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Unions back major safety overhaul to keep up with new workplace risks

Australian workers would gain stronger safety rights and new protections from AI, workplace surveillance, extreme heat and psychological harm, under a major safety review released today.

Unions welcome the Best Practice Review of Australia's model Work Health and Safety laws, saying workplace protections must keep pace with the changing nature of work.

The Review recommends stronger worker representation and consultation rights, as well as improved compliance and enforcement of workplace safety laws. When serious safety laws are breached, workers should not be left without recourse simply because a regulator is unable or unwilling to prosecute. Unions should have the right to step in and hold employers accountable when workplace safety laws are broken.

The Review calls for a national strategy on AI and emerging technologies to address risks from workplace surveillance, work allocation, work intensity and reduced worker control. It also recommends a national workplace safety strategy on climate change, with protections addressing extreme heat, poor air quality and changing disease risks.

The Review also calls for stronger protections against harmful workplace behaviours and psychosocial hazards, recognising the risks to workers' psychological health.

The recommendations follow the release of the latest Safe Work Australia data, which shows 222 workers lost their lives to traumatic workplace injuries in 2025, the highest annual toll since 2012.

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

"Work is changing, and unions want Australia's health and safety laws to keep up. Whether it's unsafe workloads, violence and harassment, extreme heat, surveillance or AI, workers deserve clear protections and practical support.

"Workers are often the first to know when something is unsafe. This Review recognises that Australians are safer when they have a genuine say in the workplace decisions that affect them. That means having strong Health and Safety Representatives and unions with the power to act.

"New technology should make work safer, not increase workloads, reduce workers' control or expose them to new risks.

"Every worker should be able to come home from work safe and well. Unions hear too often that workers don't know who to speak to, or don't feel safe to raise a concern when something is wrong.

"Governments should move quickly to implement recommendations so working people have the rights they need to prevent harm and hold employers accountable."

ENDS

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