

New York scaffolding collapse kills one immigrant worker, injures another

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Two immigrant workers, brothers from Ecuador, fell 47 stories from a faulty scaffold while cleaning windows on an apartment tower on Manhattan's wealthy Upper East Side last Friday.

Edgar Moreno, 30, died at the scene, his body cut in half by the force of the fall onto a fence below. His brother, Alcides, 37, amazingly survived the fall. He remains in critical condition at New York Presbyterian Weill Cornell Medical Center with severe and extensive internal injuries.

Edgar was married to a woman in Ecuador, whom he had hoped to bring to the US soon. His brother has a wife and three children, ages 14, 8 and 6. Both brothers had come to the US in the mid-1990s, and had worked as window cleaners since their arrival. According to published reports, Alcides had become a US citizen, while Edgar had obtained legal residence. They shared a house in Linden, New Jersey, commuting into New York City to work.

"This is the price you pay for the American dream," a friend of the family, Angel Masache, told the New York Spanish-language daily, *El Diario-La Prensa*.

Members of New Jersey's Ecuadorian community are collecting funds to send Edgar Moreno's body back to his hometown in the south of Ecuador, near the Peruvian border.

The tragic accident occurred as the two were preparing Friday morning to lower the scaffolding down the face of the Solow Tower, a luxury building on 66th Street, where apartments rent for as much as \$7,000 a month.

Family members reported that the brothers were worried about the scaffold, which had malfunctioned repeatedly earlier in the year. The two had worked at the building cleaning windows for the past three years. Relatives said, however, that their employer, City Wide

Window Cleaning, had assured them that the apparatus had been fixed. The company has failed to respond to inquiries from the media.

Apparently, the cables connecting the scaffolding to the roof failed. The apparatus is a built-in fixture at the Solow Tower, known as a swing scaffold. The motorized device is secured by cables to a track running along the roof, allowing window-washers to move up and down as well as across the building's glass façade.

It is as yet unclear whether the brothers had already begun cleaning or were attempting to lower the scaffolding when it plummeted to the concrete below. Neither was wearing a safety harness, which suggests that they had either just stepped into the swing, when it fell, or that they could have been pulled off of the roof by whipsawing cables.

Relatives and others who knew the brothers described them as extremely safety-conscious. "I know it was a risky job," their cousin, Jose Castillo, told the *New York Times*, "but they took every precaution when they worked. Something was wrong with the scaffold."

The *Times* cites one investigator who said that the scaffold's cables had recently been replaced.

The incident is being investigated by the federal Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the New York State Department of Labor and the city's Buildings Department.

While this is the first fatal accident involving a window washer since 2005, scaffolding accidents as a whole have been one of the leading causes of workplace fatalities in the city.

Statistics compiled by OSHA indicate that fatal construction accidents nearly doubled in 2006, compared to the previous year, with the main cause of the increase being falls from hanging scaffolds. Forty-

three construction workers died in work accidents last year, compared to 23 in 2005.

The statistics also indicate that the clear majority of these deaths involved immigrant workers.

The death of another Ecuadorian worker, Ramiro Jara, 25, who fell 15 stories while working on scaffolding on a building near Union Square, prompted the city to set up a task force on scaffold safety. It is supposed to produce new guidelines for safety training and stricter enforcement.

What effect these initiatives will have remains to be seen. The city's Buildings Department is stretched extremely thin by a construction boom fueled by Wall Street profits and soaring real estate prices. The number of new construction permits last year reached 84,391, while the number of complaints involving construction violations has soared from 38,000 in 2002 to 140,000 last year.

A dirty and all but open secret is the role played within this highly profitable boom by immigrant workers, who are forced to take the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs. Employers use their immigration status to intimidate those who complain about safety conditions, while regarding potential fines—as well as these workers' deaths—as a cost of doing business.

According to recent government statistics, while the total number of workplace fatalities fell by 16 percent between 1992 and 2005, the number of Hispanic workers killed on the job increased by 72 percent during the same period. Fully two-thirds of these workers were undocumented immigrants.



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