

Wednesday, 4 February 2024

Extreme heat is killing workers: Unions urge national rules to save lives

Australian Unions are calling for new national safety rules that require employers to stop work or modify duties when temperatures reach dangerous levels, warning that increasingly frequent heatwaves driven by climate change now pose a major workplace health and safety threat.

Countries like Japan already enforce mandatory occupational health and safety heat requirements, but there are currently no national heat standards in Australia. State and territory workplace health and safety laws do not clearly set out employer obligations to safely manage the risks of working in heat. Unions are urging Safe Work Australia to introduce a heat regulation that requires employers to provide controls such as rest breaks, work scheduling and work stoppages at defined temperature thresholds, and to ensure workers' compensation coverage for heat-related illnesses.

The push comes ahead of Extreme Heat Awareness Day on 4 February, with the ACTU joining the Australian Medical Association (AMA), Australian Red Cross, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) and Sweltering Cities to call for coordinated national action to protect workers and communities from escalating heat hazards driven by climate change.

Australia's housing standards are also forcing millions of workers, particularly renters, to endure unsafe temperatures at home. Unions are urging the Federal Government to update the National Construction Code to include climate-resilience measures so new homes maintain safe indoor temperatures, and to work with states and territories to introduce minimum energy-efficiency standards for rental properties.

The Commonwealth's 2025 National Climate Risk Assessment projects heat-related deaths in major cities will more than quadruple without change – rising 444 per cent in Sydney, 423 per cent in Darwin, 312 per cent in Perth, and 259 per cent in Melbourne.

Safe Work Australia data shows workers currently carry 74 per cent of the financial burden of heat-related injuries and illnesses, while employers bear just 5 per cent.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President, Michele O'Neil:

"No worker should be told to push through the brutal heat and risk their own life. When it's dangerously hot, your boss should either change your work or stop your work."

"A rest break or work stoppage in extreme heat can be the difference between a worker going home safe or not going home at all."

"We regulate asbestos and silica because they kill people and devastate families. It's time we treat climate hazards like extreme heat in the same way. There is no excuse for Australia to leave workers exposed without clear, enforceable rules, especially when the government's own reports project heat-related deaths to more than quadruple in our major cities."

"No worker should have to live in a home that becomes unsafe every summer, especially renters who have the least power to demand improvements. Updating the construction code and setting minimum standards for rental homes is basic public safety."

"The science tells us that heatwaves are getting worse, but our regulations haven't caught up. If countries like Japan can introduce national heat standards, surely Australia can too."

"If you get sick from working in extreme heat, it should be treated like any other workplace injury – and that means workers' compensation coverage, so you can focus on getting better, instead of worrying about paying the bills."

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