

On the WSWS article about the deaths of three US construction workers

28 July 1999

Dear WSWS,

Thanks for the article on the deaths of the three construction workers at Miller Park.

It's clear from what you say that the men and women on these sites work in highly precarious conditions. This is not, primarily, a matter of the physical dangers which are present. Nor for that matter, could a thoughtful person accept the cynical, self-serving comment of the Teamster official who said it was simply a matter of a crane that failed. The greater danger emerges in the form of the complex web of social relations which the workers confront.

The comments of some of the men speaking through your article, moreover, leave no doubt that the experience, knowledge and technical expertise required to prevent the overwhelming majority of injuries and deaths both exist, and are present on such sites. The question, then, is why do they continue to occur?

The resources required for a \$400 million project involve financial institutions that draw funds from highly volatile global markets and mobilize construction conglomerates that operate on the same level. The banks and corporations involved work closely with political parties and governments, very often trading personnel back and forth between public and private institutions, to obtain the most advantageous conditions for operation.

I recall the incinerator project in Detroit during which two ironworkers were killed in falls. To cut costs, the city and the unions had agreed to remove safety nets from the scope of work.

Teams of lawyers, with decades of expertise, hone the contracts for these huge projects to a fine edge. In the case of Miller Park, the language committing the unions to meet a production schedule, regardless of the hazards involved, brings the pressure of the global competition for capital directly to bear. If the unions

don't sign, the money and machines quickly move elsewhere, seeking conditions for the most profitable return.

You cite the comments of Steve Boudreaux, the ironworkers union official, admitting that Jerome Starr, the 52-year-old union steward killed in the collapse, had called the hall an hour and 15 minutes before the crane went down appealing for support in stopping the pick.

It was to be undertaken in what were obviously, extremely hazardous conditions. You have compressed volumes of contemporary labor relations into this one sentence.

The fact that Starr died with members of his crew provides a grisly testimony to the fact that he, at least, was a man of principle. Had Boudreaux an ounce of principle himself, or even some concern for his members, he would have told his steward to shut the job down to stop the pick. Anyone who has worked on such a job knows that one word from Starr would have been enough. I would surmise that the union official verbally bludgeoned his steward to take his men back to work. The unions are overwhelmingly bound together, both financially and politically, with corporations and government institutions.

It may not be obvious to large numbers of workers; but the facts of your article indicate that the difficulties these workers confronted had nothing to do with a lack of courage, or militancy. Numbers walked off and the shop steward tried to take union action. But these are political problems, with their roots in the history of the twentieth century. A new level of understanding and political perspective is required to unify workers on an independent standpoint in what are highly complex conditions. We must make every effort to assist more and more of them to find their way to the WSWS and to explore its resources.

TN

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