

Six workers killed in construction of Las Vegas “CityCemetery”

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On May 31, 39-year old Dustin Tartar of Henderson, Nevada, became the sixth construction worker to die on the job at MGM Mirage’s CityCenter project and the eleventh to die in Las Vegas in the last 18 months.

Deaths at the MGM project have become so frequent that some workers have begun referring to the complex as “CityCemetery.”

Tartar was a crane oiler who was crushed and killed while working on a moving crane when he was caught between the counterweight system and the crane’s track. He died only a month after the last incident at the site involving Mark Wescoat, 47, of Las Vegas. Wescoat was an electrician who fell to his death on April 26.

Others killed at the site include: Harold Billingsley, 46, of Las Vegas, an ironworker who died last October after hitting his head on a beam, losing his balance and falling 55 feet; Harvey Englander, 65, of Las Vegas who died last August when his body was struck and severed by an elevator counterweight system; and Bobby Lee Tohannie, 40, of Kayenta, Arizona, and Angel J. Hernandez, 24, of Las Vegas, both of whom were crushed to death in February 2007, when two 3,000-pound steel walls fell on them.

The rush to get the MGM CityCenter completed before New Years Eve in 2009—one of the busiest gambling days of the year—is a major factor in the spate of deaths. An April 1 article in the *Las Vegas Sun*, which concentrated on the recent deaths in the construction industry of Las Vegas, noted, “Workers say they feel unsafe on rushed and crowded construction sites.”

The *Sun* also pointed out that the number of deaths in the last 16 months far exceeds those of the building boom of the 1990s, and that national safety experts have become alarmed because “contractors are taking too many shortcuts and Nevada agencies are lax in oversight.”

The article was part of an investigative series of the construction industry in Las Vegas and came to the conclusion that there is a pattern of dangerous safety problems on city construction sites, including inadequate training, faulty equipment, job speed-ups, and worker

fatigue from excessive overtime.

The CityCenter is the most expensive privately funded construction project in US history. Two years ago the estimated cost of completing the project was \$4 billion. By last summer the price tag had reached \$7 billion, and today it stands at \$9.2 billion.

Last year Dubai World, the investment arm of the Persian Gulf state of Dubai, spent almost \$5 billion to buy a half stake in CityCenter and to acquire 9.4 percent of MGM Mirage.

At different stages of the process there will be anywhere between 4,000 and 8,000 construction workers on site. Once completed, it will consist of an assortment of high-rise condos, hotels, shopping centers, theatres, and a casino.

One article praising the project site stated, “If you have to even consider how much living in these MGM CityCenter condos will cost you, you probably cannot afford one. Few will be able to afford the penthouse suites, or even the larger properties—the hotel is to be one of the most exclusive locations in the world. The smallest living space will be priced upwards of \$600,000, so if you have that laying around, you too could be part of one of the fastest growing cities in America.”

The CityCenter and its counterpart the Cosmopolitan still only account for a third of the \$32 billion construction boom on the Las Vegas strip. All of this squandering of wealth and workers’ lives goes on while the US is in the midst of the greatest housing crisis since the Great Depression, with Las Vegas leading the nation in home foreclosures. Even the casinos are feeling the bite of the recession as it sets in. Many Las Vegas casinos have announced layoffs in the past few months.

According to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the Nevada Building and Construction Trades Council (NBCTC)—which is an affiliation of 17 construction unions working at the CityCenter and the adjacent projects—had been holding talks with MGM Mirage and the general contractor Perini Building Co. in an attempt to resolve the safety issues at the site.

The NBCTC has been under pressure to do something about the safety problems at the site, but its demands are no more than window dressing that will do nothing to address the underlying problems.

John Smirk, secretary-treasurer of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades District Council 15, said that many workers were so concerned about safety at the CityCenter and Cosmopolitan that they did not want to be dispatched to the site.

In response to the latest death on the site, the NBCTC promised it would take strike action if the MGM Mirage and Perini did not address their safety concerns. On June 2 the NBCTC called a one-day strike demanding that Perini submit to an immediate work site safety assessment by the Center for Construction Research and Training, institute and pay for on-site training administered by the center, and grant full job site access to union and safety officials.

Around 100 workers picketed the CityCenter and Cosmopolitan with chants of “CityCemetery” and “No More Deaths.”

Paul Jones, a 47 year-old electrician on the picket line, told the *Review-Journal*, “A lot of people have died, too many, they need to tighten safety up.” Fred Medina, a member of the Plasterers and Cement Masons Local 797, told the *Las Vegas Sun*, “We’re trying to make a statement that life is important. When you make a complaint about safety to safety managers, they keep saying, ‘We’ll fix it. We’ll fix it.’ But nothing ever happens. They’re pushing to get stuff done. They’re more interested in the money than keeping the job safe.”

The strike, which affected both the CityCenter project and the Cosmopolitan—where there have been two additional deaths—was resolved the next day with workers leaving their pickets and returning to the Cosmopolitan site at 9 p.m. on Tuesday, and City Center at midnight.

The NBCTC said that Perini had agreed to their demands to allow for inspections, on-site training and full access to union officials. How this had transformed the two sites into safe working environments for construction workers was not, however, clarified by union officials.

Speaking to the press on Tuesday, June 3, NBCTC Secretary-Treasurer Steve Ross declared, “We have come to an arrangement and an understanding. I am happy to say our long-lasting relationship is going to continue.” He also said that the agreement was “quite significant, not only for union construction workers but for construction workers in general.”

Ross’s reference to the “long-lasting relationship” between the companies and the union is revealing. The union has in fact worked hand-in-glove with the construction and casino companies for years and has no interest in

disrupting this relationship.

Another union official tacitly acknowledged that the agreement did not change the conditions at the workplace. Tate McGinty, president of the local plumbers and pipefitters union, said that while the agreement would improve working conditions on the CityCenter job site, the change would be a slow process and danger would remain as workers hustle to meet a planned opening in late 2009. McGinty simply cautioned, “They need to slow down a little bit.”

On June 5, Nevada Governor Jim Gibbons finally made his first statements addressing the deaths at the CityCenter project. He announced that Nevada has requested federal assistance in reviewing the CityCenter’s safety procedures which, according to the governor’s office, will help “ensure worker safety.” However, while the federal officials will be helping with inspections, they will not have the authority to issue citations for safety violations.

On June 10, the WWSWS spoke to workers about the conditions at the site.

Bill, a carpenter for 28 years, said the deaths were uncalled for and were “the result of the fact that a lot of the guys were tired from working too many hours. The guys here are pretty safe, but they are just tired. Really tired.” Bill said that Perini tells them to take their time, and that they don’t feel any pressure to work faster. He also said that federal agents surveyed the site and some of the more dangerous equipment was removed.

Eddie Jones, a foreman on the site, said he has been working construction for 13 years and that he has been on the CityCenter site for three months. When questioned about the recent deaths he said, “It’s scary. You have to be extra careful when working on any site, but there are a lot of new people on the job who aren’t taking their time and rushing things.”

Neil has worked as an electrician for 20 years and is living temporarily in Las Vegas just so he can work on the CityCenter project. He said, “I feel bad about the deaths, they come from people not having the proper safety training... I don’t feel any pressure to work faster, but most likely there are those that feel that way, but that’s because they don’t know their job that well. People need to be more aware of their surroundings, but they also need training, training, training again, and to be retrained.”



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