

Embargoed to 12.01am, Sunday, 28 April 2013

Workers' Memorial Day 2013: a time to mourn the dead and fight for the living

A new national memorial to Australians who have died at or because of work will be a lasting reminder of the ongoing battle to make our workplaces safer, say unions.

The \$3 million National Workers' Memorial on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra is a long-overdue formal recognition of the costly toll that work-related accidents, incidents and disease have had over the years, said ACTU President Ged Kearney.

She said it was fitting that the permanent tribute was being inaugurated today, which is International Workers' Memorial Day. Workers' Memorial Day is a union initiative that originally started in Canada in the 1980s with the slogan "mourn the dead and fight for the living".

There were 374 Australians killed in traumatic workplace incidents in 2010-11 (the most recent year that statistics are available) but it is estimated the death rate when work-related diseases are added is well over ten times that.

"The National Workers' Memorial will be a place where family members and workmates can contemplate their loss, but it will also be a focus for us to redouble our efforts to make all workplaces safer," Ms Kearney said.

"This has been brought home to us all this week by the horrific incident in Bangladesh, where the collapse of a multi-storey building that housed numerous garment-making factories is feared to have killed up to 1000 workers.

"Here also in Australia, we have seen far too many deaths on building sites, wharves, farms, mines and from diseases like mesothelioma. Every work-related death leaves behind a shattered family and unions have fought many battles over the years to improve workplace health and safety.

"Many employers are fulfilling their duties and ensuring a safe environment for workers. Regulators have done a better job than in the distant past, but there are still constant hurdles preventing workers from having proper representation on health and safety issues.

"We also have to make sure that the right to a healthy and safe workplace isn't traded off for 'cutting red tape', because we know that it's the workers who pay the price when workplace safety laws are weakened, and it's often with their lives.

"There is still unfinished business, beginning with the need for industrial manslaughter legislation to be enacted in all jurisdictions. Why is it that in Australia you can cause someone's death by action or inaction and be very confident that you will not go to jail? That is the only way to send this message home: no worker should die on the job.

"Work should give people the satisfaction of using their skills to the fullest measure and making a contribution to their workplace, their community and the common good. It should enrich people, not rob them of their life."

Ms Kearney congratulated the Labor Government for meeting its commitment to build a National Workers' Memorial, in particular Senator Doug Cameron who had chaired the bipartisan steering committee.

Media contact: Ben Ruse ph 0409 510 879