

More Australian workers killed in preventable workplace incidents

By Terry Cook
11 July 2017

Over a seven-day period at the end of last month, industrial incidents claimed the lives of four workers in the Australian state of Victoria, highlighting the dangerous conditions across industries and workplaces.

Two farm workers were killed within 24 hours. One man in his 50s was thrown from the cabin of a spreader truck that then crushed him on a property south of Yea. A man about 40 died after falling from a stationary truck while loading manure at an egg farm near Geelong.

A carpenter in his late 60s died after falling from the first storey of a house under construction at Kalkallo, north of Melbourne and a 40-year-old hand stablehand was killed in a fall at Bendigo Racecourse.

These tragedies were followed by the death of David John Keen, 51, on July 4 at Rio Tinto's Yandicoogina iron ore mine in the Pilbara region in Western Australia. Keen was killed in what the company termed "a serious incident" that may have involved an explosion.

The latest report released by a federal government agency, Safe Work Australia (SWA), shows that the number of deaths this year is on track to match or exceed the grim toll of 178 workers killed in 2016.

According to SWA, 95 workers died in industrial incidents from January 1 to June 28 this year compared to 87 for the same period last year.

So far, the sectors with the highest rate of deaths remain transport, postal and warehousing (38), agriculture, forestry and fishing (20), and construction (16). Last year's fatalities across these three sectors were 64, 41 and 30 respectively.

Between 2003 and 2015, there were 3,207 industrial-related deaths, or an annual average of 247. While there has been a decline in the overall annual toll, the decline has been largely in deaths caused by vehicle collisions—the category with the highest number of fatalities. In all other categories of cause of death, the number of fatalities remained more or less constant or

increased.

These statistics underestimate the real number of work-related deaths. Many more workers die from industry-related illnesses, cancers and other diseases, sometimes after years of pain and suffering. The statistics also exclude transport workers killed in road accidents as well as suicides related to workplace psychological injuries.

The SWA web site itself states: "Diseases are significantly under-represented in workers' compensation statistics. That is because many diseases result from long-term exposure to agents or have long latency periods, making the link between the work-related disease and the workplace difficult to establish."

A Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) analysis of the period 2016-17 estimated that 200 workers across the state of Victoria died as a direct result of workplace injury or illness, far exceeding the government's official tally of 26.

The Australian Mesothelioma Registry reports that in 2014, 641 people died from mesothelioma, a cancer caused by exposure to asbestos, which was produced and used extensively in Australia. A total ban on the manufacture, use or sale of all forms of asbestos only came into force on December 31, 2003.

Medical models point to an expected peak in deaths from mesothelioma between 2014 and 2021. Future deaths are expected to reach 18,000, on top of the estimated 10,000 deaths since the 1980s.

Many of the fatalities and injuries that continue, year on year, are avoidable. A major factor has been the undermining and deregulation of safety conditions carried out by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, which undermined even nominal restraints on the corporate drive to cut costs, speed up production and boost profits.

The trade unions are also directly responsible. They

ritualistically denounce companies following workplace deaths, but only to cover up their own complicity in imposing today's hothouse conditions. In the name of "international competitiveness," union-negotiated enterprise agreements have opened the way for seven-day working, around the clock shifts, and working in wet weather.

Also with union assistance, employers have imposed ever-greater casualisation, with workers often receiving little or no safety induction. This includes coal mining, one of the most dangerous occupations. According to an official report last June, contract labour now accounts for 33 percent of the total workforce in New South Wales mines.

To head off independent action by workers after workplace casualties, unions have called for official inquiries or appealed to governments to introduce stricter regulations and penalties. That is to leave safety in the hands of the very forces responsible for dismantling the conditions in the first place.

Jorge Castillo-Riffo, 54, died after suffering serious crush injuries to his head and neck on the Flinders Medical Centre construction site in Adelaide, South Australia in November 2014. In response, SafeWork SA pledged its investigation "would identify any breaches of the Work Health and Safety Act as well as all parties with potential responsibility for workplace safety."

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) state secretary Aaron Cartledge declared: "SafeWork and police have got to do their work, we can't speculate, it's an active investigation."

In February this year, the South Australian government announced it was dropping all charges against the project's lead contractor HYLIC and Castillo-Riffo's employer SRG Building (Southern) for alleged workplace safety breaches.

Just days after the announcement, a 55-year-old worker was killed while working a jackhammer on the same project. Despite the government's response to the previous fatality, Cartledge declared the union "wants a full investigation" by the same agencies.

Fatalities so far this year include:

- A 65-year-old man died after being struck when part of a pressurised pipe detached during tunnel work on the Lendlease NorthConnex project in Sydney's northwest.

- A worker in his mid-30s was killed by a large pipe that fell from a truck at the Neil Mansell Group transport

yard in Chinchilla, Queensland.

- A 60-year-old man died from serious cranial injuries after being trapped and crushed in a scissor lift device at James Hardie Business Supplies in Carole Park, Brisbane.

- A 32-year old rigger was crushed to death by a heavy metal beam while working on a barge operated by building contractor McConnell Dowell off Barangaroo in Sydney's Darling Harbour.

- A mine worker was killed in Tasmania's northwest at the Grange Resources open-cut Savage River iron ore mine—the fourth mining death in the region in as many years.

- A painter in his late 60s suffered critical head injuries after falling 4 metres at a construction site at Merricks North on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula.

- A worker in his early 50s was crushed by a load of steel that fell from a forklift at a scrap metal yard at Foster in South Gippsland, Victoria.

- In January a 17-year-old was killed after plunging 12 metres to his death on a construction site in Perth, Western Australia, bringing the total number of industrial deaths across the country in the first week of 2017 to seven.

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