



AWU calls for immediate action to save workers underground from silicosis

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The Australian Workers' Union is calling for immediate reform to save workers engaged in tunnelling from deadly silicosis.

Thousands of workers are regularly exposed to deadly silica dust during tunnelling, and construction companies make it difficult for unions to bring dust monitors on site and check if workers' are being exposed at any given time.

AWU National Secretary Daniel Walton said union officials needed clear rights to conduct measuring of airborne contaminants underground.

"Right now, in most states, if our officials try to get on site with a dust monitor device they are blocked by the likes of John Holland," Mr Walton said.

"Yet we know silica exposure is all but certain to be occurring at dangerous levels. Our members are working in environments so dusty they can't see more than 50 metres in front of them. They're getting covered from head to toe in dust and they walk out with that dust on them which continues to spread.

"We also know it's common for companies to operate for days despite ventilation breaking down. We know sites where water suppression is non-existent. And we know flimsy or damaged face marks are being regularly offered as PPE.

"We need union officials to be able to walk into a tunnelling site at any time to test if dust levels are unsafe. Otherwise we know we are basically permitting John Holland and others to expose workers to silica dust that will end up claiming lives.

"Companies should also have to automatically supply all dust monitoring results to the regulator and union promptly, instead of the drawn out process that exists today."

Mr Walton said other reforms were also necessary to save lives.

"Right now companies know they can pretty much get around the exposure rules with ease and there is no real penalty if they get it wrong," Mr Walton said.

"John Holland and others should fear exposing their workers or contractors to dangerous levels of silica dust. So we need much harsher penalties for companies that exceed the silica workplace exposure standard.

Contact details:

Anil Lambert 0416 426 722