Danger signs ignored before fatal pier collapse in Philadelphia

Tom Bishop
1 June 2000

Three women were killed on Thursday, May 18 in the collapse of a 140-foot portion of Pier 34 on the Delaware River in Philadelphia. They were killed when patrons and employees, engaged in early evening socializing at the nightclub "Heat", located on the end of the 91-year-old pier, were hurled into the chilly river along with the collapsing pier and the nightclub's debris. Thirty-six were injured, nine seriously.

Those killed were Jean Marie Ferraro, 27, Monica Kristina Rodriguez, 21, and DeAnn White, 25. The three women, employees of the New Jersey State Aquarium across the river from the pier, were at the club to celebrate White's birthday. Most of the injured were released from the hospital after being treated for broken bones, cuts and abrasions. The most severely injured was Melissa Hartz, a Villanova University junior who had just started a summer job at the nightclub as a waitress, who suffered a hip fracture and deep wounds to her thigh, ankle and elbow.

Philadelphia District Attorney Lynn Abraham's office is considering convening a grand jury to determine whether criminal liability is involved in the pier collapse. A grand jury could compel witnesses to answer prosecutors' questions behind closed doors. A source in the DA's office said, "We believe the officials at the pier knew all about the problems and failed to properly resolve them. They relied on patchwork and hoped it would get them through the summer." The decision on the grand jury will be made after the police department and the Department of Licenses and Inspections complete their investigations.

Due to the possibility of a grand jury investigation, the city said it would not release its preliminary engineer's report on the collapse. DA Abraham confirmed that she had asked the city not to release the report. "We have an interest in making sure what we do is dispassionate, without speculation, without leaking information that may be harmful to the investigation or untrue," Abraham stated.

Despite this suppression of information about the inspection, city and industry inspectors and the club owners have released information, each trying to blame the other for the tragedy. Deputy Licenses and Inspections Commissioner David Perri said that cracks in the pier's surface and the destruction of the seawall on the night of the collapse indicated that the pier's 2,500 timber piles, which look like a forest of telephone poles, had fallen out of alignment.

Sources speaking for Licenses and Inspections Commissioner Ed McLaughlin claimed immediately after the collapse that he had declared the entire length of Pier 34 "imminently dangerous" and he had told the owners they had the choice to immediately repair or demolish the structure. A week later, McLauglin said, "The structure of that property is the owner's responsibility. If an owner found problems ... it would be the owner's responsibility to take corrective action."

The pier owner, real estate developer Michael Asbell, had hired the marine construction firm Commerce Construction Corp. to inspect the pier several days before the collapse. Its one-page report said areas of the club were "showing settlement and movement inside the ballroom building." Commerce President Terry Zettle stated that one of his employees told Asbell, and Eli Karetny, manager of the nightclub, just hours before the collapse that the structure could break apart within several tides. This was not in the written report. Karetny denied he had received an oral or written warning.

The club was owned by Dorrance "Dodo" Hamilton, heiress to the Campbell Soup Co. fortune and the sole director and stockholder in HMS Ventures, Inc., the

© World Socialist Web Site

club owner. Using a search warrant, police investigators searched club manager Karetny's files. They claimed information they found showed he has known for some years that there were structural problems with Pier 34. Police also claimed seized documents showed a carpet company had in the past three years written to Karetny, explaining problems with his carpets were due to shifting floors resting on top of the pier. It was also revealed that a portion of the opposite end of the pier had collapsed in 1995, but it had been repaired. That part of the pier, which held the club's parking lot, was not involved in the May 18 collapse.

The City Department of Licenses and Inspections released a report a few days after the collapse that showed the club had three minor fire code violations in 1999. Documents also showed that the club had the required certificate of occupancy and building and zoning permits. Until the collapse, the city had only asked all pier owners to show engineers' plans before construction but had not reviewed periodic engineering inspection reports. Such period inspection reports were done at the discretion of the pier owners. The city is now telling pier owners to hire private contractors to do structural inspections at all of the piers along the Delaware by June 30 at a cost of $10,000 each.

All of the clubs on the waterfront lease the piers they occupy. Only a handful of the 180 piers on the river are privately owned. Most of the piers were built in the 1890s for the unloading of coal. Most are owned by the Penn's Landing Corporation, a quasi-public agency with many city officials on its board, or the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority, a Pennsylvania state agency that has put $57 million into waterfront development.

The port authority has 17 maintenance people and four engineers who are responsible for maintenance and structural integrity of the piers. An unoccupied pier across the river on the Camden, New Jersey waterfront collapsed in April.

Tom Kelly, president of Sheetmetal Workers Union Local 19, which owns one of the piers adjacent to Pier 34, said when the union bought their pier they knew it would take a lot of money and labor to rebuild the century-old pier. His union plans to spend $750 million developing their pier for condos, apartments, offices and restaurants behind the modern union headquarters and training center.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site