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Workers' Memorial Day 2010 – unions and OHS representatives make workplaces safer

Unions, community groups and grieving widows of those killed at or because of work will gather at rallies and memorial events around Australia today.

International Workers Memorial Day is the day unions globally mourn the dead and fight for the living. Unions are highlighting the positive effect they have on workplace health and safety – and the need to ensure current rights and protections are not eroded.

The ACTU is calling on the federal government to make further improvements to national workplace health and safety laws and immediately disband the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

“Bad laws cost lives,” said ACTU President Sharan Burrow.

“The proposed new national workplace safety laws reduce requirements for an effective standard of risk management. We’re also concerned that workers who put their hand up to be an OHS representative won’t have the same protections that exist currently in some states.

“Unnecessary red tape is also being put in the way of OHS Reps get proper training and being able to issue notices to protect their fellow workers. We say no to second rate safety.”

“The federal government also needs to urgently disband the ABCC, which has caused a decline in safety in the construction industry by preventing health and safety issues in the construction industry from being addressed in a timely fashion.”

There has been an increase in deaths from 3.14 per 100,000 workers in 2004, before the ABCC commenced, up to 4.27 in 2008 in the construction industry.

Ms Burrow said union research the six deaths have occurred at BHP sites in WA alone in the last two years showed the need for a greater union presence in the workplace.

“Workers need to be able to raise safety issues without fear of recrimination or punishment,” Ms Burrow said. “The presence of a union in the workplace provides workers with the support they need to speak out when there is a health and safety risk.”

Globally, over 2 million workers die from work related causes each year.

In Australia, there are estimates that up to 7000 workers die each year from work-related injuries and illnesses. Every three minutes someone in Australia is injured seriously enough to lodge a worker’s compensation claim. The economic cost of work-related injuries and illnesses is more than \$50 billion a year.

International Workers Memorial Day was started by Canadian unions in 1984. Over 14 million people took part in over 10,000 activities in over 100 countries in 2009.

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