

# MORRISON MISSING IN ACTION ON WORK HEALTH AND SAFETY

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**MISSING**  
**IN ACTION**

Australian  
**Unions**





**SINCE SCOTT MORRISON  
BECAME PRIME MINISTER  
THERE HAS BEEN AN  
8% INCREASE IN WORKPLACE  
SERIOUS INJURIES AND A  
32% INCREASE IN  
WORKPLACE DEATHS.**



**MISSING  
IN ACTION**

#### THE MORRISON MISSING IN ACTION SERIES

When it comes to the issues that matter for working people, Scott Morrison is missing in action. From keeping people safe during the pandemic, to wage rises, respect for women, to secure jobs he has either done nothing, blamed others or made the problem worse. Reports in this series include:

- » Morrison Missing in Action for Working Women (March 2022)
- » Morrison Missing in Action on Secure Jobs (April 2022)
- » Morrison Missing in Action on Work Health and Safety (April 2022).

[www.australianunions.org.au/morrison\\_missing](http://www.australianunions.org.au/morrison_missing)

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **2 FAILING TO ACT ON RISING WORK-RELATED INJURY AND ILLNESS**

Going to work has become more dangerous under the Morrison Government.

## **5 IGNORING THE RISE OF SILICOSIS**

An estimated 230 workers are diagnosed with silicosis each year, despite it being entirely preventable. Doctors are calling this the worst industrial epidemic since asbestos.

## **8 PROMOTING INSECURE WORK**

Nearly three decades of research shows that being in insecure work is hazardous for peoples' mental and physical health.

## **11 FAILING ON RISING MENTAL HEALTH ILLNESS AND INJURY AT WORK**

One in five Australians will experience a mental illness each year, with half of us experiencing one over our lifetime.

## **13 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORKERS**

Working people have borne the brunt of COVID-19 because the Morrison Government has been missing in action so many times

## **17 CONCLUSION**

# INTRODUCTION

The right to healthy, safe and secure work is a fundamental human right and essential to a decent life.

In Australia a worker is killed every two days. A further 5,000 people will die each year from diseases caused by their work and over 100,000 will be seriously injured and receive workers compensation. Despite progress over the last 20 years in reducing the rate of work-related injury, illness and death we have seen an 8% increase in the number of workers injured and a 32% increase in work-related fatalities since Scott Morrison became Prime Minister in 2018.<sup>1</sup>

The re-emergence in recent years of deadly diseases such as silicosis and pneumoconiosis (black lung) are further evidence of a Federal Government that has failed to act to keep working people healthy and safe at work.

The rapid increase in mental health injuries caused by work indicate that greater protections for workers' psychological health are needed. Not only are mental health conditions increasing in frequency, rising to 9% of all injuries, but they are also growing in terms of severity with return to work rates climbing from 11.2 weeks (2000-01) to 26.6 weeks (2019-20).<sup>2</sup>

The rise of insecure work further threatens health and safety at work. Long associated with poorer physical and psychological health and safety insecure work challenges workers' ability to speak up and demand safer working conditions. This, along with blurred lines of responsibility and poorer knowledge and support for safe working practices make insecure workers highly vulnerable to work-related injury. The Morrison Government has promoted the spread of insecure work and with their recent announcement to reintroduce the Omnibus Bill if re-elected will exacerbate this risk to health and safety.

Workers have been abandoned by Scott Morrison. The Government has ignored a wealth of evidence and recommendations to make work safer including, the Boland Review of our Work Health and Safety Laws, the Productivity Commission into Mental Health and the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Report – Respect@Work.

There has been no greater failure of working peoples' health and safety than that when it comes to the pandemic. Working people have borne the brunt of COVID-19 because the Morrison Government has been missing in action so many times: from its failure to secure masks and other protective personal equipment (PPE), vaccines and rapid tests (RATs) to the inadequate income support, including for casual workers and sole traders who were forced to go to work whilst potentially ill and infectious.

**When it comes to workplace health and safety Australian workers Morrison has been missing in action. He is:**

- 1 Failing to act on rising work-related injuries and fatalities:** After 30 years of progress at reducing work-related fatalities and serious injuries we have seen an 8% increase in injuries and a 32% increase in deaths since Scott Morrison became Prime Minister. The Morrison Government opposed the introduction of Industrial Manslaughter laws.
- 2 Ignoring the deadly rise of Silicosis:** In 2016 doctors warned of an alarming increase in Silicosis with over 230 workers being diagnosed per year. More than two years after their own Dust Disease Taskforce Interim Report recommended preventative action, nothing has been done.
- 3 Promoting insecure work:** The Government has failed to tackle insecure work which contributes to higher rates of work-related injury and illness among casual and gig workers.
- 4 Failing on rising mental health injury and illness:** Work-related mental health conditions have increased by more than 50% since Scott Morrison became PM and more than three years after the Boland Review of our work health and safety laws recommended significant changes to protect workers' mental health nothing has been done.
- 5 Missing in action on COVID-19:** The Morrison Government's 'let it rip' approach has meant that workers have borne the brunt of the impact of COVID-19. Their failure to secure PPE, vaccines and RATs meant that workers faced higher rates of infection, illness and death.

<sup>1</sup> Safework Australia, Key WHS Statistics Australia 2021 and ACTU calculation using preliminary fatality figures for 2020 and 2021  
<sup>2</sup> And likely climbing higher under the pandemic.

