media release

ACTU
australian council of trade unions

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Unions welcome support for new workplace rules on climate hazards

Australian Unions welcome Federal and State Workplace Safety Ministers' approval of plans to develop new measures to protect workers from extreme heat, poor air quality and vector-borne illnesses.

Endorsement of Safe Work Australia's three formal recommendations clears the way for development of national regulations and a National Strategic Plan on Climate Safe Work.

The decision is a major step towards protecting workers as climate change increases exposure to dangerous heatwaves, air pollution and other hazards.

Unions say the priority is now ensuring the final protections are strong, practical, enforceable, and developed with the input of workers experiencing these impacts.

Each year, about 3000 workers become ill or are seriously injured because of extreme heat in Australia. Recent research from the University of New South Wales indicated the actual number is likely more than twenty times higher than that.

Quote attributable to Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation Federal Assistant Secretary, Catelyn Richards:

"Every day, nurses and midwives show extraordinary resilience, even more so when their work is made more challenging or risks are increased due to the impacts of climate change hazards.

"Our members are working on one of the hottest continents on earth, and as we head into what is being predicted to be one of our hottest summers on record, protecting workers, including nurses, midwives and carers, must be a priority.

"We welcome the government's decision, in response to our sustained advocacy, to develop new Work Health and Safety regulations to protect workers from extreme heat and other climate impacts. We look forward to working with Safe Work Australia to turn this commitment into stronger safeguards for all workers, including the nurses, midwives and carers our communities depend on."

Quote attributable to Australian Education Union Federal President, Correna Haythorpe:

"Teachers and students are on the frontline of climate change, with extreme weather events increasingly forcing schools to close, causing disruption to students' learning.

"Exacerbating this is that many schools across Australia are struggling with inadequate infrastructure including classrooms without air-conditioning, appropriately shaded playgrounds, and buildings unable to withstand extreme weather conditions.

"Teachers and students deserve safe, climate-resilient schools, supported by urgent investment in infrastructure that can withstand the realities of Australia's extreme weather."

Quote attributable to Australian Services Union Assistant National Secretary, Scott Cowen:

"Climate change is already changing how ASU members work, from council gardeners and park rangers working in record temperatures to librarians sheltering thousands from summer heat."

"Council workers are first responders in extreme weather, and community workers care for people in homes without air conditioning. They deserve to be safe too.

"Research the ASU did with RMIT found 20 per cent of outdoor workers have seen more physical injuries due to extreme climate conditions.

"We've heard from members who had to use their sick leave because it was too hot to work safely, especially those with health conditions.

"Airlines have resisted climate safety clauses in agreements for workers spending time in full sun on the tarmac. It's time our Work Health and Safety laws reflected the climate crisis we're living in.

"The government's decision to develop new WHS regulations on climate hazards is a huge win for union members. With a Super El Nino summer coming, we need to bed down the strongest protections as soon as we can."

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

"Today's announcement that Safe Work Australia will be developing new WHS regulations to protect workers from climate change is a historic step forward for workers, and couldn't come soon enough.

"Australia is staring down the barrel of a summer that may shatter temperature records. Safe Work Australia has found that 30% of workers are exposed to heat at work, which they characterise as a high-risk hazard, alongside things like asbestos and silica.

"Any single heatwave means workers risk exhaustion, heat stroke - even death. Long-term exposure to high heat markedly increases your risk of developing heart and kidney diseases.

"We need WHS regulations that not only protect workers from the danger of extreme heat, but from other risks linked to climate change, like poor air quality and the mosquito-borne illnesses that are spreading further south due to climate change. Governments agreed these protections are necessary. Now the work starts to make sure they are strong, delivered soon, and developed with the input of the workers already feeling the heat."

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