

# Michigan: Two construction workers killed when crane hits electrical wire

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An accident at a construction site northeast of Detroit took the lives of two young workers Wednesday, November 5. The incident was described by a visitor to the site of the tragedy as an “accident waiting to happen,” with a construction boom under way in the largely unregulated housing industry.

Klee Construction Co. had a crew of six to eight workers that day building a house in suburban St. Clair Shores. On the same block, another construction crew was pouring cement for a driveway of another newly built brick home.

According to neighbors, Klee Construction had been experiencing problems with the driveway after a dump truck was stuck, requiring two different trucks to lift it out of the area. On this day, a truck with a crane was in the driveway where two young workers were attempting to lift trusses for the construction of the roof.

At around 11:30 a.m., 19-year-old Ryan Surant was working with 25-year-old Edward Spaccarotelli, a crane operator, to lift the trusses. After Surant connected the trusses and was maneuvering the crane, the crane’s arm accidentally touched an overhead wire that immediately electrocuted Surant. A news report said the line carried 13,000 volts of electricity. Crew members at the scene said Spaccarotelli tried desperately to pull Surant from the cable but was also electrocuted, resulting in both of their deaths.

While it is not clear at this point whether the location of the crane caused the accident, when standing by the site of the truck with the crane, one can clearly see that it was partially under the electrical wires. In addition, the tires were stuck deep into the mud.

Surant, a 2003 high school graduate, was a Macomb County Community College student and college basketball player who usually worked one day a week

for the construction company. Spaccarotelli worked full-time in construction and was a cousin of Surant. Both young workers were related to the owner of the company, Joseph Klee.

The WSWs spoke to neighbors who witnessed the tragedy and attempted to save the two construction workers. Charles Elderson, who lives directly across the street, said he was first alerted to a problem when he noticed his lights going out.

Elderson told the WSWs, “I was in my house when I heard a power surge and my lights went dim. I looked out the window and saw one gentleman, and noticed that he was on fire.” After pointing out where Surant was lying on the ground, Elderson said he grabbed a sauce pan from the house, noticed a puddle of water, and began splashing the water on the young man to put out the fire. Both he and a neighbor attempted to revive Surant through CPR.

“By the time the police and EMS came they were already gone,” said Elderson. “It was terrible. He was burned pretty bad from head to toe. His hand was clenched and it was burned really bad because he had a hold of the cable, and I assume he was hooking up the chain when they were lifting up these trusses and the crane hit the wire.”

Another neighbor said, “Two weeks ago, a two-ton dump truck got stuck in the driveway. They couldn’t get it out. At first, they brought in a 25-ton lift-truck but that didn’t work. Then they brought in a 50-ton lift-truck and finally got it out. I remember because they were there so late at night.” The neighbor said the construction company brought in gravel, but it was clear that it was not enough because the crane’s tires were deeply stuck in the mud.

“This was an accident waiting to happen,” said a friend of the Klee family visiting the site of the deaths.

“I don’t understand this,” she continued. “Aren’t there regulations against working this close to wire? I was in St. John’s [Virgin Islands] and noticed there that at construction sites the electric companies place yellow insulation around electrical wires to prevent something like this from happening. Why wasn’t this done?”

Housing construction in metropolitan Detroit and nationwide has grown rapidly over the last four months due to record low interest rates after experiencing earlier declines. A report issued by the US Commerce Department said housing construction rose 20.4 percent in the third quarter, an annual rate of 1.9 million units, the strongest recorded since 1986. Most of those jobs are filled by companies similar to Klee Construction, which are attempting capitalize on the market while they can.

Bob Palowski, spokesman for the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), told the WSWs his department is currently conducting an investigation into the causes of the deaths at the Klee Construction site. Palowski said the policy of MIOSHA is to randomly inspect industries for safety compliance. However, due to resource problems, they have only investigated 2,000 companies a year, including construction companies, out of more than 200,000 operating in Michigan. In the three years Klee Construction has been in business, they have never been inspected and the state agency has no record, good or bad, of their operations.

Palowski said there are regulations covering construction equipment near electrical wires. Given the voltage near this site, 13,000 volts, the crane should have been a minimum of 10 feet from the wires.

According to Palowski, in the US companies are largely responsible for regulating themselves. It is up to the company to adhere to the law and to request an exemption from regulations if it does not think it will be in compliance. He said there are provisions for construction companies to get special insulation sleeves to cover electrical wires, but that is done on a case-by-case basis and they have to request it.

According to MIOSHA, 46 workers died in work-related accidents in Michigan in 2002, 24 working in construction and 22 in general industry. So far, in 2003, not counting the latest deaths, 45 workers have died on the job—20 in construction and 25 in general industry. Six of this year’s deaths have been from electrocutions.



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