# 1

# FAILING TO ACT ON RISING

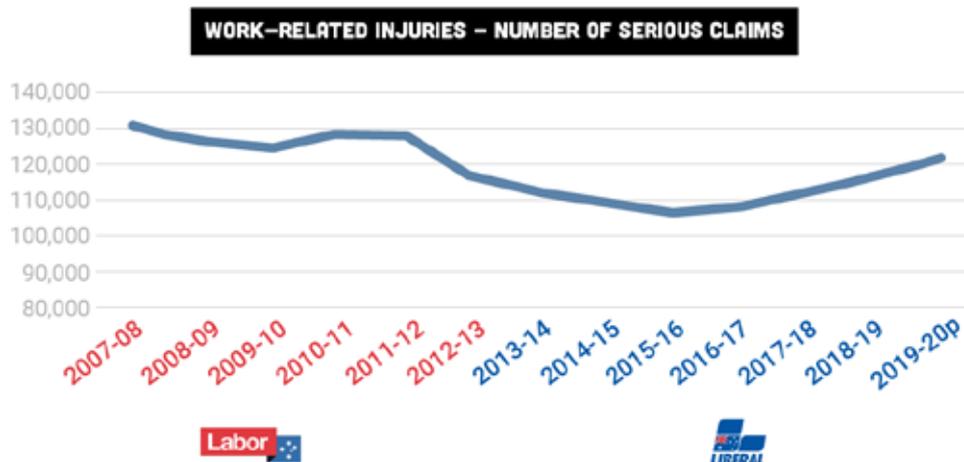
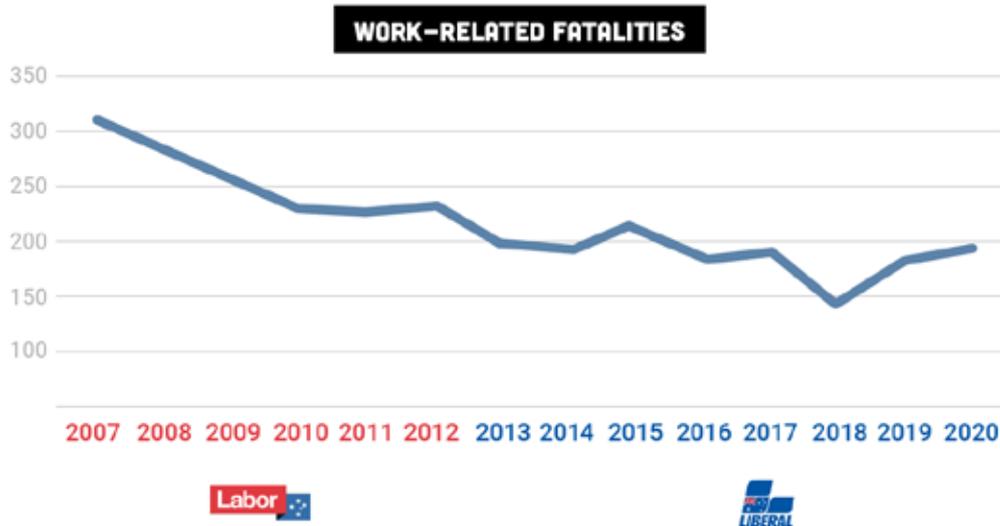
# WORK-RELATED INJURY AND ILLNESS

## GOING TO WORK HAS BECOME MORE DANGEROUS UNDER THE MORRISON GOVERNMENT.

Work-related fatalities and serious injuries, as measured by workers compensation claims, have increased by 8% (fatalities) and 32% (serious injuries).<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the Coalition Government coming to power in 2013, the numbers of workplace fatalities were steadily dropping. Yet since 2013 progress has stalled and actually reversed since Morrison became Prime Minister in 2018.

The increase in the number and severity of claims for mental health injuries and respiratory diseases also shows that our systems are not protecting workers. Those essential workers that helped see us through the pandemic lockdowns have also been particularly affected.<sup>4</sup>



3 Safework Australia, Key WHS Statistics Australia 2021  
 4 Safework Australia, Key WHS Statistics Australia 2021

In December 2018 the Boland Review into the Model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws was delivered to the Federal Government which urged immediate changes to our laws to keep workers safe. Three and a half years later, with more than 500 workers killed and hundreds of thousands seriously injured, none of these changes have been implemented.<sup>5</sup>

The Morrison Government opposed the introduction of Industrial Manslaughter laws aimed at ensuring that bosses who cut corners that result in the death of workers face serious consequences. In the absence of action by the Federal Government, some states have passed these laws, but millions of workers remain unprotected. The health and safety of workers in Australia is a serious issue. The ACTU's 2021 Work Shouldn't Hurt Report found that three in ten (29%) workers sustained at least one injury or ailment due to work in the previous 12 months. This included 12% who suffered a physical injury and 22% who had a mental health issue with 5% of workers experiencing both. The highest rates of work-related mental health issues were experienced by frontline workers in industries such as health (28%) and retail (27%). One third of all workers were either regularly or always exposed to stress at work in the past 12 months.<sup>6</sup>

The Report also found that 28% of workers injured at work did not take time off work when they needed to. More than half of them did not take time off because they feared negative consequences for their job.<sup>7</sup>

Both the 2020 Respect@Work Report by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins and the 2018 Boland Review called for changes in health and safety laws to improve protections against sexual harassment. This is particularly important for working women given that the ACTU's Work Shouldn't Hurt report found that one in five (20%) respondents and 37% young women had experienced some form of gendered based violence and harassment. Disturbingly just one in three (31%) of those respondents who took action to address the violence and harassment were satisfied with the response.<sup>8</sup>

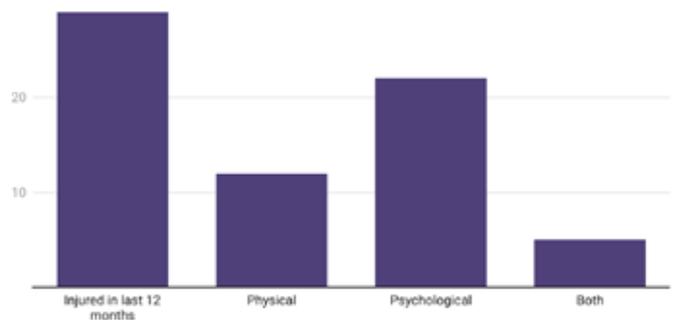
The Morrison Government has not even considered the recommendation of the Respect@Work Report to introduce a Code of Practice on the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Work and is opposing changes to required employers to take positive steps to prevent psychological injury/illnesses and sexual harassment under the *Fair Work Act*.

## WE NEED A GOVERNMENT THAT WILL TAKE ACTION TO PREVENT WORKERS BEING KILLED AND SERIOUSLY INJURED BY:

- » Introducing Industrial Manslaughter Laws – employers who cut corners that result in the death of workers should be held accountable.
- » Ensuring the mental health of workers is protected as well as their physical health – Regulations for Prevention of Psychosocial risks that replicate the approach used for physical injuries
- » Preventing sexual harassment at work - Develop a Code of Practice on Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Work to make it clear to employers the steps needed to decrease the risks of sexual harassment.

