New York City: Immigrant worker killed in construction collapse

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A laborer, Angel Segovia, fell nearly 40 feet to his death on the morning of May 20 when a third-story balcony roof he was working on collapsed suddenly. Two other workers at the luxury condominium jobsite in Brooklyn, New York, were injured, one of them critically.

"I saw three guys laying there, one of them in bad shape, and they were covered in wet cement," Ted Thomas, who lives across from the site, told the *New York Times*. "All three of them were on the [basement] garage roof, and the cement was dripping down."

Investigators found that the roof was being constructed without the support required, contrary to plans that had been filed with New York City's Department of Buildings. The collapse occurred as concrete was being poured on the roof, which could not handle the load.

Inspectors issued citations to the building owner, Marine Partners, the general contractor, Big Apple Development and Construction, and the balcony subcontractor Pro Weld Fabricators for not following the blueprints. Other citations were issued for having expired construction permits. Another report indicates the workers were given neither safety harnesses nor support rails, although at least one is required when working above 10 feet.

Big Apple has a history of safety violations. Only a week before, the Fire Department cited a worker at the Brooklyn site for reckless endangerment due to improper use of an open flame. At a nearby Staten Island site in 2002, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued its most serious category of fine to Big Apple for failing to protect an area during excavation work. OSHA records show that the company has not even responded to the $7,000 fine, much less paid it.

Prosecutors have opened a homicide investigation into Segovia's death, which was caused by blows to the head and torso and by injuries to internal organs, according to the city's medical examiner.

Segovia, age 37, came to the United States four years ago looking for work to help support his wife and their three children in Ecuador, and to pay for a house he was building for them there. After a year in New York, where he lived with five cousins in a crowded apartment in Queens, he found the job with Big Apple, working six or seven days a week for some $90 a day with no benefits. Out of his $400 weekly paycheck, he sent $200 home to his family. He was unable to go back and visit, however, due to his immigration status, nor was his wife able to get a visa to come to the United States.

One of the injured workers, José Fernandez, 20, also came from Ecuador. He was hospitalized overnight and released. The other injured worker, Gung Bak, 42, was from South Korea. He remains hospitalized in "guarded" condition.

The death and injuries underscore the widespread exploitation of immigrant workers, many of them undocumented, on construction projects large and small throughout the New York metropolitan area and around the country. Working long hours for low pay with no benefits, Segovia is hardly the first to have been killed due to blatant safety violations.

A 2001 scaffolding collapse in Manhattan killed five immigrant workers. The contractor on that site recently pled guilty to manslaughter after admitting to having designed the scaffold without regard to safety. In 1999, Eduardo Daniel, age 21, a day laborer who had arrived from Mexico, was killed when a building collapsed in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Two years later, the landlord was ordered to pay $1 million in

compensation to the victims of that collapse.

Such after-the-fact penalties do nothing to make up for the lost and ruined lives of the affected workers and their families. They amount to little more than another cost of doing business in an industry in which disregard for safety regulations is rampant, and inspections at both the local and federal levels are woefully inadequate.

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