

Workers send powerful safety message at nation-wide rallies

A strong turnout at rallies and events around the country today sends a message to Federal, State and Territory Governments that workers will not back down in their push for stronger national health and safety laws, say unions.

An estimated 15,000 workers in Melbourne took to the streets, and thousands more have attended large events in Canberra, Sydney, Adelaide, Hobart, Perth and Brisbane.

Workers concerned about the weakening of workplace safety standards under proposed new national laws were joined by the families of loved ones who have died from work-related illness and accidents.

In Melbourne the largest number of protesters since the end of WorkChoices marched from Victorian Trades Hall to the steps of State Parliament. In a moving tribute to mark lives lost at work, a bagpiper played as people laid boots and shoes on the steps of Parliament. The thousands of protesters also remembered lives lost with a minute's silence.

ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence said the Australian community were at one with unions over the need for stronger health and safety laws.

"The message is very clear today – workers and the broader community are saying they want stronger health and safety laws and we are calling on governments to deliver that – not watered down standards," said Mr Lawrence.

"We cannot afford to have another empty pair of shoes, symbolising another life lost, on these steps of Parliament."

"Unions stand up for workers and their families, and an overwhelming number of people want us to have a central role in health and safety – as we have done for over 150 years. "

A new national poll surveying 1013 people released today by the ACTU shows:

- 78% of people believe employers should do more to protect health and safety, even if it means more costs or red tape
- 80% of people wanted **more** to be done to reduce workplace illness and injury
- 81% want to be able to call in a union to help with OHS issues at their workplace
- 87% want to see either the same or better OHS protections for workers
- 73% said OHS representatives in workplaces should be elected or chosen by their colleagues, not by management.

Today's events are in response to government proposals to bring in one set of new standardised national workplace health and safety laws, called 'OHS Harmonisation'.

Mr Lawrence said that Australian workers must have the best possible health and safety laws.

"With an estimated 7,000 Australians dying each year as a result of workplace injuries or diseases it is essential the governments' proposed changes to workplace health and safety do not undermine standards or put more Australian workers and their families at risk."

ACTU Contacts: Amanda Tattam (ACTU) 0418 479 455 or Elisha Johnston 0410 283 965.