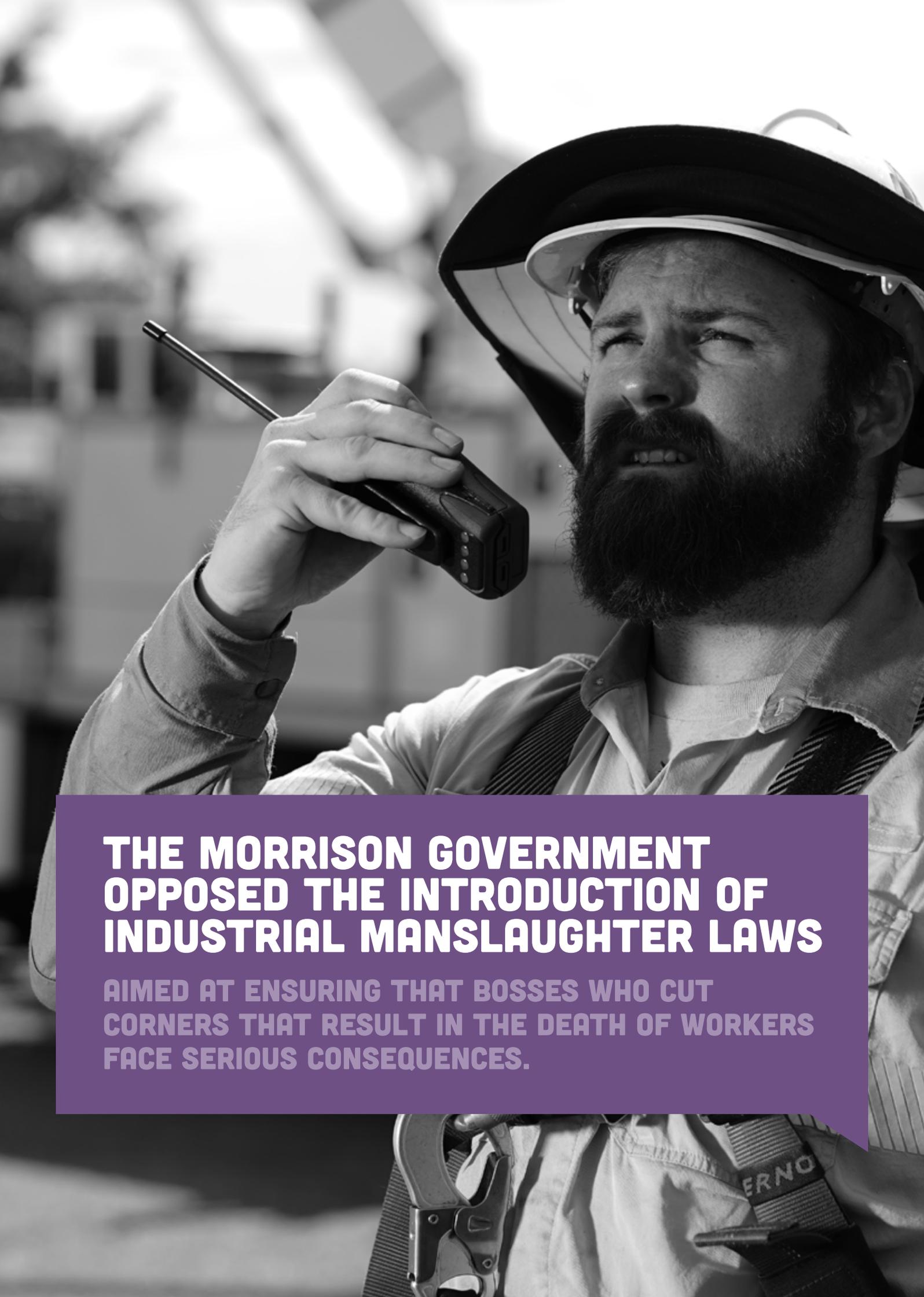
### Work-related injuries - 2020-2021

Injuries sustained in the last 12 months (July 2021)



Source: ACTU Work Shouldn't Hurt Report 2021 - Created with Datawrapper

5 Safework Australia, Key WHS Statistics Australia 2021 – also includes preliminary fatality figures for 2020 and 2021  
 6 ACTU, Work Shouldn't Hurt Report - 2021  
 7 ACTU, Work Shouldn't Hurt Report - 2021  
 8 ACTU, Work Shouldn't Hurt Report - 2021



# **THE MORRISON GOVERNMENT OPPOSED THE INTRODUCTION OF INDUSTRIAL MANSLAUGHTER LAWS**

**AIMED AT ENSURING THAT BOSSES WHO CUT  
CORNERS THAT RESULT IN THE DEATH OF WORKERS  
FACE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES.**

## 2 IGNORING THE DEADLY RISE

### OF SILICOSIS

**AN ESTIMATED 230 WORKERS ARE  
DIAGNOSED WITH SILICOSIS EACH YEAR,**

**DESPITE IT BEING ENTIRELY PREVENTABLE.  
DOCTORS ARE CALLING THIS THE WORST  
INDUSTRIAL EPIDEMIC SINCE ASBESTOS.**

#### **AUSTRALIA'S APPETITE FOR CHEAP MANUFACTURED STONE PRODUCTS FOR KITCHEN AND BATHROOM BENCH TOPS HAS COME AT A DEADLY PRICE FOR THE WORKERS WHO MAKE AND INSTALL THEM.**

In 2016 Australian doctors alerted governments and employers to the high levels of silicosis amongst engineered stone workers; a disease caused by high levels of exposure to silica dust for which there is no cure. Suppliers of engineered stone knew the dangers a decade before that. Surveys of engineered stone workers, many in their early twenties, have found one in four with silicosis. These are not the only workers exposed to hazardous levels with more than half a million workers, many in construction, demolition, tunnelling, mining and quarrying, facing similar exposures. An estimated 230 workers are diagnosed with silicosis each year,<sup>9</sup> despite it being entirely preventable. Doctors are calling this the worst industrial epidemic since asbestos.<sup>10</sup>

It is essential to provide medical treatment and care for those with silica-related disease, but prevention is the best cure. Lowering the levels of dust is essential, yet in their recent Budget the Morrison Government has allocated only 4% of funds dedicated to silicosis management to prevention.



