

New York City: Second immigrant construction worker killed in two weeks

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A Chinese immigrant worker was killed in the New York City borough of Queens June 7 when an eight-foot concrete wall collapsed on him and other laborers as they were digging a trench. Rescuers found the victim so buried under sand and concrete that only the top of his head was visible.

Firefighters and police rescue teams quickly freed three of the men in the trench and they survived, but it took an hour and a half to dig out the fourth man, who died on arrival at Elmhurst hospital. Two of the three men in the trench were injured. Xiang Xu, 38, suffered cuts to his forehead and right arm, and Tian Xing Chen, 34, suffered from both shock and a broken collar bone. Chen's situation was extremely precarious because he was immobilized for several minutes as rescuers struggled to free him from a wobbling wall that was soon to come down. With the aid of other construction workers, the wall was maintained with wooden beams long enough to get all the men out of the area.

There were about 10 laborers at the site. They said that after part of the wall collapsed, some of them attempted to dig out the men who were buried, while the others tried to hold up the rest of the wall with their own body strength. However, they were forced to abandon these efforts as it became evident that they were only putting their own lives in danger.

After the incident, building inspectors gave the owner and developer of the site, Yong Fa Cai, a violation for failing to provide shoring, sheeting and bracing during the excavation. A spokesperson for the Queens district attorney's office said that they were considering bringing criminal charges against Cai. The purpose of the job was to demolish some old buildings in order to build some new homes.

This is the second incident in less than three weeks in New York in which an immigrant worker has been

killed in a construction collapse. On May 20, Angel Segovia from Ecuador fell nearly 40 feet to his death when a third-story balcony roof he was working on collapsed. Two other immigrant workers, one from Ecuador and the other from South Korea, were also injured in the accident but survived. In that incident, investigators discovered a number of safety violations, including the fact that the roof was being constructed without required support. This was contrary to the blueprints that were sent to the city's Department of Buildings.

Before this, in 2001, scaffolding collapsed in Manhattan killing five immigrant workers. In 1999, a 21-year-old Mexican immigrant laborer was killed when a building in Brooklyn he was working on collapsed.

These accidents are the inevitable product of a system in which construction projects are routinely carried out in violation of building codes and safety regulations in a bid to lower costs. Immigrant workers, who are compelled to accept virtually any kind of work in order to escape desperate poverty, are the principal victims of these cost-cutting measures.

The developer at the site where the most recent fatality took place did not even know the name of the man who was killed. The worker, apparently a recent immigrant from China, got the job after briefly conversing with the owner on his cell phone. Even now, the authorities do not know the identity of the dead man.

Under conditions of a recent construction boom in New York, employers routinely take advantage of a pool of workers who are illegal immigrants and therefore prepared to accept poor working conditions and low pay. Many of these workers congregate daily on street corners in a number of city neighborhoods,

waiting to be picked up by contractors for a day's work.

Despite limited penalties and legal actions against developers and the occasional expression of concern by local politicians, these unsafe conditions remain prevalent throughout the city.



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