




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION (COAL WORKERS' PNEUMOCONIOSIS) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (9.03 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Workers' Compensation Rehabilitation (Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. Can I say how refreshing it is to be speaking to a bill that has bipartisan support. There is so much passion and commitment from all members here tonight to see this legislation pass.

The re-emergence of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, CWP—or black lung, as it is commonly known—is a ticking time bomb with potentially devastating consequences for those individuals who contract this insidious medical condition. We have certainly heard just how real that is when we heard from the member for Bundamba earlier tonight.

This bill aims to establish the Queensland workers compensation scheme which provides benefits for workers who sustain injury in their employment and for dependants if a worker's injury results in the worker's death, as well as encouraging improved health and safety performance by employers. As we are all aware, coal workers' pneumoconiosis is a lung disease contracted through workplace exposure to coaldust over a period of time. CWP is considered a latent onset injury under the workers compensation scheme.

There is no question that the re-emergence of CWP in Queensland has sent shock waves through the mining sector. It is absolutely imperative that processes and procedures are put in place to address the risk of black lung disease, and this amendment bill will ensure that those who have contracted and, heaven forbid, those who may contract the disease in the future are compensated adequately and afforded the treatment they deserve.

With the advent of recent changes to electoral boundaries, the Burdekin electorate will now encompass the majority of the coalmines in Queensland and the associated communities that house the mine workers and provide the necessary support and services to the mining sector. Towns like Collinsville, Glenden, Moranbah, Middlemount, Dysart and Clermont have a rich coalmining history. In fact, the Burdekin electorate is now smack bang in the middle of some of the richest coal deposits in the country.

We are right to question the standard and level of care provided to those workers who contracted black lung disease in the past. Unfortunately, black lung disease has tragically claimed lives. There are a number of both current and former mine workers who are battling this debilitating illness. As MPs we have an onus to do everything we can to put in place the necessary legislation to prevent black lung disease—a disease which is totally preventable.

This amendment bill certainly is not about knocking coalmines because coalmining has given people in my electorate, and certainly people in a number of other electorates around Queensland, a plethora of job opportunities and employment throughout the years. This bill is about creating a safety net for those who have slipped through the cracks when it comes to contracting a workplace illness like coal workers' pneumoconiosis. Make no mistake: all mining companies will need to ensure that

appropriate dust monitoring and dust treatment programs are in place at all mines in this state to ameliorate the conditions in which our miners work. I was talking to some miners in Moranbah recently. They expressed to me their concerns about the potential impact that their work environment could have on their health into the future.

Certainly the passing of this bill will allow coal workers, as well as former coalminers, the comfort of knowing that they are eligible for appropriate compensation for black lung disease. There has been a cloudy past when it comes to former coalminers being able to access compensation. This bill will ensure that companies have to go above and beyond to ensure the workplace health and safety of their employees. There will be no shadow of a doubt that if an employee has any concerns about having potentially contracted coal workers' pneumoconiosis or a coalmine dust related disease they will have access to a medical examination through the workers compensation scheme. This bill will achieve the objectives by amending the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003, the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 and the Electrical Safety Act 2007.

The amendment bill introduces a medical examination for retired or former coal workers who are concerned that they may have black lung disease or a coalmine dust lung disease. This bill will go above and beyond the access that the compensation scheme through WorkCover can allow, having no limit on a worker's age or employment status.

The passing of this amendment bill will also allow for the payment of a lump sum compensation payment for workers who are diagnosed with pneumoconiosis, which includes CWP, silicosis or asbestosis, from working in a dusty environment. This lump sum will help to ease the burden that these workers and their families face upon diagnosis of a workplace related disease. These workers and their families throughout the state—and those in my own electorate—will be able to sleep a little easier at night knowing that they will not be left destitute.

One of the positive measures contained within this amendment bill is that it will not just look after the workers who contract dust borne diseases from this point on; it will also look after those who have already contracted black lung disease or other dust related diseases. The amendment will ensure that a worker with pneumoconiosis who experiences disease progression can reopen their claim and access further benefits under the workers compensation scheme if their condition deteriorates.

This compensation is about knowing that families will still be able to stand on their own two feet if worst comes to worst and a worker falls ill. We have all witnessed the devastating impact that black lung disease can have on an individual's health and the impact that it has on families and those tight-knit communities that characterise our coal towns. This is why it is important that this bill is passed here tonight so that these families who have suffered in the past feel that their voices have finally been heard.

It is vital that we look after our workforces in Queensland, whether that be in our mining industries, agriculture industries or even retail. If a worker is injured at their place of employment or contracts a disease directly related to their workplace then there needs to be the appropriate legislation in place to adequately ensure that the worker is correctly compensated.

The proposed amendments will allow former coal workers to undergo a one-off lung disease examination. The worker must have been employed in an industry involving mining, loading, transporting or otherwise dealing with coal and have permanently stopped working in the coal industry before 1 January 2017.

The mining sector provides employment for tens of thousands of employees throughout the state. It provides significant revenue to the state in the form of royalties, and there is no question that Queensland has a long and proud history of mining. Our responsibility here tonight is to ensure that our mineworkers are appropriately treated when it comes to workplace injury and compensation. We must ensure that the workers of our state feel that they are not left to pick up the pieces from a workplace incident or accident.

The Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill is about drawing a line to ensure that the past and future workers of this state are afforded the protection they deserve and that, heaven forbid, if they should contract black lung disease they are looked after and, if necessary, compensated. I commend the bill to the House.