**1 IN 4 STONEMASONS  
HAVE BEEN DIAGNOSED  
WITH SILICOSIS.**

Engineered stone products have become a “fashion item” since the early 2000s. There are many alternatives to kitchen and bathroom bench tops, yet the Morrison Government has delayed action and dismissed calls by their own National Dust Diseases Taskforce (NDDT) which recommended:



**A FULL BAN ON THE IMPORTATION OF SOME OR ALL ENGINEERED STONE PRODUCTS BY JUNE 2024 IF THERE IS NO MEASURABLE AND ACCEPTABLE IMPROVEMENT IN REGULATORY COMPLIANCE RATES AND EVIDENCE INDICATES PREVENTATIVE MEASURES ARE NOT EFFECTIVELY PROTECTING THOSE WORKING WITH ENGINEERED STONE FROM SILICOSIS AND SILICA-ASSOCIATED DISEASES.”**

Despite receiving the NDDT interim report more than 2 years ago **nothing has been done to improve prevention.**

**WE NEED A GOVERNMENT THAT WILL TACKLE THIS DISEASE BY ENSURING WORKERS HAVE A RIGHT TO CLEAN AIR AT WORK. THIS INCLUDES:**

- » Implementing a ban on the use of high silica content engineered stone.
- » Adopting a national regulation in all states and territories that ensures workers have a right to clear, healthy air by:
  - banning the dry cutting of engineered stone,
  - adopting a licensing system for businesses using engineered stone, and
- » ensuring that employers are required to protect workers from all hazardous levels of silica dust
- » Funding initiatives to educate consumers and designers of residential and commercial buildings about the risks to workers of engineered stone
- » Industry development funding to encourage adoption of low silica content engineered stone.

CASE STUDY

JOANNA

QUARRY WORKER,  
SILICOSIS SUFFERER

After returning from maternity leave, Joanna was asked to undergo a fit for work test. The test result changed her life in an instant. The phone call Joanna got was a real shock – the first words were “well you don’t have cancer”.

The mother of two young girls was diagnosed with silicosis.

Joanna said: “It’s the unknown which is so terrifying. What I have since learnt about silicosis is that there is no cure, and you just don’t know how it will progress. Now I am feeling healthy, but I don’t know if that will be the case in one year, let alone five or ten years and as a mum of two young daughters that terrifies me.”

**JOANNA CONTRACTED SILICOSIS WHILST WORKING FOR SEVEN YEARS AT THE QUARRY.**

She was initially employed by the multi-national company in an admin role, but it also involved more hands-on work, and for her to visit all parts of the site. Joanna had never been informed about the risks of breathing in crystalline silica.

“No matter where you were in the plant you would be exposed to dust. It would be all over your clothes and skin.”

“I fear this will affect my life and my family’s life and I am angry. I should never have been exposed to this disease.”

“There is no information in my employer’s induction packs about exposure to silica dust, despite being a large multinational company. In 2021, there were still no signs and warnings around the plant to warn workers. People need to be aware of this.”

**“IT IS JUST A WAITING GAME TO BE HONEST”.**



**AT JUST 34 YEARS OLD  
JOANNA HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED  
WITH SILICOSIS AFTER WORKING  
IN THE ADMINISTRATION TEAM  
AT A QUARRY IN MELBOURNE.**

## NEARLY THREE DECADES OF RESEARCH SHOWS THAT BEING IN INSECURE WORK IS HAZARDOUS FOR PEOPLES' MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH.

Recently experts outlined to a Senate Inquiry into Job Security the extensive research demonstrating the harmful effects on mental and physical health associated with insecure work arrangement when compared to workers holding full-time permanent/ongoing jobs.<sup>11</sup>

Analysis of work-related injuries in Australia highlight that, with the exception of workers aged over 55 years, casual workers recorded the highest injury frequency rates. The highest injury frequency rates were recorded by young workers with those aged 15-24 recording rates of 62.3 injuries per million hours followed closely by workers aged 25-34 years at 61.5.<sup>12</sup>

Other forms of work insecurity, including sham contracting or gig economy work are also associated with higher rates of injury. Evidence of this can be seen in the alarming increase in fatalities amongst food delivery riders who have poor access to regulatory employment rights, are not provided with health and safety training and have a decreased ability to raise health and safety concerns.

Not only are insecure workers more likely to be injured or made ill they receive less financial support than permanent workers. Over the last decade there has been an increase in the numbers of workers who received no financial assistance despite reporting being injured at work. Only one in three casual workers reported getting financial assistance for work-related injuries compared to 2 in 3 permanent workers.<sup>13</sup>

The 2021 Work Shouldn't Hurt survey highlighted the challenge faced by insecure workers with three in five (60%) injured workers in insecure work not taking time off to recover compared with just one in 10 (11%) permanent workers. More than half (53%) of respondents in insecure work reported that they couldn't afford to stop working.

Many of the safety risk factors are associated with various forms of insecure work are linked to disorganisation between firms, gig platforms, labour hire employers creating blurred lines as to who is responsible which consequently leads to risks not being addressed.<sup>14</sup>

### THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF INSECURE WORK ON HEALTH AND SAFETY CAN SUMMARISED AS:

- 1 Higher incidence/frequency of injuries, including fatalities
- 2 Poorer physical and mental health. The evidence shows that those without job security have poorer cardiovascular health. Insecure work also increases workers exposure to hazards such as low job control and higher job demands which are known risk factors for poorer mental health – most commonly depression and anxiety.
- 3 Poor knowledge of and access to regulatory employment rights impacts workers willingness and ability to raise health and safety concerns. The disconnection between firms and workers and supervisors removes protective factors which impacts on workers ability to raise concerns

11 Submission to Senate Select Committee on Job Security Emeritus Professor Michael Quinlan B.Ec (hons) PhD (Sydney), FASSA, Industrial Relations Research Group, UNSW and Dr Elsa Underhill, M.Com (Melb), PhD (UNSW) Deakin University, Victoria, March 2021

12 SafeWork Australia, Australian work-related injury experience by sex and age, 2009-10, July 2012

[https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/australian\\_work-related\\_injury\\_experience\\_by\\_sex\\_and\\_age\\_2009-10.pdf](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/australian_work-related_injury_experience_by_sex_and_age_2009-10.pdf)

13 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Work-related injuries 2017-2018, October 2018

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/work-related-injuries/jul2017-jun2018>

14 Pilbeam C, Denyer D, & Doherty N, (2020): **Safety risk factors in two different types of routine outsourced work: a systematic literature review**, Policy and Practice in Health and Safety DOI: 10.1080/14773996.2020.1787701

## CASE STUDY

**2020 GROSVENOR  
COAL MINE  
EXPLOSION**

A further example of the risks associated with insecure work is evident in the 2020 Grosvenor Coal mine incident in Central Queensland where five labour hire workers were seriously injured following a methane explosion 400 metres underground. Despite their serious burns, and with the assistance of brave workmates who risked their own lives to retrieve them the workers were able to be evacuated.

