



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY AND ANOTHER ACT AMENDMENT BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Alger—ALP) (11.46 a.m.): The 100 or so work fatalities each year in Queensland are 100 too many. In fact, one injury is one too many. The great tragedy of all this—and it is all too well known to the families and loved ones of people injured or who die from workplace injuries—is that the deaths and injuries are largely preventable. I support this bill and the minister's efforts to improve the regulatory regime guiding workplace health and safety practices in Queensland. I know there have also been significant contributions to the bill from trade unions, employer associations, non-government agencies and numerous departmental officers contributing to these reforms. I acknowledge the good efforts that have gone into this bill.

Labor governments, as many honourable members have said, have a proud record of protecting the safety of workers whilst also being mindful of the need for businesses to grow and develop. It is expected that employers will be concerned about the costs of workplace health and safety changes and practices. They want to keep their costs to a minimum. They will be concerned about further training for workplace health and safety officers. They will be concerned about the costs of assessment or auditing processes. But the cost to business of unsafe practices can be enormous.

We have seen this fairly commonly in relation to damage to company reputation when injuries or accidents occur. It is an important cost that I believe businesses ought to bear. I am pleased to see that this bill tries to strike a healthy balance between the needs of workers and the needs of company owners and operators.

Good workplace health and safety practices, in my view, are good insurance for employers. It is vital for government, industry and trade unions to continue to work together to be vigilant. There are also many emerging risks, some we know about, some we do not know enough about. For instance, we do not hear a lot about workplace health and safety risks within hairdressing salons. Hairdressers are exposed to horrible chemicals every day of their lives. I have often asked my hairdresser what sorts of precautions she takes. But they are taking very limited precautions in those salons. There are all sorts of industries where we know little about those workplace practices. I think in future we will hear there are problems in those environments. One that we are hearing more about is smoking in venues. There have been some claims against employers in relation to passive smoking. We need to be vigilant about all of those areas.

It is particularly important that this bill widens the onus of responsibility for safe workplaces to include not only employers but also suppliers and others in the chain of industry. The bill includes a requirement that suppliers must supply safe equipment and other items to workplaces. The whole issue of onus of responsibility is a very important one. A constituent who came to see me recently is being affected by fumes emitted from an adjacent workplace, but his own employer does not seem to be willing to approach the workplace or do much about it. The employee himself has approached the Division of Workplace Health and Safety and the EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency, to try and get support in relation to his own workplace issue.

This man feels like he is being pushed from pillar to post and he is not getting the right sorts of answers yet. In relation to this bill, I am aware that Safework Queensland and trade unions have actively contributed and, in general, are very pleased with what is contained in the bill. However, they have raised with me two issues. They believe that two clauses of the bill could have been beefed up. I raise these with the minister—I am sure that he is well aware of them—and I ask that he keep a

watchful eye on these particular issues. One of them relates to clause 23. The bill proposes that the workplace health and safety officers do an assessment once a year. Some unionists—and I know staff at Safework Queensland—have lobbied for an audit process to be incorporated into the bill rather than an assessment process. An audit is commonly used within the occupational health and safety field and should be easily understood. In fact, the training of WHSOs includes a session on auditing and planning. The WHSOs have to complete an audit as part of their assessment on their training.

The proposed amendment will require employers to enable WHSOs to conduct at least one workplace health and safety assessment each year using criteria developed either by the Division of Workplace Health and Safety or agreed to by the workplace health and safety committee at the workplace. A WHSO will be required to record the results of assessment and submit them to the employer along with any other recommendations to rectify anything that needs to be rectified. This is an important and positive step forward, but the issues raised with me are that it is far more preferable to have this process beefed up and to be a complete audit rather than an assessment.

The second issue relates to clause 20(3)(o), which gives workplace health and safety representatives an entitlement to attend a training course. This is not a mandatory requirement. Trade unionists and Safework Queensland have raised this issue with me, saying that it should be a mandatory requirement. For example, the legislation for Commonwealth employees states that representatives must receive training.

A number of issues have been raised. Again, the objective of the bill is to try to provide a stronger regime for workplace health and safety to prevent injuries and accidents whilst not imposing too many costs or burdens on industry. I think that we have a reasonable balance, but I ask the minister to keep a watchful eye on these particular issues—issues that unions tried to achieve but probably feel that they have lost out on—and they are the right of workplace health and safety representatives to stop work and for representatives to have the right to issue provisional improvement notices.

I think that the fact that we have unions jumping up and down about some of these issues and that they are not entirely happy with the bill is a good sign. It means, I think, that we have struck a balance between the needs of industry and employees. But again, as a caution, I urge that we continue to keep a watchful eye on some of these issues that have been raised. But overall, this is very positive, much-needed legislation and reforms. I give full marks to the minister and his staff for bringing this bill to the House.