National education and union news

Safety rules failing to tackle climate change risk to workers

Unions are calling for new work health and safety (WHS) laws to better protect workers from climate change, including extreme heat, natural disasters and air pollution.

A delegation of union leaders and workers, including nurses, firefighters and teachers, travelled to Canberra last month to launch a new report – Work Health and Safety in the Era of Climate Crisis – laying out the extreme safety risks to workers and reforms needed in the face of rising temperatures.

Australia's current WHS regime does not enforce mandatory thresholds for safe temperature or indoor and outdoor air quality, heat stress protocols, co-developed emergency plans or any other binding climate adaptation measures.

The first National Climate Risk Assessment, released in September, confirms that Australia is likely to experience more frequent and extreme climate hazards.

Unions are concerned that most workplaces are already becoming more dangerous, leaving workers exposed to ever increasing climate hazards.

According to the National Climate Risk Assessment, Australia is on track to experience a 350 per cent increase in extreme heat days if three degrees of warming occurs, leaving outdoor workers in agriculture, construction and transport at higher risk of everything from heat exhaustion to cardiac arrest.

Indoor workplaces that already generate heat, including bakeries, foundries and commercial laundries will also face greater risks.

Under current forecasts, heat deaths are predicted to spike 444 per cent in Sydney, 423 per cent in Darwin and 312 per cent in Perth if three degrees of warming takes place.

Climate change-driven bushfires and heatwaves increase concentrations of ground level ozone, nitrogen dioxide and

particulate pollution, which can cause cancer, stroke and respiratory illness in indoor and outdoor workers.

Worsening natural disasters add to the strain on healthcare and emergency service workers, who are required to work longer hours in more hazardous conditions, risking exposure to contaminants from fires and floods.

Warming temperatures are also increasing the spread of disease-carrying insects, exposing farmers, foresters, gardeners and construction workers to illnesses like Japanese encephalitis, which has spread from far north Queensland to Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

The WHS report was released as part of a broader campaign by Renew Australia for All, an alliance of 80 unions, clean industry, climate and community groups calling for more Commonwealth investment in climate resilience measures across healthcare, local government, housing, agriculture and our emergency responses.

ACTU President Michele O'Neil said Australian workers and communities have to be kept safe from the impacts of climate change.

"The current 2035 emissions target has us on a path toward warming above two degrees, an unacceptable outcome that we all need to work harder to prevent," she said.

"Australia must also lift its ambition to decarbonise to exceed 70 per cent emissions reduction by 2035.

"At the same time, our work health and safety regime needs urgent improvement to protect workers from the climate impacts we're already witnessing, let alone what we'll see in the 2030s and 2040s.

"Safe Work Australia must urgently develop binding regulations to protect workers from extreme heat, natural disasters, insect-borne diseases and poor indoor and outdoor air quality – all hazards made significantly worse by climate change.

"Countries like South Africa, Brazil, Qatar and Japan have strong laws to protect workers from extreme heat and Australia needs a much stricter regime to meet those international benchmarks."

New data reveals a third of jobs driving Australia's serious injury claims

A third of jobs accounted for over half of all serious work injury claims over the past year, with healthcare and social assistance the most common industries, according to new data released by Safe Work Australia.

The Key Work Health and Safety Statistics 2025 report shows that Australia recorded 146,700 serious workers' compensation claims over the past 12 months. Of those claims, the four most common industries were healthcare and social assistance (19.9 per cent), construction (12 per cent), manufacturing (10.1 per cent) and public administration and safety (9.2 per cent).

Collectively, the four sectors made up over half of all serious claims – despite only representing just 36.3 per cent of filled jobs covered by a workers' compensation scheme.

According to Safe Work Australia's report, in 2024, 188 workers lost their lives to traumatic injuries – a rate of 1.3 deaths per 100,000 workers, down 24 per cent since 2014, but still far too high. Vehicle incidents remain the leading cause of death.

Concerningly, the data exposes a large gap between injury and compensation. Only three in 10 injured workers report receiving workers' compensation, meaning seven in 10 do not lodge or receive a claim – commonly because the injury is seen as minor or "not necessary", but uncertainty about eligibility and lack of awareness also play a significant role. However, 40 per cent of workers who did not make a workers' compensation claim needed time off work, highlighting that many unclaimed injuries have a real impact on workers' lives and livelihoods.

Over the past decade, serious claims for mental health conditions experienced the largest change of any major injury group, up by 161 per cent. Mental stress is now the fourth most common mechanism behind serious claims at 11.5 per cent of all serious claims, after body stressing (musculoskeletal disorders), falls, trips and slips and being hit by moving objects.

The median time lost from mental health serious claims is about five times the median time lost across all serious claims. Mental health claims represent the costliest form of workplace injury, leading to significantly more time off work and more than four times the median compensation paid across all serious claims.

Safe Work Australia is currently undertaking a review of Australia's model work health and safety laws. In response, unions are advocating for stronger legislative protections for workers exposed to psychosocial hazards, including violence and aggression, sexual harassment and discrimination. These calls reflect growing concern about the need for clear, enforceable standards to safeguard mental health and wellbeing at work.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien said these new figures showed exactly where prevention, enforcement and resourcing would save the most injuries and lives.

"Health and care workers, tradies, factory workers and the people who keep our communities safe are at the greatest risk," he said.

"A 24 per cent fall in the fatality rate since 2014 is welcome, but 188 families lost a loved one last year. One death at work is one too many and our job is far from done.

"Unions are alarmed that seven in 10 injured workers don't receive workers' compensation. That points to barriers and under-reporting that hide the real cost of workplace injuries on Australian workers.

"Mental stress is now the fourth biggest cause of serious injury. Employers must treat work stress and intensification with the same seriousness as any other health and safety consideration."

AEU Victorian branch welcomes statewide treaty

The Australian Education Union Victorian Branch has welcomed the historic passage of the Victorian Statewide Treaty Bill, including the move to embed truth-telling in the Victorian curriculum.

"The passage of this legislation is a defining moment for Victoria," President Justin Mullaly said.

"With this Treaty Bill, we all have the opportunity to work together to build our future, properly acknowledge the past and ensure Aboriginal communities are the centre of decision making that affects them.

"Importantly, embedding truth-telling into the school curriculum ensures the truth of our history and the realities of the impacts of colonisation on First Peoples are taught to Victorian children and young people.

"Every Victorian student should have the opportunity to develop an understanding of our shared history, including the histories of massacres and genocide and to learn about First Peoples' deep knowledge and understanding of, and enduring connection to, Country."

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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