

Scores of Australian workers killed in workplace incidents

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9 December 2015

Workers in Australia continue to be killed or maimed in workplace accidents with sickening regularity as companies cut corners on safety and governments reduce funding for safety inspectorates.

The deaths and injuries, many of which are entirely preventable, stand as a damning indictment of the capitalist system and its political servants, who put profits above the lives of ordinary working people.

In the last week of November, three young workers—Joe McDermott, Gerry Bradley and Benjamin White—perished during a single day in Perth, the capital of Western Australia (WA).

McDermott and Bradley were crushed to death under a huge concrete panel that fell from the back of a truck at a site run by building company Jaxon Constructions. The two ceiling contract workers were reportedly on a break in an area outside, but close to, the site when they were killed. Allegedly no exclusion zone had been established around the area where the tilt-up panels were being off-loaded.

White was killed when he fell from scaffolding at Alcoa's Kwinana refinery.

The three deaths brought the number of workplace fatalities in WA to five during the second half of November, following two deaths in the state's mining sector. Since July, WA has recorded 17 workplace deaths.

Work-related accidents also resulted in seven fatalities in the state of Victoria during November—four deaths on rural properties and three at urban work sites in Melbourne.

The urban deaths included 25-year-old maintenance worker Ron Ricketts, who was electrocuted at a Braeside factory, and 29-year-old Carlos Araujo, who was crushed to death under a section of pipe on the same day. A 64-year-old worker died in an explosion

when he went to inspect a mis-timed detonation at a construction site in Melbourne's outer southeast.

Also in November, two workers died in Queensland. A delivery driver was fatally injured at the Tarong Power Station and a worker was crushed to death under a large steel pipe at a sandblasting business in Ipswich, west of Brisbane.

Safe Work Australia, a government agency, reports that to December 1 this year, the number of work-related deaths had reached 173. The highest death tolls occurred in transport, postal and warehousing, 48; agriculture, forestry and fishing, 48; construction, 23; and mining, 13. Last year, the figure reached 187.

Officially-recorded deaths in mining increased from 10 in 2013 to 13 in 2014 and 13 so far this year. These fatalities occurred as mining companies laid off thousands of workers and restructured their operations to slash costs amid plunging commodity prices driven by falling demand in Asia and globally.

Many more workers are injured on the job, with many seriously injured or incapacitated. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, over a half a million workers were injured in work-related incidents in 2013–14—around one person every minute.

Thousands of workers also continue to die from work-related diseases through exposure to dust, carcinogens, chemicals and asbestos. A recent report by the Cancer Council of Western Australia cited research that concluded that occupational risk factors may account for 6.5 percent of new cancer cases diagnosed in Australia every year, amounting to around 5,000 cases attributed to workplaces annually.

In a damning revelation on December 1, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program reported the re-emergence of black lung, or coal miner's pneumoconiosis. This disease, caused by

inhaling coal dust, was thought to have been eradicated. The program reported that four cases of black lung had been diagnosed in Queensland but stated there might be many more. That is because thousands of x-rays stockpiled in the state's Mines Department remaining unexamined due to an absence of qualified readers.

Speaking on mining deaths and injuries at a Mine Safety Road Show in October, WA Department of Mines and Petroleum regional inspector Doug Barclay highlighted the impact of corporate cost-cutting on mine safety. "Cost-cutting is part of every mining company's strategy at present so it means the level of support is down, the resources are down, perhaps the level of training that is available is reduced," he said.

Barclay also pointed to other factors contributing to workplace accidents, including increasing levels of stress among workers due to concerns over job security. "The uncertainty of jobs is a distraction that people are maybe not as focused on what they are doing because they are concerned," he noted.

In a report earlier this year, Alex Collie of Monash University's Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research drew attention to rising levels of stress among workers, noting that claims for "serious" work-related mental health issues rose from around 6,500 in 2000–01 to 8,000 in 2011–12.

These conditions did not fall from the sky. Successive Liberal and Labor governments, at both federal and state level, have unwaveringly backed employers' workplace restructuring at the expense of safety, working conditions and jobs, in order to boost company profits. At the same time, they have deregulated safety, including cutting spending on regulation and reducing the number of safety inspectors.

For example, the number of WorkSafe inspectors in WA was reduced from 103 to 93 this year after the Barnett Liberal state government cut the agency's funds by \$4.1 million in the May budget. The cutback has undermined the inspectorate's ability to conduct systematic and random investigations of worksites. The number of safety inspectors was also wound back in NSW in 2013.

Moreover, the trade unions, while feigning concern for safety, are wholly complicit in the undermining of conditions. For decades they have worked to contain opposition by workers to the relentless elimination of jobs, the removal or watering down of safety practices,

the imposition of longer shifts and around-the-clock working, and the ever-greater use of contract labour. The ongoing workplace deaths and injuries are the deadly consequences of this profit-driven process.



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