

Safety at risk

By Eva Scheerlinck



The purpose of occupational health and safety regimes is to protect workers. Safety harnesses, protective goggles and machine guards are a product of occupational health and safety initiatives. Smoke-free areas in pubs, clubs and restaurants are also a positive development arising out of a desire to protect the health and wellbeing of workers.

When a colleague is injured or killed in a preventable work accident, it affects everyone. Work is a big part of our everyday lives and we are all entitled to expect our work environments to be safe and suitably equipped to enable us to go about our duties without risk to life and limb.

Workers' compensation systems represent sound social policy initiatives and aim, though differently in each jurisdiction, to allow injured workers access to free healthcare and compensation for loss of income. However, full compensation to all workers, regardless of fault, is not economically feasible. Workers' compensation premiums would be too high and employers would put great pressure on government if premiums were to increase.

Occupational health and safety regulations are therefore a necessary mechanism to encourage safe work practices and working environments. Non-compliance with OH&S regimes can incur substantial fines, even

imprisonment in some instances, to deter employers from cutting corners on health and safety measures. Investigation of breaches and enforcement of the various regulations are, however, reliant on complaints and resources.

The federal government's industrial relations reform package will make it more difficult for employees to ensure that their environment is free from occupational health and safety hazards. Collective bargaining protects vulnerable workers and provides a mechanism for occupational health and safety concerns to be negotiated into employment conditions. Occupational health and safety matters are often not front-of-mind for people who are new to the job market. Migrant workers may not have the requisite command of English to negotiate occupational health and safety protections on their own behalf.

Australia is a country built on the hard work of millions of its sons and daughters. They build our homes and our roads; care for our sick and aged; teach our children; and grow our fresh produce. They deserve to work without fear of injury.

Industrial relations policy should not be developed in a vacuum. It should complement other social policy initiatives such as occupational health and safety, health care, disability and welfare policies, to name a few. Failure to implement such an integrated approach will lead to injustice for

everyday Australians. The federal, state and territory governments must work together to retain and reinforce workers' protection – their health, their safety, their employment conditions and their right to freedom and stability. Twenty million Australians depend on it. ■

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