

Workers put on trial after police massacre in Kazakhstan

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Thirty-seven workers and political activists have been put on trial following a brutal intervention by police on December 16 in the Kazakh city Zhanaozen, which left at least 17 striking oil workers dead and hundreds wounded.

Twenty-five of the accused are charged with participating in mass unrest, the destruction and theft of private property and the use of force against government representatives. The remaining 12 defendants, who include Vladimiz Kozlov, the leader of the liberal opposition party Alga, are accused of “inciting social discord.”

The massacre was a response by the government to a month-long strike by thousands of oil workers in Zhanaozen. The demands of the workers included better wages for themselves as well as for local teachers and doctors, and the resignation of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The oil company Ozenmunaigaz had fired 1,800 workers because of the strike. The demonstration in December demanded their reemployment.

While the government continues to blame “outside forces” for the unrest, claiming that the police had acted in self-defence, footage (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BotGiV5DeQ>) of the events clearly show a heavily armed unit of OMON-police marching toward the peaceful protesters and eventually firing directly into the crowd.

One man was bludgeoned to death by the police, when already lying on the floor. The police have refused to identify the responsible officers. A hearing date for the officers who are accused of “misconduct” remains to be set.

Following the incident, President Nazarbayev had declared a state of emergency and a curfew in the city until January 5. In order to mitigate the general outrage over the massacre Nazarbayev fired several managers

of the oil company and removed his son-in-law, Timu Kulibayev, from his post as supervisor of the nation’s oil companies. Fearing further unrest, he also made sure that most of the fired workers were reemployed by another company.

The situation remains tense, however, with the majority of the population siding with the workers and blaming the government for the massacre.

The trial against 25 of the defendants began on March 27 under the strictest security precautions in an overcrowded courtroom. The trial against the remaining 12 defendants, who have been charged with “inciting social discord”, a charge which carries a maximum sentence of 12 years in prison, is due to take place at a later, not yet specified date. Apparently the government wants to wait for the tense situation to cool down.

The first day of the trial started with angry scenes in the courtroom when stewards tried to prevent families and friends of the defendants from participating in the trial. Following some skirmishes with the police some of them were allowed to enter the courtroom. Many relatives and citizens of Zhanaozen are angry that the trial is not taking place in Zhanaozen but rather in Aktau, a city at the Caspian Sea, two hours away. Miram Batkanbayev, a cousin of one of the accused, told a reporter from *EurasiaNet.org*: “Are we expected to travel here for a month? This is unfair.” Several hearing dates have been postponed at the last-minute in order to delay the proceedings.

During the riots in December, shops and government buildings were damaged and set on fire. At the hearing on March 27, several shop owners appeared in court to ostentatiously relinquish any claim for compensation. One small businessman, for instance, declared: “In my opinion, the prosecutors were unable to identify the people who have destroyed my property. And the 50

million tenge [around 250,000 euros] I am liable in compensation cannot make up for the lives that were lost.”

At the hearing on April 17, defendants withdrew their confessions, claiming they had been made under torture. Human Rights Watch called for a halt to the trial in a press release on April 23, claiming that “the alleged widespread and serious ill-treatment of the defendants undermines the chances of guaranteeing a fair trial.”

Rumours about torture of the defendants in custody have been circulating for some time. One worker was beaten so badly during an “interrogation”, that he died shortly afterwards at his home. Mayra Tursynaliyeva, whose husband, Zhalgas Shalgynbayev, has been charged with committing murder during the riots, told *EurasiaNet.org* that he was unable to stand and breathe properly when she visited him in prison. The police had beaten him and strangled him with tape in order to force a confession. Shalgynbayev himself was not involved in the strike.

Most of the inhabitants of Zhanaozen blame the government for the massacre and condemn the trial as an attempt to find scapegoats. They are outraged over the killings, the actions of the government and the social grievances in the city. Many people from Kazakhstan and Russia have also expressed their rage over the Nazarbayev regime on the Internet.

Zhanaozen is a town built during the period of the Soviet Union around an oil field. The residents are for the most part employed in the oil sector. Expressing general frustration over the decrepit state of the town, an infuriated pensioner said on *EurasiaNet.org*: “We extract oil, and look what kind of a dilapidated town we live in.” The government, she said, had “promised to do a lot but they haven’t done anything yet.”

The oil workers’ strike was an expression of the widespread discontent in the population over the catastrophic consequences of capitalist restoration in the country, which has enriched a tiny layer of corrupt former Stalinist bureaucrats, while plunging the rest of the population into dire poverty. The world economic crisis hit Kazakhstan like the other states of the former Soviet Union particularly hard, aggravating long-standing social grievances.

The financial crisis on Wall Street led to the burst of a big housing bubble in Kazakhstan, which especially

affected broad layers of the urban middle classes. The banking sector stood on the brink of collapse due to large-scale debts with American financial institutions and was bailed out with \$14 billion at the expense of the working population.

A second wave of the crisis would severely affect the already weakened economy, of which the export of natural resources accounts for 73 percent of the total. Kazakhstan’s major export markets – the EU, China, and Russia – are already showing signs of economic slowdown and recession.

Strikes by industrial workers have increased since the beginning of the crisis. Typical demands include the payment of withheld wages and better working conditions and food supply. The strike in Zhanaozen was by far the longest and most significant. The government panicked because the workers started to raise political demands. The massacre of the workers and the show trial are first and foremost aimed at intimidating the population.

Neither the Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, nor any of his colleagues in the post-Soviet states and beyond have condemned the massacre or the trial. The social tensions in these countries are just as explosive as in Kazakhstan and their governments will proceed with the same brutality as Nazarbayev against any opposition by the working class.



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