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## Thousands die or are injured at work - we need vigilance on safety in the workplace

Over half-a-million workers injured and thousands killed each year in Australia shows we need to strengthen not weaken workplace safety regulation, say unions.

Data shows 600,000 workers are injured – 127,000 of those seriously – costing Australia more than \$60 billion annually.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said: “This raises serious questions about workplace safety at a time when the government is seeking to further diminish the ability of workers to speak up for themselves in their workplaces.

“Thousands of workers are injured or killed from preventable factors and that tells us we need to be much more vigilant, not less which is the direction we are heading. There are not enough inspectors and they are unable to visit anywhere near the number of workplaces required. Fines and prosecutions are extremely low compared with the number of injuries and deaths.”

New figures from Safe Work Australia reveal that in 2011-12 only 417 employers were prosecuted for breaching OHS laws resulting in just \$22 million in fines.

“People are going home injured and some aren’t going home at all,” Ms Kearney said.

“Some employers still don’t understand how to make their workplaces safe and they need guidance, others don’t care and should face serious fines and prosecutions. Employers have only been fined \$22 million yet the cost of injury claims in Australia is in the billions.

“We have workers climbing unsafe scaffolding, being exposed to asbestos, falling victim to bullying and being put into unduly stressful situations on a daily basis.”

Ms Kearney said the growth of casual and insecure work was another area of concern.

“People in insecure work are too frightened to speak up about safety in case they lose their job,” she said. “Time and time again studies demonstrate that the safest workplaces by far are union organised and where people are relatively secure in their position.”

“The Coalition is talking about the resurrection of the ABCC but that’s the exact opposite of what we should do. Workers need to be able to speak up in the workplace. These were real people who went to work and didn’t come home because their workplaces were unsafe.

“The Queensland Government recently tabled limiting right of entry laws which, again, quieten workers ability to speak up,” she said.

Ms Kearney said unions were meeting today in South Australia for the ACTU Occupational Health Safety and Workers Compensation Conference to discuss the next 1000 days and how to tackle significant workplace safety issues and barriers.

“We must urgently act to save lives and stop injuries,” she said. “Employers, governments and unions must work together to ensure safety is at the highest level in our workplaces because we can do a lot better than we currently are.”

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