

Australian building site tragedy reveals erosion of safety conditions

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A tragedy on a government building site in Australia last month has highlighted the erosion of safety standards in the construction industry after two decades of restructuring by employers and governments in collaboration with the unions. Two men were killed and three others badly injured when the roof of a partly constructed water tower collapsed on October 22 in the rural town of Lake Cargelligo, 590 kilometres west of Sydney.

The New South Wales Labor government's Department of Public Works hired a cheap labour contract company to build the tower, the first stage of a project to supply water to the isolated town of 3,300 people. The five men were standing on top of the tower, pouring concrete for the roof, when steel supports holding up the formwork suddenly gave way. Together with scaffolding, formwork and approximately 120 tonnes of wet and dry concrete, the men were sent crashing down 20 metres inside the tower.

Those killed were Anton Beytell, 37, the South African-born director and site foreman of the small South Australian contract company, BGA Pty Ltd, and Craig McLeod, 34, from Port Pirie in South Australia. It took nearly six hours to rescue the three severely injured workers from underneath the tangled metal, concrete and other rubble.

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) official Brian Miller, who visited the site after the disaster, told WSWs that the tower collapsed because BGA had not complied with the NSW building code of practice. Miller described the formwork and scaffolding as sub-standard and "third-world".

According to the union, one of the injured men has stated that Department of Public Works officials visited the site at least four times to check on progress but did not object to the shoddy work.

A press secretary for Public Works Minister Morris Iemma refused to comment, claiming that information could not be released while a departmental investigation was underway, with a coronial inquiry pending. A spokesman for WorkCover, the state government authority charged with enforcing industrial safety, told WSWs that the company should have obtained an engineer's certificate establishing that the scaffolding and formwork could bear the weight of the concrete before the pour proceeded.

The state government bears a major responsibility for the tragedy. Iemma and his department were meant to oversee the work on the Lake Cargelligo site and ensure that building regulations were met. But it seems BGA was permitted to operate even though the company had been avoiding its legal obligation to pay workers' compensation premiums to WorkCover.

WorkCover itself has little chance of effectively enforcing safety regulations. It has only 302 inspectors to monitor the whole state with just 42 assigned to the construction industry.

Just over a year ago, the government wound up a specialist WorkCover inspectorate for the highly dangerous demolition industry. During the five years before the dismantling of the inspectorate, one fatality occurred in NSW. Over the past 12 months there have been four. The latest casualty was Greg Lees, 33, who was crushed to death on September 19 when a large steel structure under demolition collapsed at the defunct BHP steel site in Newcastle.

With companies demanding ever-tighter completion deadlines, construction remains one of the deadliest industries in Australia. WorkCover's own statistics show that almost 40 out of every 1,000 building workers are injured or suffer occupation diseases each year. Over the past two years, at least 100 construction

workers have been killed nationally—an average of one fatality every week. Twenty-three of the deaths occurred in NSW.

CFMEU state secretary Andrew Ferguson this week declared the events leading up to the Lake Cargelligo accident to be “inexcusable” on a government building site and described the Department of Public Works’ performance as “unsatisfactory”. However, he did not criticise the government itself.

Both the union and the media have sought to focus public attention to another aspect of the affair. According to the union, one of the injured men, South African Oagiles Malothane, 42, had been brought to Australia by BGA on a business migration visa. He was being paid \$100 monthly for working 14-hour days, seven days a week. After the accident Malothane was taken to hospital with a severe leg injury but was quickly flown back to South Africa.

While the CFMEU claims that it will represent Malothane in recovering wages that are due to him, its main campaign is to demand that overseas workers be banned from employment. It has demanded that Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock freeze the issuing of all work visas “allowing building workers to come to Australia” and called on the Howard government’s Royal Commission into the Building Industry to investigate the “use of illegal immigrant labour”.

Over the past year, the CFMEU has repeatedly called on the Royal Commission to investigate the presence of “illegal” workers on building sites and handed over the names of sites to the Immigration Department, prompting raids by police and immigration officers. The union stands completely opposed to the fundamental democratic right of workers to live and work in any country.

By witchhunting foreign workers, it is seeking to divert attention from its own collaboration with the major construction companies in dismantling working and safety conditions. There is no evidence that foreign workers have undermined safety, at Lake Cargelligo or anywhere else. Since the mid-1980s, however, the union has negotiated work agreements that have cut manning levels on building sites, lifted restrictions on overtime and weekend working, abolished bans on wet weather working and increased the use of contract labour. In June this year, the union’s Victorian branch even abandoned the practice of closing down sites for a

day following a fatality.

The only guarantee of safety on building sites has been the vigorous enforcement of conditions by workers themselves. For decades, they refused to accept dangerous practices, such as working in the rain or operating with sub-standard equipment. On larger sites, rank-and-file safety committees used to call stoppages over any breaches, and these actions tended to set the standards for the entire industry, even smaller jobs such as the Lake Cargelligo site.

But the CFMEU’s continuous undermining of conditions on major projects has helped create a climate where building contractors operating on small sites, especially in more remote areas, feel free to flout standards. Given the increasingly cut-throat competition in the construction industry, more fatal safety breaches are bound to occur.



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