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## Australia on track for more asbestos deaths, unions warn

Australian Unions will today call for an urgent overhaul of national asbestos health and safety laws to force employers to remove asbestos-containing materials from Australian workplaces, including schools.

Unions warn that without an urgent overhaul of the laws covering asbestos removal, as many as 27,000 Australians will die from exposure to old and degrading asbestos over the course of this century.

Despite a national ban on asbestos 21 years ago, more than 6 million tonnes of asbestos material remain in Australia's built environment.

At the current slow pace of removal we will still have asbestos in our homes and workplaces at the end of this century - 100 years after it was banned. The latest Asbestos National Strategic Plan (ANSP) says this will mean a further 27,000 Australians will encounter the toxic material and are expected to die from that deadly exposure in communities Australia-wide in the coming decades.

ACTU Assistant Secretary, Liam O'Brien, will today announce that unions will push for reforms to health and safety regulations that will give stronger rights to workers to compel employers to remove all asbestos-containing materials in buildings, as part of Safe Work Australia's review of asbestos health and safety laws.

Under current laws, there is no requirement for employers to remove bonded or 'non-friable' asbestos - asbestos mixed with cement or resin - despite posing serious health risks when its airborne fibres are damaged or degrade over time.

Unions are discussing the crisis at a two-day Work Health and Safety conference in Adelaide, where the need to curtail the deadly asbestos legacy remains unfinished business.

A delegation of union activists from Indonesia is also in Adelaide to highlight the widespread use of asbestos in that country, and to garner support for an employer-led defamation case brought against them for warning of the dangers of asbestos.

### **Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary, Liam O'Brien:**

"Despite a national ban more than two decades ago, more than 6 million tons of asbestos remain in our homes, schools and workplaces.

"Under current laws, employers are not required to remove asbestos from workplaces unless it is broken, at which point workers and the community may have already been exposed. The breakdown of these materials over time exposes people to fatal diseases.

"Employers nationwide should be required to develop a prioritised removal plan for all asbestos, and workers must have the right to act when their health is at risk."

**ENDS**

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