

## International Workers Memorial Day 2009

**Tuesday 28 April 2009**

### **Death, injury and disease in the workplace**

Workplace injury and disease destroys quality of life, social and family activities, affects job prospects and career advancement.

Australia has an unacceptably high rate of workplace death, injury and illness.

This year marks 14<sup>th</sup> International Memorial Day. The first day was held in 1996 when at the United Nations in New York a Global Union delegation lit a commemoration candle and incense to highlight the plight of workers who die, are injured or become ill due to unsustainable forms of work and production.

This year's theme is "Good occupational health for all workers". Around the world, over 2 million workers die, more than 1.2 million are injured, and more than 160 million who fall ill each year due to unsafe, unhealthy, or unsustainable work and workplaces<sup>1</sup>.

### **Official statistics – an underestimate**

Australian Government figures show:

- In 2005-6 there were 457,603 work-related incidents –including diseases, injuries and fatalities<sup>2</sup>.
- In 2007-08 there were 150 notified work-related fatalities (131 worker-notified fatalities and 19 bystander notified fatalities). 137 of these fatalities were male. Over 27% of fatalities were workers aged over 55, but this group make up only 15% of the workforce.<sup>3</sup>

According to unions, researchers and government agencies, these official figures underestimates the true scale of the problem.

A 2003 Access Economics report for the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission, estimates there are 8168 work-related fatalities every year<sup>4</sup>, and the

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<sup>1</sup> 2005 World injury and fatality statistics: Each year, over two million women and men die as a result of 270 million occupational accidents and 160 million new cases of occupational disease, figures that are supplemented by ILO/WHO estimates that occupational diseases alone cause over 1.7 million deaths, and that at least 268 million non-fatal workplace accidents occur each year.

<sup>2</sup> ASCC, *The Costs of Work-related Injury and Illness for Australian Employers, Workers and the Community*, March 2009.

<sup>3</sup> ASCC, *Notified fatalities and statistical report*, July 2007-8. p 1.

<sup>4</sup> Access Economics, *Review Of Methodology And Estimates Of Workplace Fatalities For The National Occupational Health And Safety Commission*, September 2003, p.8.

ABS reports nearly 690,000 workplace injuries or illnesses occurring at work every year<sup>5</sup>.

The Australian Safety and Compensation Council also stated in its March 2009 report on the *Cost of Work related death, disease and injury* that, "Disease fatality estimates are considered to be a conservative estimate, with studies estimating that as many as 7000 fatalities may occur each year as a result of work-related disease"<sup>6</sup>

### Road toll and workplace death toll

The workplace death toll is 4.3 times higher than the Australian road toll.

Road deaths 2007 <sup>7</sup>	Workplace death (every year)
1616	7000

### Cancer at work

Current research suggests that at least 14% of cancer deaths in Australian men and 2% of cancer deaths in Australian women are caused by occupational exposures.

5000 invasive cancers and about 34 000 non-melanoma skin cancers are being caused by occupational exposures in Australia each year

1.5 million Australian workers may currently be exposed to occupational carcinogens<sup>8</sup>.

### The cost of workplace death and injury

The total economic cost of work-related injuries and illnesses for the 2005-6 financial year is estimated to be \$57.5 billion representing 5.9 per cent of GDP for the 2005-6 financial year.

This represents a significant increase in costs as a proportion of GDP from the 2000-1 estimate of 5 per cent of GDP.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6324.0 - *Work-Related Injuries, Australia*, 2005-06

<sup>6</sup> ASCC, *The Costs of Work-related Injury and Illness for Australian Employers, Workers and the Community*, March 2009, p 20

<sup>7</sup> Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Road Deaths Australia:2007 Statistical Summary*, August, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> ASCC, *Occupational Cancer in Australia*, April 2006.

### **The compensation scandal**

There is a gap between the actual numbers of people who die in work-related accidents and those who get compensation for their illness and injury. Many workers who sustain accidents and illnesses receive no workers compensation<sup>9</sup>.

Of the 457,603 work related incidents –including diseases, injuries and fatalities in 2006-07 only 264,700 ‘incidents’ were compensated and 192,890 were not compensated. Of the 120,000 diseases reported only 53,970 were compensated<sup>10</sup>.

### **What are the risky occupations?**

Construction workplaces recorded a consistently high number of notified worker fatalities over the period 2003-4 to 2006-7 (ranging from 18 in 2004-5 to 36 in 2007-8). Unions believe that the creation of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) has resulted in deteriorating safety standards on construction sites.

Overall, these four industries account for 80% of worker fatalities:

- construction
- transport and storage industry
- agriculture, forestry and fishing
- manufacturing

### **How are workers injured and killed?**

The most common causes of deaths

- Vehicle accidents
- Being hit by falling objects
- Being hit by moving objects
- Falls from a height
- Being trapped by moving machinery

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Safety and Compensation Council, *Compendium of Workers' Compensation Statistics Australia 2006-2007*, March 2009

<sup>10</sup> ASSC, *The Costs of Work-related Injury and Illness for Australian Employers, Workers and the Community*, March 2009, p 21