

Atlantic City, New Jersey: 4 workers killed, 21 injured in construction collapse

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Four construction workers were killed and twenty-one hurt, three of them critically, when the top five floors of a 10-story parking garage they were working on suddenly collapsed at 10:40 a.m. on Thursday, October 30, trapping at least 30 people in the wreckage of twisted steel and concrete.

The crash occurred as cranes were lifting concrete slabs and huge buckets of fresh concrete up to the 10th floor of the parking structure. With 300 to 400 workers on site at the time, the toll would have been even more horrific had the collapse not been limited to the top five floors at one end of the building. One report described it like the leaf of a drop-leaf table folding down, landing diagonally on the floors below, which remained intact even as the ends of the upper floors came to rest on them.

Those near the scene reported the sound of what seemed like an earthquake or an explosion. "I just heard a boom, and the whole building just vibrated," said Alan Pierce, who was working on the fifth floor at the time. Uninjured, he was able to walk down through the lower floors.

A pedestrian on his way to work described the event as "a house of cards collapsing." He witnessed three workers hanging 20 to 30 feet in the air off of loose concrete before he ran for help.

The body of one of the dead, ironworker Michael Wittland, was not located until 3:15 a.m. the following day. It took rescue workers until after dawn to extract the body from the rubble around the crushed stairwell where it was found.

The 2,400-car garage was part of a \$245 million expansion of the Tropicana Casino and Resort near the south end of the famed Atlantic City boardwalk. The project also includes a 502-room, 18-story hotel tower nearing completion and a 200,000-square-foot dining and entertainment center known as The Quarter. Breaking ground only last April, and—before Thursday's collapse—due to open this coming April, the expansion of the Tropicana was set to make it the largest hotel complex in New Jersey, with a total of 2,126 rooms.

New Jersey's Democratic Governor James McGreevey rushed to the scene in what amounted to little more than a

photo opportunity. One of the calls he made from his helicopter was to Paul Rubeli, the chairman and CEO of Tropicana's Arizona-based parent company Aztar, to offer to assist however possible, in Rubeli's words, "to get to the bottom of what happened and to get this building opened." It is safe to assume that the real priority is the flow of expected profits from the opening of the new complex, and any investigation into the cause of the collapse will be conducted in such a way as to interfere only minimally with the resumption of construction.

While parts of the existing hotel complex near the construction site were evacuated, the Tropicana casino remained open throughout.

Speculation on the cause of the tragedy centers on whether or not the concrete floors were being allowed enough time to "cure" properly after being poured, before temporary wood and steel supporting forms were removed and additional floors were constructed on top. It normally requires 14 to 28 days for the concrete to reach full strength.

Many of the workers pointed to increasing pressure to rush the work in order to complete the job by the deadline. Laborer Mike Shaughnessy, who was working on the top deck at the time of the collapse, told the Associated Press, "They're always trying to rush the job to stay ahead because the bad weather's coming." He said that additional workers were hired about a month ago to accelerate the pace of work. "It was taking three weeks to do a floor and now it's taking a week."

Liz Daly, contract administrator for Fabi Construction, which was hired to do the concrete work on the site, acknowledged the time pressure, telling the *New York Times*, "Remember last winter, remember how much snow we had in Atlantic City? The project was delayed, and of course you want to make up time and meet an owner's schedule."

A spokesman for the general contractor, Philadelphia-based Keating Building Corporation, however, denounced the "wild speculation" about the cause of the collapse. "That speculation is disruptive and is disrespectful to the families involved," he said.

Other workers were critical of the construction technique being used on the project for its safety shortcomings. Known as the “filigree wide-slab” method, it uses prefabricated concrete plates about two-and-a-half inches thick that are fastened into the steel and concrete frame. Fresh concrete is then poured over the slabs on site to produce a floor some 10 inches thick.

The technique, in wide use for the last decade, has the advantage of being lighter weight and faster to assemble.

Ironworker Louis Fiorentino, 54, who worked on the Tropicana site earlier, explained that this method does not form a complete bond, as does pouring concrete into molds for the entire floor. “They bring in pieces made somewhere else and you have to link them together—it’s built somewhere else and you have to make it right,” Fiorentino told the press. “This type of construction is meant to save money...”

This is not the first serious accident at the Tropicana project. In October 2002, three laborers were injured under somewhat similar circumstances when a prefabricated concrete slab on which wet concrete was being poured cracked under the weight, opening up like a trap door through which the men tumbled to the ground. Since they were working on the first floor at the time, the fall was not as far.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined Keating Building Corp. \$1,125 for safety violations as a result of that incident. Fabi Construction was fined \$8,375, but is contesting the amount. OSHA never determined the cause of the earlier accident. “Our mission is not necessarily to find the cause,” OSHA spokeswoman Kate Dugan told the *New York Times*. “We find any violations of OSHA law on site.”

The same two contractors were working together on a previous Tropicana construction project in 1995. A worker was killed when a 10,000-pound concrete slab he was working on collapsed. Fines totaling \$105,000 were levied against Keating and Fabi at the time, which were later reduced to \$31,500.

Reports show that OSHA has cited Keating for 122 violations since 1973, and Fabi for 44 since 1975. OSHA rules require that an accident be reported to them only if there is a fatality, or if at least three persons are injured.

Due to sharp cuts in the OSHA budget over the years, there are now only 1,123 inspectors to cover some 7 million work sites nationwide. Frequently, inspections are made only after disaster strikes. Many employers have been put on a “voluntary” compliance program, with routine inspections waived.

At 1,121 deaths, the construction trade accounted for over 20 percent of all workplace fatalities in 2002, over twice the

number in manufacturing. The rate of worker fatalities in construction was exceeded last year only by mining and agriculture.

As for OSHA penalties, they are set so low that employers consider them merely a cost of doing business, if they cannot get out of them altogether. The OSHA web site defines a “serious” violation as “one where there is a substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result and that the employer knew, or should have known, of the hazard.” The maximum fine for such a violation is \$7,000.

Those killed at the Tropicana garage include Mr. Wittland, 53, who was set to retire in six months after 35 years as an ironworker. He and his wife Nancy were planning to move from the house they had occupied in nearby Pleasantville, New Jersey to Florida, where they owned property. Edward, the oldest of their three sons, was among the critically injured with a broken neck. Another son, Michael, was also an ironworker on the Tropicana job, but he had the day off Thursday.

The other ironworker killed was Jim Bigelow, 29, of Egg Harbor, New Jersey, who was due to celebrate his second wedding anniversary on November 17. His wife Joleen described her husband as “a wonderful, wonderful man, and he loved me, and he loved his son,” referring to 19-month-old Jimmy Jr. In the spring of this year, Bigelow had completed his four years’ training as an ironworker, being named apprentice of the year by the local union.

Two men who worked as laborers for Fabi were also killed on the site, Robert Tartaglio, 42, of Galloway Township, New Jersey and Scott Piterosante, 21, of Milmay, New Jersey.

Also critically injured was Demetrius Joshua, 51, of Atlantic City, who sustained a broken back, neck and other fractures. Joshua was only a year from retirement.



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