

Family protests after officials call off search for trapped worker in Florida garage collapse

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Three workers were killed and ten others were injured in a garage collapse at Miami Dade College West in Miami, Florida on Wednesday. Though the bodies of three workers have been recovered, a fourth worker, Robert Budhoo, remains buried in the rubble. Rescue officials called off the recovery mission for Budhoo after only 13 hours.

Family and friends of the victim have responded with protest. It is unknown whether Budhoo is still alive.

Dozens of his family and friends confronted police and Ajax company officials near the garage site on Saturday, chanting “get him out,” and holding signs that read, “Where is my husband?” and “Uncle Baba: too soon to be forgotten!”

Budhoo, a 53 year-old father of three, moved to South Florida from Jamaica 16 years ago and was working as an electrician at the garage site at the time of the collapse. Several of his family members remained huddled under a tree near the site of the accident for hours after the disaster occurred. Budhoo’s daughter reportedly wrote on Facebook: “Daddy, where ever you are please hang on.”

Budhoo’s daughter, Tasha Budhoo, expressed the family’s fury at the company, Ajax Construction Corp, and local police officials in an interview with Local 10 News: “What happened when the building collapsed? They left him there like he was nobody!”

“I believe he is alive, it’s just that they gave up looking for him,” said Donovan Budhoo, Robert Budhoo’s brother, in the Local 10 report.

The victim’s sister, Henrietta Robinson, added: “Nobody’s saying anything to us, so we are just left in the dark... It’s tearing us apart. We can’t eat. We can’t sleep.”

“We have to beg for them to tell the family what’s going on,” said a friend of the family.

Ricky Gomez, a police chief for the town of Doral, the site of the collapse, told family and friends, “[W]e are trying our best.”

When the protest attracted local media attention, company and police officials promised to add a second crane to the rescue efforts. Officials also promised to give Budhoo family members a mere two daily updates regarding the fate of their loved one.

An estimated 17 electricians, welders, painters, and other construction workers were working on the garage construction site at the time of collapse.

“It fell to the ground like a house of cards,” said Victoria Buczynski, a worker at a nearby cigar shop, to ABC News. “The construction workers started running out, screaming. It was loud. Our entire building shook.”

Workers reportedly had only seconds to leave the premises before being crushed by falling blocks of concrete. Hundreds of rescue workers arrived on site and located trapped workers by their screams. One worker was rescued only after his legs were amputated.

Though details surrounding the cause of the collapse remain unclear pending an investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), what is certain is that the company and local public officials called off the search for Robert Budhoo without consulting the worker’s family.

A statement made on Friday by William P. Byrne, President and CEO of Ajax Construction Corp., attempted to tacitly absolve itself of any fault for the deaths and injuries of the workers it contracted to build the garage. “Speculation does not inform the process or help in any way,” he declared.

Ajax was slated to net \$22.5 million for construction of the garage. Ground broke in February, and construction was scheduled for completion in December.

Construction is one of most dangerous and underpaid professions in the United States. OSHA statistics show that 721 construction workers died on the job in 2011 alone—accounting for 17.5 percent of total workplace deaths for that year, far more than any other profession.

In total, 251 construction workers died in 2011 from falling at a construction site, 67 died of electrocution, 73 were killed by a falling object, and 19 were “caught in or between” objects.

Despite the risk of injury and the likelihood of long-term handicap caused by the physical strenuousness of construction work, the average construction worker in Miami, Florida makes only \$43,000 annually with minimal, if any, benefits. Construction workers have faced exceptionally high unemployment rates since the housing market crash in 2007. Construction workers currently face an unemployment rate of 11 percent, according to the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data.



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