

MEDIA RELEASE



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Coalminers' lives at risk as deadly "Black Lung" disease re-emerges in Queensland for the first time in decades

Three cases of Black Lung have been detected in three months at coal mines in Queensland, in what could be the tip of the iceberg for a disease that had been wiped out in Australia half a century ago.

Black Lung, or Coal Workers Pneumoconiosis, is caused by a build up of coal dust in the lungs due to inadequate ventilation and health standards in coalmines.

While a regulatory system was set up to monitor and detect a range of health issues affecting coalmine workers, which included providing regular x-rays, the miners union believes the system has not been maintained and is compromised.

CFMEU Queensland District President Stephen Smyth confirmed the new cases, sparking fears the deadly disease had re-emerged in unknown proportions.

"It's appalling that companies and regulatory bodies have let health standards deteriorate, putting the lives of workers at serious risk," said Mr Smyth.

"This is a disease that takes hold gradually and we're extremely concerned that recent diagnoses are just the tip of the iceberg,

"Of great concern is that Australian health and regulatory frameworks are no longer equipped to deal with the disease."

A report from the Queensland Government's Health Improvement and Awareness Committee, shows that local authorities do not have the required qualifications to read and interpret x-rays of coal mine workers, leading to a backlog of 100,000 x-rays to be reviewed.

Mr Smyth said specialists from the United States had to be used by the men recently diagnosed because local expertise simply didn't exist anymore.

"There is no way to judge the size of the problem affecting coalmine workers in Queensland, or for how long it has been an issue because the regulatory system has broken down and the medical specialists don't exist in Australia to deal with it.

"There is a real possibility that many more current and ex-mine workers are living and working in Queensland with the disease undiagnosed.

"Failure to detect Black Lung early means that miners will continue to work in the coalfields at a devastating cost to their health."

The CFMEU welcomes the Queensland Government's decision to conduct a review and is seeking urgent action from government and industry to address this issue. The union has made a number of recommendations that need to be enacted as a matter of urgency.

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The CFMEU Mining and Energy Division is seeking:

- Obtain and process all exposure data for 2015.
- Consider the establishment of an industry database for coal mines to monitor all personal exposure data.
- Ensure that suitably qualified “B Readers” review all x-rays taken of coalmine workers for dust disease, not just medical conditions.
- Identify other at-risk workers by randomly sampling those with 15-20+ years service in the industry and performing checks.
- Implement a system to clear the backlog of 100,000 outstanding worker medicals.
- Implement a community outreach process to encourage people in Ipswich, Collinsville, Blackwater and Moura to come forward and get checked.
- With Black Lung developing later in careers or during retirement it is vital that healthcare and screening extends beyond the employment of a worker to ensure they receive the support they need when they need it.
- That chest x-rays be mandatory and regular for mine workers, as well as on termination.
- Communicate to the wider industry the risks given the three confirmed cases of Black Lung.

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