

Thursday April 1 2021

Morrison Government to cast deciding vote on workplace health and safety changes

The Morrison Government is likely to have the deciding vote at a meeting of state and federal WHS ministers which will consider making changes to national WHS Laws designed to prevent sexual harassment, install national penalties for industrial manslaughter and improve rights for workplace health and safety representatives.

All Ministers responsible for Health and Safety, including the Federal Attorney General, are due to decide at an upcoming meeting whether or not to adopt the changes.

Six out of nine of those governments need to support a change for it to be adopted. The ACTU understands that the Morrison Government may have the casting vote.

The meeting was due to take place on 15 April but has been postponed until after the Tasmanian state election on 1 May. The ACTU is calling for the meeting to take place as soon as possible after that date, given the urgency of these issues, and that these recommendations are over two years old.

The outgoing Attorney General Christian Porter made it clear in parliament that he was open to supporting national Industrial Manslaughter laws. The ACTU has written to Michaelia Cash to affirm that she is intending to vote to make workplaces safer, especially for women.

A key element of the proposed laws would require employers to eliminate or reduce risks to mental health, including those caused by sexual harassment. This is a key recommendation of both the Respect@Work report by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and the Boland Review of national workplace health and safety legislation and would function in the same way as current laws regulating physical risks in the workplace.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

“The Morrison Government will never get a more straight-forward opportunity to make workplaces safer than this vote. The proposed changes will help address sexual harassment, improve mental health in the workplace and hold employers accountable for negligence causing deaths at work.

“As the incoming Attorney General, Minister Cash can take action to make all workers safer, including women experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace.

“A majority of women will experience sexual harassment in their lifetime. Almost 200 people per year are dying at work. These changes represent concrete action to address these systemic issues.

“We call on Minister Cash to vote in support of safer workplaces and show that the Morrison Government understands that action is needed to address systemic workplace health and safety issues.”

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