Following the incident the Queensland Government established a Board of Inquiry to understand the cause of the explosion along with 27 previous high potential incidents involving dangerous exceedance of methane in the preceding 12 months. The Board concluded that there was a perception among coal mine workers that a labour hire or contract worker who raises safety issues might jeopardise their employment at the mine.<sup>15</sup> This was an important factor considering in the year before the tragedy at Grosvenor, 6 in 10 casual workers in Queensland's mines reported that they couldn't speak up about safety without fear of reprisal. That is 50% higher than the results for the overall mine workforce. Nearly 9 in 10 mine workers also believed that casualisation affects workplace safety at their site.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst similar examples can be found across a wide range of industries this is a particular issue for the Queensland coal industry which has been plagued by employer efforts to casualise coal mining jobs. The Coal Board Inquiry Report cited research detailing the extent of casualisation in the industry which had seen direct permanent employment fall from 94.1% in 1996 to 61.5% by 2002. By 2017 the Commissioner for Mine Safety and Health revealed that there were more contractors than direct employees in Queensland Coal mines.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Queensland Coal Mining Board of Inquiry Report Part II, p408-409, 31 May 2020 <https://coalminesinquiry.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Queensland-Coal-Mining-Board-of-Inquiry-Part-II-Report.pdf>

16 CFMEU Mining & Energy Division, 29 July 2019, Queensland Coal mine worker safety survey results, <https://me.cfmeu.org.au/sites/me.cfmeu.org.au/files/uploads/SAFETY/MinersSafetySurveyResults.pdf>

17 Queensland Coal Mining Board of Inquiry Report Part II, p408-409, 31 May 2020 <https://coalminesinquiry.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Queensland-Coal-Mining-Board-of-Inquiry-Part-II-Report.pdf>



# ONLY 1 IN 3 CASUAL WORKERS REPORTED GETTING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR WORK-RELATED INJURIES COMPARED TO 2 IN 3 PERMANENT WORKERS.

Australian research has shown that improving job security and predictability in working arrangements is strongly associated with decreasing depression and anxiety symptoms in workers.<sup>18</sup> The Morrison Government refuses to acknowledge the risks of insecure work and consequently is failing workers, again. Rather than reduce the prevalence of insecure work they have acted to make the situation worse. The Morrison Government changed the laws in early 2021 which allow an employer to call any employee a casual worker.

Recently Scott Morrison has announced plans to revive the Industrial Relations Omnibus Bill which not only cut the take home pay of workers but included provisions that would see permanent part-time jobs effectively casualised. Under their proposal part time workers on at least 16 hours a week can be asked to work extra hours without overtime rates. This is likely to further compound the health and safety issues experienced by insecure workers.

**WE NEED A GOVERNMENT THAT IS GOING TO TAKE ACTION ON INSECURE WORK BY CHANGING THE LAWS TO PREVENT EMPLOYERS TURNING SECURE JOBS INTO INSECURE ONES. THIS INCLUDES:**

- » For Labour Hire workers: Change the law to ensure “Same Job Same Pay” – this will remove the economic incentive for employers to use labour hire and increase the number of secure permanent jobs.
- » Introducing a common sense and fair definition of who a casual worker is.
- » Closing the legal loopholes to put an end to sham contracting.
- » Changing the laws to grant new rights for gig economy workers.
- » Recognising job insecurity as a risk factor for poor psychological health in Regulations and Code of Practice

18 LaMontagne A et al, Changes in Job Security and Mental Health: An Analysis of 14 Annual Waves of an Australian Working-Population Panel Survey American Journal of Epidemiology, Volume 190, Issue 2, February 2021, Pages 207–215, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa038>

CASE STUDY

JANE (RTBU MEMBER)

RAIL WORKER

Jane (not her real name) was excited at the opportunity to get a start in the rail industry working for a labour hire company doing rail maintenance.

She was eager to become a welder and in late 2021, at just 19, she jumped at the opportunity to learn and was assigned to work on a week-long train derailment job for a major rail freight operator in central Queensland.

