

Five workers killed in New York City construction accident

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Five construction workers were killed and ten injured in a scaffolding collapse in New York City on October 24. The deadly accident took place in the Gramercy Park area, barely two miles from the site of the World Trade Center. A 14-story-tall scaffolding collapsed suddenly at 4 p.m., trapping the workers under a pile of wood and metal. Rescue workers, some called from the site of the World Trade Center disaster, had to work cautiously in extracting the injured from the three-story-high pile of rubble to keep the loose façade above from falling on top of them.

The 20-story office building whose façade was being repaired is managed by the brother of the New York City Democratic mayoral candidate, Mark Green. Stephen L. Green heads 215 Park Avenue Associates, which operates the building at 215 Park Avenue South. As an investigation of the fatal accident began, the company was cited for three violations of city construction regulations. The company is accused of performing masonry work with an expired permit, erecting a scaffold without a permit, and failing to properly maintain the building façade.

Investigators think the collapse was caused by an overloaded makeshift hoist, as one section of the scaffold was weighed down by bricks and cement, pulling the framework away from the façade and toppling the scaffold. Green's company was also cited by a building inspector on August 1 for filing to "maintain an exterior building wall." At that time a section of the façade was found to be cracked and leaning away from the building. It was not clear whether this earlier violation was in any way responsible for last week's scaffolding collapse.

This tragedy has attracted attention because of the loss of life and also because of the involvement of the brother of the man who in all likelihood will be the next

mayor of New York. In fact, it points to conditions that are extremely common in the construction industry, and also extremely dangerous. Immigrant workers, many of them undocumented, are given nonunion jobs at substandard pay and with safety regulations routinely ignored. The workers on this job were paid \$8 an hour, barely a third of that paid to union construction workers. Authorities are also looking into reports that one of the workers on the job was only 17 years old, below the 18-year minimum for working in construction. The workers were replacing brickwork on the courtyard façade of the 87-year-old building when the scaffolding gave way.

The dead were all immigrant workers from Latin America. They included Donato Conde, 19 years old, a native of Mexico who had been living in New York for the past two years, and Efrain Gonzalez, 29, from Ecuador. Conde was planning to be married to his girlfriend in Mexico at the end of this year. Gonzalez was sending much of his weekly pay back home to his wife and three children in Ecuador. Also dead in the accident were Manuel Balavezo and Ivan Pillacela, as well as a fifth worker whose name has yet to be released.

215 Park Avenue Associates issued a statement saying that the companies it had contracted with for the repair of the façade had claimed to have all permits for the job. A lawyer for one of these firms, Tri State Scaffold and Equipment Supplies Inc., reported that the workers on the scaffolding were not employed by Tri State or the primary contractor for the project, Nesa Inc., but by yet another subcontractor. These arrangements are sometimes used to evade legal responsibility for such issues as pay, safety and working conditions. Only a week ago, immigrant workers who had been hired as day laborers at the

World Trade Center cleanup reported that they had not been paid by a subcontractor even though they had put in two weeks work.

In any event, Tri State erected the scaffolding three days before receiving city approval. And Nesa, the masonry contractor, had a city operating permit that expired last July. One of the officers of this firm, Constantine Stamoulis, was fined \$250 and ordered to perform 10 days of community service after pleading guilty last June to having someone else take his test to obtain a rigger's license.

One of the firms headed by Stephen Green leases 25 major office buildings in the city, earning \$10 million in rents annually. He has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for his brother Mark's current mayoral campaign. The owners of one of the firms involved in the deadly accident donated \$13,500 to Green's campaign.



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