



INTERNATIONAL WORKERS MEMORIAL DAY
Wednesday 28 April 2010

Unions and OHS Reps make work safer

The theme for 2010

MOURNING THE DEAD AND FIGHTING FOR THE LIVING

The key focus for Australian unions is the loss of rights and protections for workers and their representatives under the Model OHS Act due to take effect 1 January 2013.

- All workers have the right to:
 - Be represented in their workplace on OHS matters.
 - Have an OHS Rep who is protected and supported by OHS law and
 - The right of any worker to have unrestricted access to a union official of their choice.

Compensation

The federal government has also started to process of developing a model Workers Compensation Act. Safe Work Australia held a 2 day Forum 30 & 31 March 2010.

However, unions are sceptical about this, given reductions of worker OHS rights and protections that currently stand to happen.

A key speaker at the forum, Dr Mary Wyatt, said that

- * 'Return to Work', following an injury, is important, but not going well and
- * 'harmonisation', as currently discussed, won't improve the situation.

The importance of OHS Reps

In the UK, the government knows OHS Reps make a huge difference – the “union safety effect.” The government estimates safety reps save society between £181 million and £578 million each year Savings came from a reduction in annual lost time occupational injuries and work-related illnesses of between 286,000 and 616,000 days. It is estimated that the UK's OHS Reps prevent between 8,000 and 13,000 workplace incidents and between 3,000 and 8,000 work-related illnesses each year. (Source: *Workplace reps: A review of their facilities and facility time*, January 2007).

Another British study in 2000 found that 'The proportion of employees who are trade union members has a positive and significant association on both injury and illness rates.'

In Australia, research over the last 20 years has found that, where OHS Reps are trained and provided the broadest powers, they are most effective.

Source: Biggins, D. and Holland, T. (1995), 'The Training and Effectiveness of Health and Safety Representatives' in Eddington, I. ed. *Towards Health and Safety at Work: Technical Papers of the Asia Pacific Conference on Occupational Health and Safety*, Brisbane, 75-9. Biggins, D., Phillips, M. and O'Sullivan, P. (1991), 'Benefits of worker participation in health and safety', *Labour and Industry*, 4(1): 138-159; Biggins, D and Phillips, M (1991) A survey of health and safety representatives in Queensland Part 1: Activities, issues, information sources, *Journal of Occupational health and Safety – Australia and New Zealand*, 7 (3): 195-202

What happens when workers don't have the right to be represented

Laws that are specific only to the construction industry restrict the right of workers to access representatives of their choice – union officials. The number of deaths in the construction industry has increased nearly every year from 3.14 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2004 to 4.27 deaths in 2008.

International Workers Memorial Day (WMD) is an international day that unions, workers and their families and communities around the world join together to remember and mourn for those who have been killed or injured by work, and to fight for the living. The day is also known as 'International Commemoration Day'.

History of WMD

- Workers Memorial Day was started by Canadian Unions in 1984. By 1996, it was an international day.
- Australian unions first marked the day in 1997.
- In 2004 Victorian Unions adopted the canary as the symbol of this day (first adopted by Canadian Unions).
- Activities held by unions and community groups have grown over the years, with all capital cities and many regional centres holding an event on or near the day. Many workplaces also mark the day with a minute's silence at 11:00am.
- Globally in 2009, 14 million people took part in over 10,000 activities in over 100 countries.

Why we have WMD

- **Globally**, we remember the 2 million workers who die, the 1.2 million who are injured, the 160 million who fall ill each year from unsafe, unhealthy or unsustainable work and workplaces and the 337 million non fatal occupational incidents that occur each year.

Source: ILO data for 2008

- **In Australia** as many as 21 Australians die each day from work-related incidents or illnesses, 1890 workers are injured or made ill each day and one in seven workers are exposed to at least one cancer causing substance in their workplace.
- The ILO estimates that Australia, with different reporting systems (compensation, inspectorates, coronary reports, hospital records) at best cover 60 – 70% of all fatalities.
- Every 2 -3 minutes someone in Australia is injured seriously enough to lodge a workers compensation claim.
- The (former) Australian safety and Compensation Commission stated in a March 2009 report that "Studies estimate that as many as 7000 fatalities may occur each year as a result of work related diseases." This is four times the national road toll.
- The total economic cost of work-related injuries and illnesses for the 2005-06 financial year was \$57.6 billion, or 5.9% of Australia's Gross Domestic Product.
- In 2004 the national OHS Commission found that
In terms of the burden to economic agents, only 3 per cent of the total cost is borne by employers, 44 per cent by workers and 53 per cent by the community. The cost of pain, suffering and early death could conservatively add a further \$48.5 billion to the total cost figure (net of human capital costs already included in total costs), leading to a total cost estimate of \$82.8 billion.

What can your workplace do?

- Put this flyer on your notice board
- Send your OHS rep to the event in your State.
- Talk to your workmates and observe a **minute's silence** at your workplace at **11.00am on Wednesday 28 April**.
- Go to your union or Trades & Labour Council website for more information and materials,.
- To see what is happening globally, and to download lots of materials from around the world, go to www.hazards.org/wmd