New York City crane collapse kills at least four

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A giant crane being used in the construction of a luxury condominium building in Manhattan toppled over without warning on Saturday afternoon. Parts of two city blocks were devastated, in one of the most serious construction accidents in the city's history. Four construction workers were killed and two dozen workers, first responders and residents or passersby were injured. Two other workers and a neighborhood resident are still missing and feared dead. Eight victims remain hospitalized, three in serious condition.

The accident took place at 2:22 pm on a quiet weekend afternoon. Eyewitnesses described a sound like that of thunder that went on and on, or of the roar of hundreds of lions. Some thought a bomb had gone off.

The workers who lost their lives were identified as Brad Cohen, Aaron Stephens, Anthony Mazza and Wayne Bleidner, all members of Local 15 of the International Union of Operating Engineers.

The location of the disaster attracted added attention. It is only a few city blocks north of the United Nations headquarters, an upper middle class neighborhood several blocks east of the Midtown business district and its scores of skyscrapers, the largest such concentration of offices in the United States and probably the entire world. Six buildings on the 50th and 51st Street block between 1st and 2nd Avenues suffered structural damage, and another six have also been evacuated as a precautionary measure, according to the most recent reports.

The crane was being used in the construction of a 43-story building at 303 East 51st Street, between 1st and 2nd Avenues on Manhattan's East Side. Nineteen stories had been completed. The 22-story crane fell over and broke into several pieces. Part of it fell directly across the street, demolishing a penthouse and structurally damaging the 19-story building at 300 E. 51st St. The crane's cab and arm felt on to the next street, totally destroying a four-story townhouse and shearing away the side of a six-story building at 301 E. 51st St, exposing the apartments within.

Although the exact cause of the accident remains under investigation, many nearby residents said that they had repeatedly complained about the haste on the project and unsafe conditions, and specifically feared a crane collapse under conditions in which several floors were sometimes being added in a single week. A retired iron worker whose family owns the town house that was destroyed said: "I told my brother if you don't hear from me next week it's because the crane fell through my house. I was kidding."

One retired construction contractor had complained to New York's Department of Buildings barely a week and a half before the collapse that the crane was not properly braced, but his warning was dismissed.

Records of Department of Buildings show that the site has been cited for 14 violations over the past two years, but this is not considered an unusual number. Thirteen violations remain outstanding, but officials said the crane had been inspected one day before the accident and found safe.

Within hours of Saturday's accident, both New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the Democrat who is scheduled to be sworn in as the new Governor of New York on March 17, David Paterson, showed up at the scene. The Mayor and Governor were undoubtedly concerned, among other things, about the image of a disaster-prone Manhattan that was being broadcast around the country and the world.

Bloomberg was quick to announce that safety did not appear to have been a factor. The billionaire Mayor has often come forward to try to shield employers involved

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in such calamities, as he did in the case of the Con Edison steam pipe explosion last year and the weeklong blackout in a Queens neighborhood in 2006.

Other local politicians, including Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, expressed their outrage and called for fundamental but unspecified changes in the building inspection system in relation to the continuing Manhattan construction boom.

What none of the Democratic or Republican officials cared to explain, however, was the social dimension of this tragedy, the latest but unfortunately not the last in a series of such incidents.

The last major crane collapse in New York City, killing one worker and injuring three others, took place in 1999. There have been an increasing number of other construction accidents, however, involving scaffolds and other equipment. Only last December an Ecuadorian immigrant worker was killed and his brother gravely injured when they fell from a scaffold to the street 47 stories below at a construction site less than one mile from the scene of Saturday's accident.

According to the New York newspaper, the *Daily News*, the 12 percent increase in high-rise development over the last year has been accompanied by a stunning 83 percent rise in construction accidents. The known fatalities in Saturday's disaster bring to 16 the number of deaths in construction accidents over the last 12 months.

The previous year had seen a major spike in construction deaths, with forty-three people killed working in New York City construction in 2006, an 87 percent increase over the 23 who died the year before.

The residential and commercial construction boom continues in Manhattan, at least, despite the indications of an economic meltdown more serious than any since the Depression. Behind the residential building boom in particular, is the continued demand by the super-rich, including foreign nationals, for properties that are considered somewhat less risky than the alternatives.

This has meant a frenzied surge of building. Developers and construction companies are maintaining a pace of activity on each site that is also fueled by an eagerness to sell million-dollar apartments before the demand turns down.

In many cases, those employed on the building sites are immigrant workers given no safety training, and with little ability to challenge unsafe working conditions.

The deaths of workers in this drive for profit are merely one more cost of doing business. The contractors and developers are never criminally charged with manslaughter for creating working conditions in which horrific and fatal accidents are more than likely. Instead, they are merely hit with fines that are easily affordable given the sky-high prices of Manhattan real estate.

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