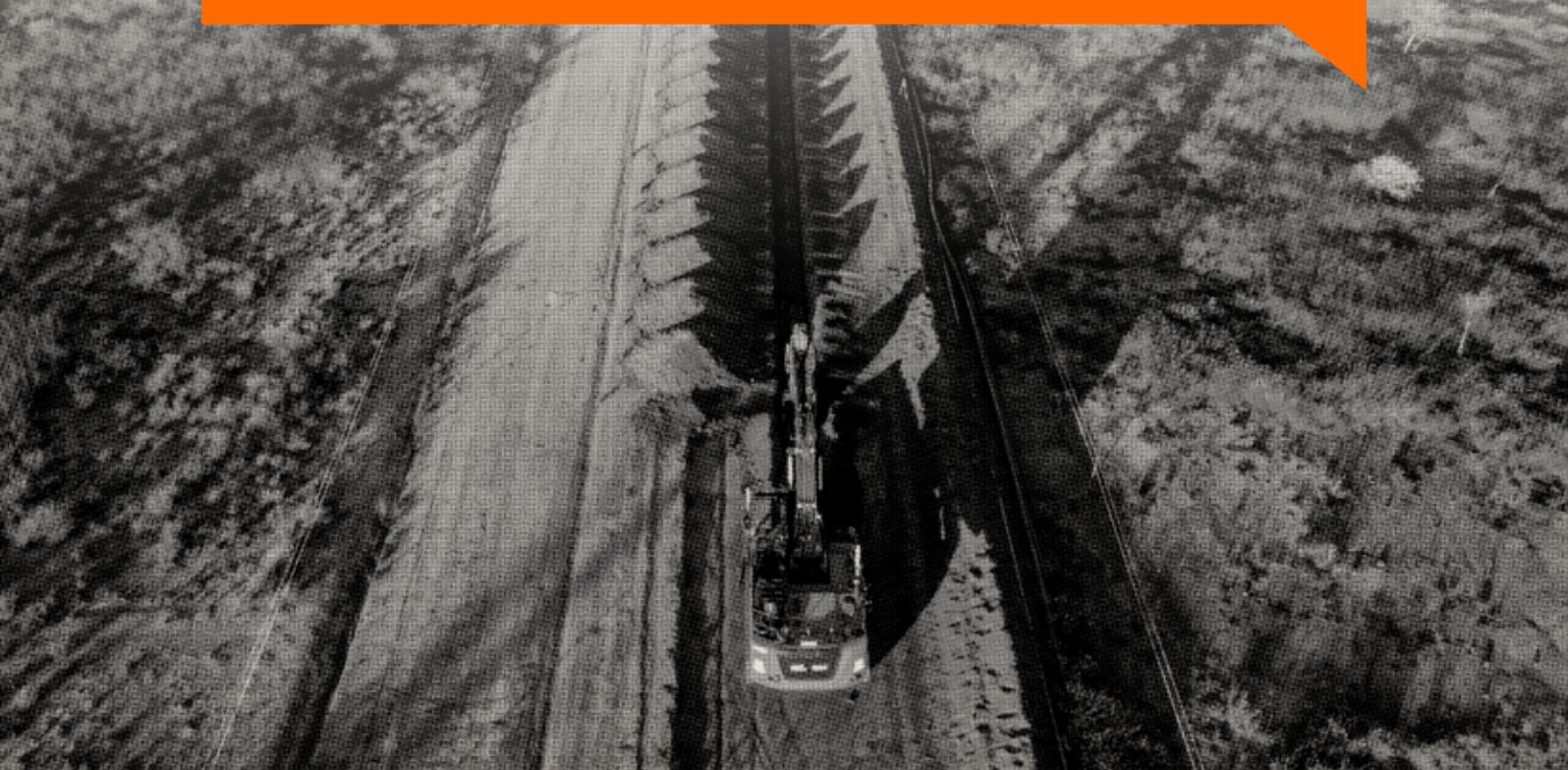
It was there on her first day where she began to suffer the effects of heat exhaustion. After working all day in temperatures exceeding 45 degrees she headed back to her accommodation. That night she became faint and nauseous and her workmates became concerned that her body temperature remained high and she was quickly taken to hospital for immediate treatment and recovery.

After being released from hospital the next day the freight operator that she was assigned to work for didn't want to know her. They were less concerned about how they would rectify a situation where they had failed to provide a safe workplace and taking the necessary steps to ensure that it didn't happen again, and more focussed on ensuring that she left site.

Not only was Jane told that she would not be remaining on this job and wouldn't be paid for the rest of the week but that she was also 'black banned' from ever working on any other jobs with this freight operator.

Jane has not worked since the incident – nearly 6 months ago.

**NOT ONLY WAS JANE TOLD THAT SHE WOULD NOT BE REMAINING ON THIS JOB AND WOULDN'T BE PAID FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK BUT THAT SHE WAS ALSO 'BLACK BANNED' FROM EVER WORKING ON ANY OTHER JOBS WITH THIS FREIGHT OPERATOR.**



## ILLNESS AND INJURY AT WORK

One in five Australians will experience a mental illness each year, with half of us experiencing one over our lifetime. Mental ill health and suicide costs Australia an estimated \$70 billion a year, with mental-health related sick days costing up to \$10 billion and presenteeism, \$7 billion.<sup>19</sup> Only 1 in 3 Australians with a mental health disorder will seek help, and for those that do receive services, they often receive sub-optimal care.<sup>20</sup>

In recent times, Australians have been forced to cope with further mentally damaging issues, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>21</sup> and trauma from [climate change-induced](#) extreme weather events including bushfires and floods<sup>22</sup>. 2021 also saw the national spotlight shone on the crisis levels of sexual harassment at work. There is [growing evidence](#) that Australians are feeling more uncertain, anxious and stressed about their futures<sup>23</sup>.

It is no surprise then that mental health injury and illness at work are growing fast with claim numbers increasing by nearly 60% since the Coalition came to power. **Mental health conditions now make up 9% of workers compensation claims, up from 4.9% in 2000-01.**

Not only are they increasing in frequency but the severity of illness is getting worse with a typical mental health injury costing \$45,900 compared to \$14,500 for physical injuries and takes 26.6 weeks to recover compared to 6.4 weeks.

[Research](#) from the Black Dog Institute found that those at greatest risk of mental illness as a result of pandemic effects included young workers, women and those employed in insecure, casual and gig economy jobs.<sup>24</sup>

Adding to this growing crisis are serious shortages across the mental health workforce, who are suffering increased levels of stress, burnout and PTSD, partly due to the COVID crisis.<sup>25</sup>

Frontline healthcare workers were at [increased risk](#) of developing mental illness symptoms before the pandemic<sup>26</sup>. There are now predictions that levels of PTSD linked to COVID-related trauma will increase within the healthcare sector based on [international findings](#)<sup>27</sup>.

[A survey](#) conducted by the Australian Psychology Society found that 1 in 3 psychologists are unable to see new clients (up from 1 in 5 in June 2021 and 1 in 100 prior to the pandemic). Australians are typically waiting up to 3 months to access psychology services after being referred by their GP, with wait times worse in regional areas<sup>28</sup>.

- 19 PC inquiry into mental health 2020, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health#report>
- 20 Petrie K, Baldwin P, Crawford J, Harvey SB. The voice of mental health practice in Australia: a mixed-method cross-sectional study of gaps and areas of need. *Aust N Z J Public Health*. 2021 Aug;45(4):318-324. doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.13078
- 21 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Mental health impact of COVID-19 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/2affffe1-c751-442d-987c-27ca0143591a/Mental-health-impact-of-COVID-19.pdf.aspx>
- 22 <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/anxious-nation-eco-grief-takes-hold-as-code-red-for-humanity-hits-home-20220311-p5a3ua.html>
- 23 Biddle, N., Edwards, B., Gray, M. & Sollis, K., ANU Poll August 2020, Tracking wellbeing outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic February to August 2020 [Computer file]. Canberra: Australian Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2020.
- 24 Black Dog Institute. Modern work: how changes to the way we work are impacting Australians' mental health. White Paper. October 2021. Sydney, AU: Black Dog Institute
- 25 Northwood K, Siskind D, Suetani S, McArdle PA. An assessment of psychological distress and professional burnout in mental health professionals in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australas Psychiatry*. 2021 Dec;29(6):628-634. doi: 10.1177/10398562211038906.
- 26 Dobson H, Malpas CB, Burrell AJ, Gurchich C, Chen L, Kulkarni J, Winton-Brown T. Burnout and psychological distress amongst Australian healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australas Psychiatry*. 2021 Feb;29(1):26-30. doi: 10.1177/1039856220965045.
- 27 Surviving SARS and living through COVID-19: Healthcare worker mental health outcomes and insights for coping. Styra R, Hawryluck L, Mc Geer A, Dimas M, Sheen J, et al. (2021) Surviving SARS and living through COVID-19: Healthcare worker mental health outcomes and insights for coping. *PLOS ONE* 16(11): e0258893. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258893>
- 28 <https://psychology.org.au/for-members/publications/news/2022/australians-need-psychological-help-more-than-ever>

