Ten workers die in construction accident in the Philippines

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An electric gondola used on the exterior of a high-rise construction in the Makati business district of the capital Manila collapsed on January 27. It fell 21 stories and landed on protruding metal rods. Ten construction workers died; one survived but is now in the hospital with numerous fractures and injuries. The tragic death of these workers was completely avoidable. The accident reveals the appalling working conditions of the construction industry in the Philippines.

The accident occurred at Eton Property Group's luxury condominium construction, Eton Residences. Eton Residences is a 39-story complex scheduled for completion this year. The workers had been installing glass windows on the 32nd floor. News reports vary, but the suspended electric lift had a maximum carrying capacity of five or six people. There were 11 men crowded into the gondola. At shortly after 11 am, the ropes on which the gondola were suspended gave way and it collapsed, falling 21 stories and landing on a safety net that was perforated at numerous points by twisted metal bars.

The investigation into the causes of the accident revealed a scandalous disregard for the safety of the workers on the part of Eton Property Group and its subcontractors. There were no safety harnesses or lifelines provided for employees. Workers were not supplied any protective equipment. A photograph of the mangled body of a worker being removed from the wreckage of the gondola showed that he was wearing *tsinelas*, a pair of cheap rubber flip-flops, not work boots. The lift that collapsed had no official operator; any worker was allowed to raise or lower the gondola. The job site had no permit to be operating a gondola at all.

All of these practises are violations of the safety standards of the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Eton Property Group's construction sites, however, are not inspected by DOLE. Under the Labor Standards Enforcement Framework, the policy of the Philippine government is that any corporation which employs more than 200 workers should voluntarily self-regulate its own safety standards. DOLE inspectors only investigate companies that employ less than 200 workers. Large capitalist firms are entirely unregulated.

The workers had no employment records with the construction firm. This is because they were all contractual laborers. Not treated as permanent employees by their employer, they received no social security or medical benefits. As contractual laborers they were prevented from forming a union. They were paid a daily rate of 260 pesos ($US5.75). The country's minimum wage is 404 pesos ($US9).

According to a statement issued by the Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research, 1.8 million workers are employed in the construction industry. Of these, 100,000 are considered permanent employees and 1.79 million are contractual. They share similar circumstances to those who died in the gondola accident. They are paid less than the minimum wage and receive no benefits. Job site safety standards are non-existent. Construction work is characterised by a flagrant disregard for the value of human life. The workers often live on the job site, their makeshift plywood shelters standing in stark contrast to the towering glass and aluminum structures which they have built.

Eton Property Group responded to the public outrage over the accident by blaming its construction subcontractor, CE Construction. CE Construction, in turn, blamed its subcontractor, Arlo Glass and Aluminum. Arlo Glass and Aluminum blamed its labor subcontractor EM Piñon. Not one of these groups has accepted any responsibility for the death of 10 workers. When questioned about the appalling conditions, the CEO of Arlo Glass callously and curtly responded, "We did not hire them, they came to us."

All of these companies are complicit in the exploitation and death of their workers. The workers died because the enforcement of even minimal safety standards would have hampered their employers' rapacious pursuit of profit. Accountability cannot be subcontracted.

The Philippine government of President Benigno Aquino III has done essentially nothing in response to this tragedy. Flags flew at half-mast in the Makati business district, in part in response to a recent bus bombing and in part to the construction tragedy.

Politicians bandied words on the Senate floor. Senator Jinggoy Estrada, son of former president Joseph Estrada, called for swift justice to be administered. He made his speech a day after he personally ordered the eviction of thousands of squatters from land on which he wished to build a mall and the new San Juan city hall. Forty people were injured in the ensuing violence.

The chief investigator of the Eton Residences accident has said that criminal cases will be filed against those responsible. It is unclear from any government statement whether anyone will be held accountable. A scapegoat will no doubt be found, but it is certain that the Philippine government, which is complicit in the mistreatment and death of these workers, will not see fit to prosecute Eton Property Group or any other of the very wealthy investors who are responsible for this tragedy.

Eton Property Group is owned by Lucio Tan. *Forbes* magazine lists Tan as the second wealthiest Filipino. He was a crony capitalist during Ferdinand Marcos's presidency and profited hugely from the largesse bestowed upon allies by the corrupt dictator. He owns a number of banks, Philippines Airlines, a tobacco company, a major beer brewery, and the largest unlisted real estate firm in Hong Kong. Eton Property Group owns luxury condominiums, low-end high-rise housing, business process outsourcing centers, and several malls. It also own residential and commercial towers in Hong Kong and China. Eton Property Group invested $US3 billion in the construction of luxury apartment blocks in Shanghai and Beijing over the past year, adding on to its existing $US6 billion investments in China.

The construction work done by Eton Property Group in the Philippines is contributing to a real estate bubble. High-rise condominiums are being constructed in Metro Manila at a staggering rate. Some are lower-end housing, which is purchased on debt at predatory lending rates by families supported by remittances from overseas workers. These condominiums are being sold by employees who work on commission in every mall—they thrust fliers promising 'the good life' into the hands of passers-by.

Other real estate projects cater to the very rich. Eton Residences, where the 10 workers died, is located between the business district and the ostentatious Greenbelt malls and is being sold to the Philippine elite and to wealthy foreigners.

The speculative construction of condominiums and malls has resulted in recently completed projects standing nearly empty. Many units are purchased as investments, in the expectation that real estate values will continue to appreciate. The trend of rising real estate values in a market soon to be flooded with completed skyscrapers and sprawling commercial complexes cannot continue. This bubble must soon burst.

The classic Tagalog novella written by the former construction worker Edgardo M. Reyes, *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (In the Claws of Light), captured the condition of these workers aptly, when he described them at the foot of a skyscraper, their own creation, "lugmok, lupaypay, sugatan, duguan, nagtingala sa kanyang kataasan" / "prostrate, collapsed, wounded, bloody, faces turned upwards to its height." The current real estate bubble in the Philippines has been built upon the backs of the working class, and at times, over their dead bodies.