

# SAFETY ALERT FROM THE CFMEU

29<sup>th</sup> April 2008



## WARNING - FORMALDEHYDE IS THE NEXT ASBESTOS

Formaldehyde is used in particle board and furniture. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) is calling for the Federal Government to start an urgent large-scale investigation into the use of formaldehyde in household products. We believe formaldehyde is as dangerous as asbestos, and should be subject to stringent laws.

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The Government has already confirmed up to 50 Northern Territory intervention staff and police officers were exposed to concerning levels of the substance in the converted shipping containers they were living in for six months.

The CFMEU says the incident exposed a major health concern that could affect millions of Australians. High levels of the dangerous carcinogen could be found in thousands of Australian homes as it is used in particle board and furniture.

The CFMEU's National Health and Safety Coordinator, Martin Kingham, says union members are exposed to the potentially carcinogenic substance in their daily work and the health concerns extend to householders as well. Mr Kingham says union workers have reported a range of detrimental health effects from short-term exposure including asthma, breathing difficulties, skin irritations, severe eczema and dizziness. He says American studies have shown a serious cancer risk associated with the substance.

"With the combination of both those short-term exposures but also the potential of increased cancer risks with long-term exposure that's a convincing argument that we should be using the safest standard possible here in Australia," he said.

"There's also a long-term health effect for ordinary householders - particularly when you think of a kitchen, kitchen cupboards, that's where you store food, and tests have indicated that the formaldehyde cures out of the product into the air for up to 20 years after it's been installed."

Mr Kingham says there is a voluntary formaldehyde content standard that Australian manufacturers comply with, but imported particle and chipboards often contain up to four times the acceptable level.

He says only legislation will stop the import of products containing unacceptable levels of formaldehyde.

"One of the things we're asking the Federal Government to do is to in fact put some teeth to legislate as they have done for materials that contain asbestos, to make it an offence for people to import products that are hazardous and are recognised as being outside the Australian exposure standard," he said.