

## Media Release

---

Monday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2008

### **Unions mark International Workers Memorial Day with calls for better monitoring of Asbestos and Occupationally linked Cancers in Tasmania**

As part of International Workers Memorial Day a ceremony was held on Parliament House Lawns, Hobart today. Tasmanian unions joined families, friends and workers across the country in ceremonies to remember those who have been killed in accidents or died from diseases contracted on the job, including asbestos-related cancers.

110 pairs of boots and shoes were laid out on the lawns to represent workers who have died from work related injury in Tasmania in the last ten years. There was a minute silence at 1pm.

In Tasmania in 2007, nine workers lost their lives in traumatic workplace incidents.

National figures show a 10% rise over the past five years in the number of workplace fatalities in Australia that are covered by compensation.

This year unions are focusing on raising awareness of the risks posed to Australian workers by occupational cancers – cancers caused or contributed to by work.

Secretary of Unions Tasmania, Simon Cocker called for far greater efforts to be made by governments, business and regulators to map sites where asbestos is known to be in Tasmania.

He also called for improvements in monitoring cancers and the work history of cancer sufferers. Better data collection is needed so that the work history of cancer sufferers is recorded and links can be drawn with exposures to carcinogens at work so that future deaths can be prevented.

Simon Cocker outlined the key challenges facing business, regulators, government and unions in terms of preventing the next workplace deaths:

- Improving health and safety practises in all Tasmanian workplaces through education and vigilance.
- Improving our knowledge of the carcinogens that are in our workplaces and removing them.
- Educating managers and workers about all the risks and hazards in their workplaces including cancer causing agents.
- Removing asbestos from all our workplaces, our homes, our schools and communities and ensuring asbestos victims are compensated.
- Ensuring that companies like James Hardy and Australian Cement here in Tasmania at Railton, do everything they possibly can to minimise the harm the products that they manufactured are doing to former workers and the community at large.
- Supporting a worldwide ban on asbestos.
- Keeping better records of the work histories of cancer sufferers.

#### **Unions Tasmania Secretary, Simon Cocker said:**

“We have laid out 110 pairs of shoes representing the deaths we know about from government statistics. Reported and recorded, documented and published in reports. These are not just statistics. They are stories of pain, hardship and bereavement.”

“Today is a day to remember these 110 workers. We remember them as colleagues, friends, family, union mates and loved ones. We send our condolences and messages of support to their families. “

“But there are many more stories not included in these statistics. There are hundreds of deaths we don't necessarily hear about or read about or associate with work. These are the silent statistics including an unknown number deaths caused by stress - heart and other diseases brought on by years of work overload and poor work practices. They also include the unknown number suicides of those who have been harassed and bullied at work. Then there are deaths where a clear employment relationship is not defined, like a father or a mate helping out on the tractor or doing a bit of work on the farm or a self employed person who has an accident.”

“This unknown number of work related deaths also includes fatal cancers caused by exposure to chemicals and carcinogens at work. Sometimes, as is usually the case with asbestos, the exposure can be decades earlier and a connection is not necessarily drawn between the workplace and a disease which shows up years later. And of course it includes deaths from skin cancer caused by sun exposure at work. “

“If you take these silent statistics into account it is estimated that around 6,700 Australians die every year from a workplace injury or work-induced disease. “

“1.5 million Australian workers may currently be exposed to occupational carcinogens”

“At the moment we know that there are literally tonnes of asbestos products all over the state in buildings, in lagging around pipes, behind switchboards, in roofs and insulation. Business owners are supposed to make a register of any asbestos on their site but there is no central map of where this stuff is and no tracking of what's being done about it.”

“Diagnosed cases of mesothelioma in Tasmania have increased more than sixfold since 1989 and asbestos related deaths are not expected to peak until 2020. We have not done enough to track this substance and safely remove it.”

"It time to having a good look at what we can do better in terms of monitoring exposure to cancer causing agents in the workplace.” said Mr Cocker

**For a full transcript of the speech or comment contact:**

**Simon Cocker 0419402377 or Susan Wallace 0418372198**