



Speech by
**Mrs NITA
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MEMBER FOR BUNDABERG

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WORKCOVER QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs NITA CUNNINGHAM (Bundaberg— ALP) (2.47 p.m.): I rise to support this new compensation legislation—legislation that, sadly, cannot help the thousands of Queenslanders who were treated badly by the coalition's changes to compensation in this State. However, it is clearly welcome news for employees and employers throughout Queensland.

The major issue of concern to all Queenslanders is jobs—access to jobs, job security, job protection and adequate and fair compensation for those who have jobs. In recent years, these issues have all deteriorated. Queensland employees and employers will be overjoyed to see this can-do Government keeping its promises, creating jobs, increasing confidence and, through this Bill, restoring equity and balance to the Queensland workers compensation system.

Unfortunately, changes made to the system by the previous Government upset that essential balance. They have resulted in significant reductions in the rights of workers to compensation, added exposure to common law to some employers, and eaten away at the basic right of all Queensland workers to financial protection when they are hurt at work.

The WorkCover Queensland Amendment Bill 1999 illustrates just how committed the Beattie Labor Government is to fairness and equity for employers, workers and the Queensland community. The International Labour Organisation report released just this week indicates that figures for workplace injury and fatalities across the world are on the increase. This report indicates that there are 1.1 million work-related deaths each year and 250 million work-related accidents. There are already 160,000 people affected by occupational diseases and this is expected to double by the year 2020.

In Australia work-related injuries and fatalities are also a serious cause for concern. The Industry Commission inquiry in 1995 into occupational health and safety, Work Health and Safety, illustrates that workplace injury and disease have a far greater impact than many people appreciate. This report, which is just as relevant today, indicated that around 500 people die annually as a result of traumatic injury at work and up to one in every 12 workers will suffer injury or illness. At any time, the accumulated effects of work related injury and ill health mean that up to 140,000 workers cannot work at full capacity and about 200,000 people are prevented from working at all. Work related health problems also affect people in their retirement, with up to 300,000 persons over the age of 65 estimated to be suffering from these continuing health problems.

These are the real concerns of workers compensation systems around the world. An equity system should support workers who are injured and give them adequate compensation while they are unable to work not just for the first few weeks, but while they are unable to work. An equitable system also should focus on rehabilitation of workers back into the workplace when the time is appropriate.

The changing nature of work means that there are new safety problems emerging all the time. The workers compensation system must change to keep up with those changes. The extensive use of information technology, the Internet and mobile phones has resulted in more employees working in isolation or in mobile offices, and in many cases the worker may be removed from a fixed work environment with its built-in safety features, supervisors and supports.

New products and systems are being introduced all the time. New hazardous substance are being created, and the pressure on industry to maintain global competitiveness is increasing. With

increasing pressure to perform, to produce more, to make more and to work faster, the potential for human error or mechanical breakdown resulting in injury is magnified. The health and safety implications of this rapidly changing environment must be identified and adequately managed. Good management is the key to the prevention of work related injury and disease, and the changing environment offers enhanced opportunities to effect positive change in the workplace to focus on prevention.

Government plays an important role in facilitating and regulating workplace health and safety and has considerable powers of enforcement and intervention. Equally, the Government has a role in assisting employers and employees to prevent injury and illness before they occur. But the changing nature of the labour market also means that the variety of different types of contractual arrangements needs to be accommodated through legislation.

A workers compensation system which does not address the needs of the emerging categories of workers is one which is out of date and inequitable. The Beattie Labor Government's WorkCover Queensland Amendment Bill recognises the function of the emerging workplace environment. By contrast, the coalition moans about so-called compo culture, focusing its debate on worker fraud, creating the perception that any worker seeking to make a claim is acting fraudulently, and is completely unable or unwilling to comprehend that we can have a system that is fair to both employers and employees.

Good workplace health and safety practices and a workers compensation system that focuses on fairness and balance are the answer, and it is the Beattie Labor Government that is delivering in this area. We are restoring fairness and balance to the scheme, recognising the emerging categories of workers and workplaces that will be commonplace in the 21st century. We are restoring fairness and balance to the scheme by removing the harsh and unfair definition of "injury" for workers. We are restoring fairness and balance to the scheme by establishing a more independent and transparent review process for workers and employers. We are restoring fairness and balance to the scheme by protecting employers from exposure to common law damages, maintaining self-insurance, abolishing the 10% surcharge and maintaining employer premiums at the second lowest rate in Australia.

I have listened to concerns from the building industry regarding perceived extra red tape and paperwork, and I have spoken to the Minister regarding the effect on the building industry. I am satisfied that those concerns are being addressed, and ongoing negotiations with the industry will be undertaken to minimise extra work prior to those changes that will affect the building industry and will come into effect in July of next year.

All of these reforms provide for a responsible and balanced approach to the workers compensation system. Not one person in this House would not expect to be properly compensated if he or she were hurt in the conduct of their work. I believe that every worker in Queensland is entitled to the same—the same right to a healthy and safe environment and the same right to protection if they are injured at work. This WorkCover Queensland Amendment Bill will help to deliver that, and I commend it to the House.
