

Union Action Plan

Healthy, Safe &
Respectful Work



ACTU
CONGRESS 21



ACTU Congress briefing: Healthy, safe and respectful work

Why it matters:

One of our fundamental human rights is the right to good health and safety and this includes work that contributes to our good health.

Despite progress in lowering traumatic fatalities and injuries a worker is killed every two days in Australia. Thousands more die each year from diseases caused by their work. The re-emergence of deadly occupational diseases such as silicosis and pneumoconiosis (black lung) along with a workplace mental health epidemic highlights that progress on health and safety is not guaranteed and requires the concerted efforts of governments, employers and unions.

Insecure work, in its many forms, further threatens our goals for healthy and safe work. It is linked with poor safety outcomes and has negative impacts on the physical and psychological health of workers. Conversely, the provision of secure, ongoing work is a key factor in improving health and safety outcomes for workers and is an essential feature of decent work.

Insecure work is both more prevalent amongst, and has greater impact on, vulnerable sections of the workforce, including young, women and immigrant workers. The rise of 'gig' work has seen the transfer of risk from employers to workers; the risk includes threats to workers' health and safety and the capacity to enjoy a safe and healthy work environment. Insecure work also undermines the health and safety of those in permanent employment.

All workers have an equal right to healthy safe and respectful work, without discrimination and free from violence and aggression, however, workers across all sectors face significant threats to their physical and psychological health from gendered violence, racial discrimination and occupational violence.

The climate crisis facing Australia further threatens healthy and safe work. Increasing temperatures and the ongoing threat of natural disasters such as bushfires, will see workers exposed to extreme temperatures and poor air quality.

Key facts:

- In addition to hundreds of workers being killed at work it is estimated that a further 5,000 people will die from diseases caused by their work with up to 1 in 10 cancers in men being linked to work exposures. In recent years there has been a large increase in work related lung disease, associated with old and new industries.

➤ Poor mental health means that 1 in 5 workers will take time off work to deal with mental health issues. This doubles to 2 in 5 for workers in mentally unhealthy work. Psychological injury and illness are now the fastest, and one of the only, growing injury types in our workers' compensation system.

➤ In 2019 27,000 workers responded to the ACTU Work Shouldn't Hurt Survey – of the respondents:

- a) 79% had suffered a mental or physical injury caused by work;
- b) 61% had experienced poor mental health because their employer did not manage hazards at work;
- c) 55% were aware of an existing hazard at work that would cause serious injury or illness;
- d) 16% knew someone killed at work or who has died from a work-related disease.

➤ On just about every indicator Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers reported higher levels of exposure to risks and lower levels of employer action to protect their physical and psychological health.

Australian Unions believe:

➤ Healthy and safe work is a fundamental human right and is essential for decent work. Every worker has an equal right to healthy and safe work irrespective of their employment arrangements or personal attributes. Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

➤ Workers must be protected from all hazards and risks at work, including psychosocial as well as physical hazards and risks.

➤ Workers who are injured at work must be afforded the highest level of support to seek treatment and return to meaningful work.

➤ Having a voice at work, and on how work is conducted, is essential to health and safety. Workers who are empowered to act collectively through their unions are safer and healthier at work. Worker elected, union trained and supported HSRs are a critical determinant of healthy safe and respectful work.

➤ Injured and ill workers must receive both financial support to ensure no loss of real income throughout their life as well as the highest possible medical, rehabilitation and vocational support. These costs should not be borne by the worker or by the Australian taxpayer and should be funded by levying the businesses and industries which cause harm.

➤ Essential to the dual objective of growing the movement and improving health and safety at work, workers must be actively organised through their unions on matters related to health and safety. Representation of workers through their union delegates and elected Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) are key components to healthy, safe and respectful work.



Action Plan 2021-25

Australian Unions will work together:

- to improve our organising capacities to win healthy, safe and respectful work by increasing the numbers, and improving the density of, union-trained and democratically elected Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) and workplace activists,
- to take collective action in workplaces and across industry to address the workplace causes of poor mental health,
- to campaign and advocate:
 - for a stronger regulatory framework to prevent harm from psychosocial risks at work,
 - to reduce the prevalence of insecure work and the risks it poses to health and safety,
 - for workers compensation and rehabilitation systems that support workers to regain their health and obtain or maintain secure, safe and healthy employment post injury/illness,
 - for a stronger regulatory framework to prevent workers' exposure to hazardous dusts and for increased support to identify and care for those who have contracted occupational diseases,
 - across regions and sectors to implement a world-wide ban on the use of asbestos,
 - an improved regulatory framework to help protect workers from the impacts of climate change such as working in high temperatures and poor air quality.