add workplace and cyber bullying to Victoria's Crimes Act.

Workers wanting advice about workplace bullying can contact the Unions Australia hotline on 1300 4 86466 or www.unionsaustralia.com.au

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