## SOLUTION

**WHILE MORRISON HAS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH REFORM IS NEEDED, HE HAS FAILED TO ACT. WHEN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ARE INACCESSIBLE, PEOPLE'S LIVES ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER.**

### **HE NEEDS TO:**

- » **Implement and fully fund all recommendations of Respect@Work and Boland review, and commit to meaningful reform to reduce psychological harm at work.**
- » **Commit further funding to researching evidence-based control measures for psychological interventions in workplaces.**

## CASE STUDY

### **MEG (FSU MEMBER)**

At NAB, employees have reported feeling overwhelmed by workloads and exploited by their leadership to work excessive hours. The company has created an uncertain working environment for employees through numerous restructures, and introduced unachievable targets for employees that may only be met through the working of excessive hours. A report commissioned by the Financial Sector Union (FSU) showed that 87% of NAB employees reported that excessive workloads significantly harmed their physical and/or mental health, with increased stress / anxiety, loss of sleep and other mental health impacts the most reported.

Meg has worked at nab for over 15 years and has seen a number of internal changes made without consultation with employees that has added to an already demanding job.

*"There's a strong sense of dread I get when I'm reminded of work. I can't shake it for minutes on end and it emotionally depresses me.*

*"My IBS is getting increasingly worse and when I've seen a doctor, they've said it's all psychological. I've started experiencing panic attacks as well. My relationships are being affected and I'm becoming more reclusive because of anxiety and stress."*

Never has the work that you do or the type of employment you are in had a greater impact on your health than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether you were a frontline worker exposed to the public every day without protective gear and access to vaccines or a casual without sick leave, COVID-19 has been an ever-present hazard in your work that you have been left to manage on your own.

In the early days of the pandemic the failure to source and supply critical personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves and hand sanitiser highlighted how much of our domestic manufacturing capability had been lost under the Morrison Government. Instead, frontline health and other essential workers had to scramble to protect themselves as we saw significant and preventable exposures, transmission and deaths. Even as the Omicron wave crashed into Australia nearly two years into the pandemic we saw aged and disability care workers still unable to source suitable masks to keep them and the vulnerable Australians they care for safe.

COVID-19 also highlighted the huge risk of insecure work to the community as a whole.

As workers in insecure work with no access to sick leave became ill they were forced to choose between testing and isolating without pay to keep their workmates and the community safe and going to work and risking infecting others just to put food on the table. The Morrison Government's failure to support such workers with an adequate paid pandemic leave scheme, or curb the growth of insecure work generally contributed to an acceleration of COVID-19 amongst working people and particularly those in insecure work.



## VACCINE STROLLOUT

Despite these failures as the country neared the end of 2020 the hard work and sacrifices of many ensured deaths remained relatively low when compared to the devastation experienced overseas. Whilst federally funded and regulated aged care, which saw over 700 deaths in the first and second waves of the pandemic was an exception to this, Australians felt overwhelmingly positive as we saw falling case numbers and reports that vaccine trials were showing promising results. Indeed Australians were looking forward to 2021 and putting the pandemic, and its associated lockdowns behind us as we moved to vaccinate the nation and the world.

Despite proclaiming throughout 2020 that Australia was 'at the front of the queue' it would later be revealed the Morrison Government was slow to procure a broad range of vaccines. Unlike many other developed countries Australia's strategy largely lay in a single vaccine – AstraZeneca (AZ). This stood in stark contrast to our global counterparts, who had quickly secured multiple vaccines, moved quickly to vaccinate Australia hit numerous stumbling blocks.

The rollout, which rightly identified key priority groups such as the elderly and frontline workers, was slow to get going. Numerous bungles plagued the program including a last minute decision not to prioritise aged and disability care workers leaving these vulnerable sectors exposed and at the mercy of the virus. The situation was further compounded when adverse effects began being reported in relation to AZ. A rare but nonetheless concerning blood clotting side effect saw health advice change limiting the number of Australians who were recommended for vaccination with AZ. This decision, announced by Scott Morrison on a Sunday night in April laid bare the weakness in our vaccination strategy and the failure of the Federal Government.

For the months that followed Australians were defenceless to the virus which had mutated to the much more infectious Delta strain. As the virus took hold in Sydney it moved rapidly to Melbourne plunging over half of the Australian population into some of the longest continuous lockdown the world has seen. After months of delay and further one thousand deaths the country finally received sufficient supplies of Pfizer and then Moderna vaccines. Australians, as they have throughout the pandemic, did their duty and rolled up their sleeves in record numbers.

