

Friday 10 June 2022

Health and safety recognised as a fundamental right at work by the International Labour Organisation

After years of campaigning by workers globally, the right to a healthy and safe workplace has been adopted as a new fundamental right at this year's International Labour Conference in Geneva.

The right to a safe and healthy work environment became enshrined into the International Labour Organisation's framework of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

This principle now sits alongside the right of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced labour, the abolition of child labour, and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

ACTU President Michele O'Neil's speech at the annual conference in Geneva highlighted that, although this was an incredible achievement, more work needed to be done to improve occupational safety and health.

This included the need for a shift in focus from just physical injury to a broader understanding which encompasses the importance of psychological safety at work, and bringing an end to gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

It is estimated that in the Asia Pacific region there are more than 1.1 million deaths each year from work related trauma or disease; this number is likely to be much higher in reality, due to underreporting.

In Australia 200 workers die at work each year. A further 5,000 workers will die from occupational diseases including asbestos related disease and silicosis.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

"The adoption of a healthy and safe workplace as a fundamental right at work means we are finally taking seriously the responsibility to prevent tragedies like Rana Plaza – where over 1100 garment workers in Bangladesh, mostly women and girls, lost their lives.

"Australia knows only too well the devastating impact of unsafe work practices. Every year in Australia over 5000 workers are killed at work or die from diseases caused by their work.

"Australia has been one of the world's highest per capita consumers of asbestos for most of the last century and we continue to suffer from increasing rates of asbestos related disease. Responsible for more 200,000 deaths globally and recognised as causing over half of all occupational cancers, we must ensure that workers are not exposed to this life-threatening substance.

"Health and safety at work goes beyond physical injuries and incl risks to workers' psychological health. Work-related mental health conditions are the fastest growing injury type in Australia. Our work must include eliminating psychological risk factors including, high workloads, poor work support as well gendered violence and harassment if we want to continue making work safe and healthy.

“We welcome the new Federal Labor Governments commitment to implement in full all 55 recommendations of the Respect@Work. Obligations on employers to prevent sexual harassment are long overdue.

“More work is required: we are still seeing millions of workers die from work-related trauma or disease in the Asia-Pacific region every year. Our work isn’t done until every worker comes home safe.”

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