

Bridge collapse at Indiana casino construction site injures workers

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On Tuesday, a bridge collapse on a floating casino in Hammond, Indiana, injured a dozen construction workers. The Horseshoe Casino, which is moored on Lake Michigan directly offshore near the border with Illinois (and the city of Chicago), was nearing completion of a \$500 million remodeling project at the time of the accident.

The bridge, which attached the riverboat casino to the main pavilion, gave way early in the morning. Several workers, feeling tremors, jumped off the bridge into the lake 10 feet below. Others then fell in when the bridge collapsed, while a few more jumped in afterwards to rescue their coworkers. In all a dozen suffered injury, but only one was hospitalized and later released.

The cause of the collapse has yet to be determined. Evidently the bridge had been propped up by a barge floating below, and supports gave way prematurely. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) promised an investigation.

Workers privately informed a local Chicago television affiliate “that there has been incredible pressure to accelerate the pace of the project” in time for the casino’s reopening scheduled August 8. Horseshoe officials assured the media that the accident would not delay reopening. The workers are members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Laborers International Union of North America.

Though a genuine tragedy was narrowly averted, the accident offers a telling glimpse of the socially regressive nature of contemporary life in the US.

Worker deaths and accidents have been on the rise for many years. While the details of the Hammond accident have yet to fully emerge, the general trend itself arises from the gutting of workplace regulation and oversight that has taken place over the past quarter-century, with the acquiescence of the trade unions.

Hammond is an old steel city, which for many years sat astride one of the world’s greatest industrial centers, “Calumet,” a zone of steel milling and attendant industries that stretched from south Chicago and Joliet, Illinois, all the way to Benton Harbor, Michigan, and encompassed the US Steel company town of Gary, Indiana. The area has been ravaged by deindustrialization and is now one of the most concentrated areas of poverty in the US.

In this enormous belt of poverty, social need would dictate that vast resources be allocated for the construction of schools, the improvement of infrastructure, the creation of a livable urban area with culture, education, and green space, as well as the resurrection of industry and jobs. Yet social priorities under capitalism, such as they are, have found resources instead for the launching of a half-billion dollar casino. In fact, rather than providing decent jobs, the operation aims to prey on the desperation of the working class of the area.

Officially, 20.3 percent of Hammond’s population lives in poverty. The city’s estimated median household income in 2005 was \$33,586, a *decrease* from \$35,528 in 2000. The city’s estimated population also dropped, by almost 6 percent, between 2000 and 2006, from 83,048 to 78,292. To put the casino renovation in perspective: the half-billion dollars being spent on this one facility represents about 40 percent of the combined annual income of the city’s *entire* population (\$1.27 billion).

Gambling itself is one of the few “growth industries” remaining in the US. Harrah’s Entertainment, a multibillion-dollar gambling outfit, is controlled by enormous investment funds such as Texas Pacific Group and Apollo Management.

The web site of Harrah’s Entertainment, which owns

the casino, boasts: “The all new Horseshoe Casino Hammond will soon completely transform its coveted location along Lake Michigan. Construction is well underway to create an amazing new gaming and entertainment facility—the total size will be an unbelievable 350,000 square-feet.

“With over 108,000 square feet of gambling space, more than triple in size of the current casino, the new casino will include spectacular amenities, an incredible entertainment venue, and more luxury than ever before. It’s truly a remarkable expansion boasting a \$500 million price tag.”



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