

Rush to complete new stadium blamed for deaths of three US construction workers

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Three construction workers were killed July 14 when a 567-foot crane lifting a 400-ton section of a retractable roof bent in half and collapsed inside the new Miller Park stadium being built for the Milwaukee Brewers' professional baseball team. An estimated 1,200 tons of concrete and debris fell, killing the workers and injuring five others, including the crane operator.

The dead were Jerome Starr, 52, Jeff Wischer, 40, and William DeGrave, 39, who were in a cage that was being hoisted by another crane when the disaster occurred. Fortunately nearly all of the other 700 construction workers at the site had been removed as a precaution during the roof lift.

The crane, nicknamed "Big Blue," is one of the largest such pieces of equipment in the world, requiring a 1,150 ton counter-weight to keep it balanced. The shock caused by the crane's collapse was severe enough to be measured on the nearest seismograph at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Construction work is one of the deadliest occupations in America. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics 94 workers lost their lives in crane accidents alone in 1997, up from an average of 77 deaths a year between 1992 and 1996. At the same time 38,980 ironworkers on construction sites were injured badly enough to lose time from work.

The families of the victims are only eligible to receive death benefits equal to four years of pay. Under Wisconsin's workers compensation law, it is almost impossible to recover damages from employers even if they were guilty of gross negligence.

Generally the death of workers on the job barely rates a mention in the US news media. However, the Miller Park disaster received some coverage, mainly because a delay in the scheduled opening of the \$400 million new stadium could cost the Milwaukee Brewers' owners millions in lost profits. Typical was an article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, entitled, "The long-term effect of Brewers' construction disaster," which complained about the loss of income from ticket sales, naming rights, corporate

sponsorship, suites, premium seating and concessions. The difference in revenue potential between the Brewers' old ballpark, County Stadium, and Miller Park "is like day and night," Milwaukee sports attorney Martin Greenberg told the *Journal Sentinel*.

There is mounting evidence that the three workers lost their lives because the construction companies were under pressure to complete the project on schedule, regardless of the risks they had to take.

The widow of Jerome Starr told the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office that workers did not want to proceed with the lift because of hazardous conditions caused by high winds. Ramona Starr said she had visited her husband on the site shortly before the lift and he told her that the ironworkers had argued with a supervisor, saying it was too risky to proceed. The medical examiner's report stated, "there had been an argument about the advisability of placing the roof section, reportedly some ironworkers felt the weather, i.e., the wind, was too strong."

Steve Boudreaux, an official with the ironworkers union, said Starr, who was a union steward and planned to retire after this job, had also called the union voicing his complaints only 75 minutes before the crane collapsed.

At the time of the lift the National Weather Service recorded winds gusting to 26 mph. Although nine sections of the roof had previously been successfully lifted to the top of the stadium, none were carried out in such high winds. Stadium officials and construction crews had previously noted that lifts in winds of more than 10 mph were potentially dangerous.

Authorities said that at least 25 ironworkers went home earlier in the day, reportedly as an act of protest against unsafe working conditions. Lyle Balistreri, president of the Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council, which includes Ironworkers Local 8, however, discounted any report of a protest, saying the union had signed an agreement that there would be no work stoppages on the Miller Park project.

Frank Busalacchi, a Teamsters official and chairman of the

stadium board's construction committee, came to the defense of management, saying, "The cause may be something that wouldn't have mattered if the winds were 95 mph. If there was a crane failure, there was a crane failure."

A *Journal Sentinel* reporter who interviewed workers at the construction site noted that workers felt the subcontractor responsible for the roof construction, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries of America, considered them "expendable." The article said, "To a man, those speaking out ... believed it was too windy to make the Wednesday pick [roof section lift]. To a man, they believed their safety concerns were unheeded. Behind schedule, 'management'—not a pleasant word to some of these guys—turned the screws, increased the pressure and forced unsafe situations, they alleged."

One construction worker who quit four months ago, said, "I felt it was unsafe...I would never go back there." Many workers said they felt pressure to work harder and faster to keep the project on track to be ready for opening day in 2000.

The director of the Crane Institute of America, James Headley, said, "I don't know if I would want to make a lift in 25- to 30-mile-an-hour winds. I can't believe they would want to do it. I can't understand it." Mel Stapel, the semi-retired owner of the company that designed Big Blue said, "They shouldn't have been picking, it looked to me like the wind was kind of high. It's common knowledge in the crane industry that wind has an effect on the load as it's being picked. It's somewhat technical, but it's common sense, really."

Mitsubishi, which holds the \$47 million subcontract to build Miller Park's retractable roof, reportedly faced stiff financial penalties if the work was not completed on schedule. Mitsubishi removed one of its subcontractors, Dumas Concepts, from the job on July 9, five days before the crane collapsed, allegedly after a disagreement over safety. "Dumas was fired because they would not make picks in the high winds," said Donnie Halama, a construction worker.

The stadium's former safety director, John Hauke, also left the job three months ago. Hauke said, "I have a lot of things right now that I want to say and that need to be said... I worked mighty hard for two years to make sure nothing like this happened, I did the best I could."

The first roof pick was carried out January 8 in very low temperatures, but with a wind of less than 10 mph. The lift had been delayed for 17 days to wait for a calm day. The second pick, scheduled for March 5, was also postponed after winds reached 20 mph.

Moreover, an additional 100 feet of boom was added to the

original 467 feet crane two weeks before the ill-fated lift. However, no additional ballast was added to the base of the crane to balance it, especially in high winds.

Stadium board officials reportedly met with HCH Joint Venture, the general contractor, and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to pressure them to get back on schedule. They expressed concern over the delays between roof picks in the late winter and early spring and said the fixed roof panel down the right-field line had to be put in place soon or the project would be in danger of falling behind schedule.

Construction on the Miller Park site has been temporarily halted. The Milwaukee County district attorney's office and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration are investigating the accident, with the help of forensic engineers and metallurgists.

The roof that was damaged in the crane's collapse was made from a special high-strength steel, designed and produced in Luxembourg, which will take seven to eight months to replace. The project coordinators have gotten around this dilemma by deciding to use an inferior grade of roof steel that can be quickly produced in the US, thereby reducing the delay to four or five months.

Miller Park is not an isolated case. In the last decade 33 of the 120 teams in the four major sports leagues have constructed new facilities. Another 66 teams are either seeking new facilities, in the process of finalizing a deal, or waiting to move into a new stadiums. Much of the financing for stadiums, including Miller Park, comes from public funds. Teams lease the government-owned buildings but pocket most of the revenues through their control of operating rights. As one recent *Detroit News* article noted, "New stadiums are a cash cow for teams."

The frenzied pursuit in the last decade for the construction of new sports stadiums underlies the death of the three Milwaukee construction workers—this is the real cost paid so that sporting consortiums can establish their fields of dreams.



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