



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

Tuesday 28 January 2020

### **CFMEU demands action on silicosis**

The CFMEU National Construction Division is calling for urgent national action on silicosis after revelations that 1-in-5 Queensland stone workers tested positive to the potentially fatal disease.

“The severity of the risks associated with engineered stone products requires a nationally coordinated approach rather than leaving it to piecemeal regulatory regimes and health monitoring programs in the states and territories,” said Nigel Davies, CFMEU Assistant National Construction Secretary.

“Silicosis is a fast-acting, debilitating and often fatal disease the prevalence of which has been grossly underestimated until now by the industry and workplace health and safety authorities. The revelation that 1-in-5 Queensland stonemasons have been diagnosed with silicosis must be a wake-up call resulting in urgent action.”

“Australia needs nationally consistent regulations covering the use of these products and strong enforcement action taken against operators who refuse to provide a safe environment for their workers. The regulations must require the application of the hierarchy of control for silica and other inorganic dusts, and need to be supported by nationally consistent codes of practice.”

“The industry must consider substituting engineered stone with safer alternatives. In the interim, there should be a ban on cutting of engineered stone on site and a ban on dry cutting of stone, as is presently the case in Victoria.”

“The CFMEU has already resolved to implement a ban on the cutting of engineered products on construction sites.”

“The union also wants greater accountability in the use of the products, demanding principal contractors provide appropriate information on risk mitigation in supply chains for all engineered stone supplied to building sites.”

“The union has also resolved to require appropriate assurances in relation to insurance of engineered stone products in light of reports that insurers are refusing coverage for this product.”

“The CFMEU has made recent submissions to the National Dust Diseases Taskforce, calling for Workplace Exposure Standard (WES) of 0.02mg/m<sup>3</sup> as a matter of urgency. SafeWork Australia recently agreed to recommend to Ministers that the WES be lowered to 0.05mg/m<sup>3</sup> over an 8-hour period, with this change being subject to a 3-year transition period.”

“Australia is lagging the world on exposure standards. Other countries, including Mexico, have significantly lower standards (in the case of Mexico, its 0.025mg/m<sup>3</sup>). The CFMEU strongly believes that the recommendation of SWA does not go nearly far enough.”

“Air quality monitoring regulations are currently inadequate. Under current workplace health and

safety regulations an employer is only required to undertake air monitoring when it is not certain on reasonable grounds that the relevant WES has been exceeded. This isn't good enough. Regulation should state that air monitoring is required in all dusty environments and when the WES is exceeded, an employer should be required to notify the relevant regulator."

"The scale and scope of this problem requires immediate health responses, including:

- Establishment of a national dust disease register and mandatory reporting;
- Expanded health screening programs conducted by properly trained medical professionals;
- Establishment of a compensation fund; and
- Adoption of the 2015 SWA deemed diseases list amended to cover all silica related diseases."

"These regulatory changes are of little value in the absence of a well-resourced regulator. Currently we are only aware of fabrication sites being inspected, despite being aware of wide-scale noncompliance by the small business operators responsible for installation."

"The workers at greatest risk are in artificial stone benchtop industry, which is typically comprised of geographically dispersed, small business employers (particularly once at the installation stage) who fail to adopt even the most basic preventative measures."

"Stonemasons and other workers concerned about their working conditions can call the union, anonymously if they wish, and the CFMEU will be targeting workshops and businesses which breach safety regulations."

"Silicosis is a terrible disease which is devastating lives around the country. The speed with which this disease kills and debilitates people means there is no time to waste. We need action now."

**Media contact:** John Kelly 0407 071 703