## RAPID ANTIGEN TEST (RATS)

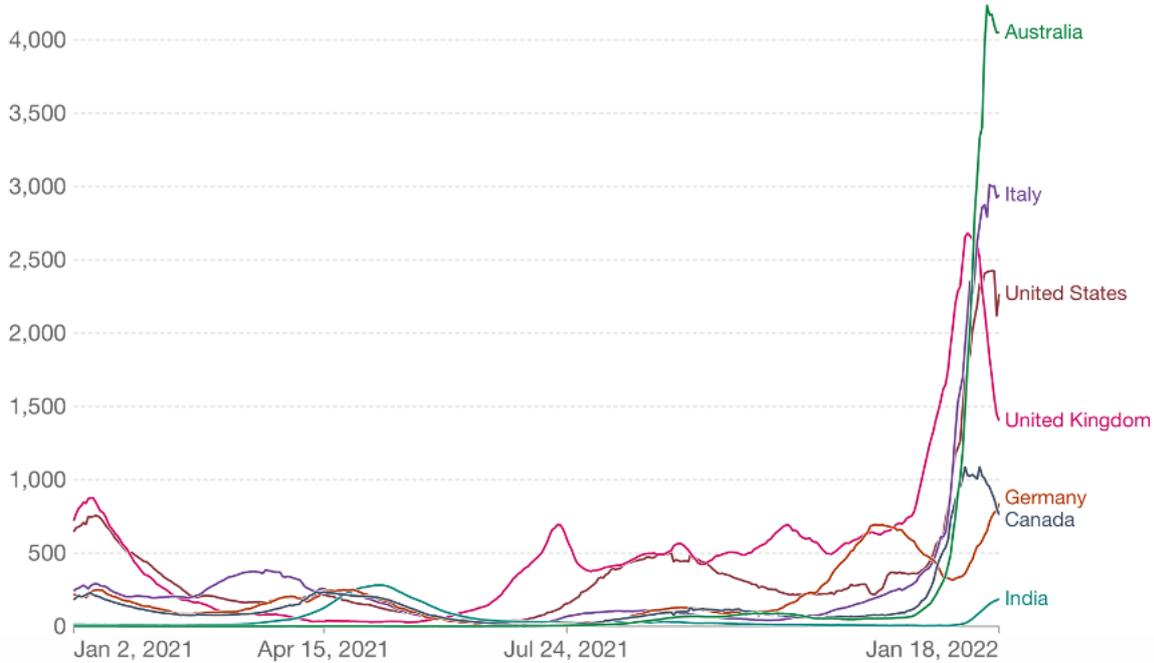
As Australia emerged from another year of lockdowns with some of the highest vaccination rates in the world we were told by Scott Morrison and his federal colleagues that the pandemic was behind us and that we must 'open up'. Gone were public health restrictions, masks and border closures and we could instead look forward to a summer of fun and relaxation, of interstate and international travel and a pre-covid life that we had worked so hard for. Many of Australians were wary of this. Concerned at the pace the PM was urging to open up we could all see that the virus had not disappeared. Cases and deaths continued to rise and calls for precautionary measures such as masks and rapid testing were dismissed by Scott Morrison who wanted to move on from COVID despite concerning developments here and overseas including reports of a new, even more infectious strain of the virus emerging.

By late November, with border quarantine restrictions removed at the urging of the PM Omicron landed in Australia. The country went from just less than 300,000 cumulative cases up until Christmas of 2021 to over 2.5 million by the start of February. Christmas holidays across the country were plunged into chaos. Australians lined up for hours awaiting PCR testing only to watch the system crash under the strain. At one stage more than 30% of PCR tests in Sydney were returning positive results and it was estimated that as many as 1 in 40 Australians had COVID-19.

Again the failure of the Morrison Government to prepare was laid bare. Whilst around the world rapid antigen tests (RATs) were made free and widely available in Australia their scarcity caused anger and despair and contributed to Australia having the highest infection rate of anywhere in the world in the month of January.

### Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

7-day rolling average. Due to limited testing, the number of confirmed cases is lower than the true number of infections.



Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

CC BY





**THE AGED AND DISABILITY CARE SECTORS WERE IN CRISIS WITH SOARING INFECTION RATES AND NO ABILITY TO QUICKLY TEST WITH RATs MANY ELDERLY AND VULNERABLE AUSTRALIANS AND THE WORKERS WHO CARED FOR THEM NEEDLESSLY CONTRACTED COVID.”**

The impact on work and in particular frontline workers was severe. Already abandoned by the Morrison Government when it came to vaccines essential services were grinding to a halt. The aged and disability care sectors were in crisis with soaring infection rates and no ability to quickly test with RATs many elderly and vulnerable Australians and the workers who cared for them needlessly contracted COVID.

As frontline workers fell ill supply chains began to crumble and the Federal Government took a series of decisions, such as forcing essential workers who were close contacts back to work, that further put workers and the community at risk. **The callous disregard for workers’ health and safety reached a peak when the Prime Minister declared that children would be permitted to drive forklifts.** Fortunately, the outrage of Australians, and the refusal of every state and territory political leader to oblige, ensured that this dangerous idea would not proceed. Whilst this event was just a brief interlude in the chaos that was the Federal Government’s management of the pandemic it revealed to most Australians both how out of touch Scott Morrison was and the priority he placed on workers’ health and safety.

Whilst Omicron numbers have subsided since their peak in January it is clear we are not out of the woods yet. Now two years into the pandemic we know that winter, and the colder months leading into it, present the greatest risks. With new variants emerging and vaccine efficacy waning the coming months present uncertainty for the management of the pandemic. The question remains as to whether the failures of the Morrison Government on PPE, pandemic leave, vaccines and RATs will sharpen their focus on COVID-19 going forward or whether these mistakes will continue to be repeated by a government that remains ignorant of the risks and consequences for working people of this virus.

**CASE STUDY**

**MYRNA (ASU MEMBER)**

**DISABILITY SUPPORT WORKER, NSW**

I have been a disability worker for 14 years. I am there for some of the most vulnerable people in our community. We should have been a priority through the COVID-19 pandemic but we have been completely forgotten.

The Morrison Government failed to get us the PPE we needed, for months after they were promised, there were not Rapid Antigen Tests and there was no funding to support NDIS workers with isolation leave. This put workers and people with disabilities at unnecessary risk!

Now, no one has any leave entitlements left to take a break, and everyone is at risk of burning out.

**THE MORRISON GOVERNMENT  
FAILED TO GET US THE PPE WE  
NEEDED.**



# CONCLUSION

## **PROGRESS ON HEALTH AND SAFETY IS NEVER GUARANTEED. IT REQUIRES HARD WORK AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.**

The recent increase in workplace deaths, injuries and illness under the Morrison Government must be reversed. These are more than just concerning statistics. They are our family, friends and workmates.

Whether it be the re-emergence of diseases like silicosis, long thought eradicated from the world of work, or the epidemic of mental health injuries in our workplaces, working people need a Federal Government that will take action to make work safe, secure and healthy.

They need a government that will tackle the scourge of insecure work and the risks it poses to our health and safety rather than one that makes the situation worse.

They need a government that will take active steps to manage the pandemic and secure the necessary tools to fight it rather than the 'let it rip' approach led by the Morrison Government.

**Most of all Australians need a government that cares.**



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