

Australia: High-rise crane collapses on building site

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A fire erupted in a 65-metre hydraulic tower crane in Sydney on Tuesday, causing a 20-metre boom to crash onto a building site in a terrifying and potentially life-threatening incident. The crane is owned by Marr Crane Hire and leased to Lend Lease, which employs the driver. It is one of 12 such cranes currently operating on Sydney and suburban construction sites.

The fire occurred shortly after 9 a.m. at Lend Lease's University of Technology (UTS) construction site in Ultimo, next to Sydney's central business district. Workers ran from the site and pedestrians and traffic were blocked on Broadway—a major thoroughfare into the city—as thick black smoke poured from the top of the crane, and flames leapt 10 metres high. One witness told the media he heard the massive cables that supported the boom “snap one by one.”

The crane driver, who had courageously attempted to extinguish the fire, risked his life by swinging the boom away from the street and onto the construction site. Had the boom fallen across Broadway there could have been multiple deaths and serious injuries. The driver was able to escape unharmed, ten minutes before the cabin was engulfed by flames.



While one construction worker was injured when he

was struck on the shoulder by one of the crane's cables, no other injuries were reported among the more than 100 workers on the site. University students, office workers and residents were among those evacuated from the surrounding buildings.

Eight fire crews raced to the scene, but firemen abandoned attempts to climb the crane and fight the blaze, fearing that the structure had become unstable. Instead, the fire was allowed to burn out as it consumed an estimated 1,000 litres of diesel fuel.

Two hours after the fire began, smoke and flames were still coming from the top of the crane. NSW Fire Brigade spokesman told the media there was the potential for a large fire to break out “because of building material nearby.” The temperature in the burning cabin reportedly reached 1,000 degrees.

A short statement issued by Lend Lease on Tuesday said that a full investigation would be held and that management was “working closely with relevant authorities and unions to evaluate the incident.” It further stated that the company “regularly audited to ensure on-site safety.” This is an extraordinary claim, given that Lend Lease management had been warned several weeks earlier by construction workers on the site that the crane was leaking fuel.

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) state secretary Brian Parker said that Lend Lease had been told of the fuel leaks and other crane maintenance problems after the site was recently shut down for a four-day safety inspection. The leaks were so bad, he said, that workers below the crane had reported oil dripping onto their hard hats and clothing.

Parker declared that the UTS crane fire was an “accident waiting to happen”, and that the union was “concerned” that the company had done nothing about its complaint. But Parker's remarks make clear that the

union was fully aware of the danger posed by the leaking fuel yet had allowed the crane to continue operating. Yesterday the CFMEU ordered the closure of other high rise cranes in Sydney, pending safety checks. No combined mass meetings were called of building union members, however, to discuss the UTS fire.

For decades the construction unions have collaborated closely with the major construction employers, to block industrial action, enforce strict deadlines, and slash costs to make the companies “competitive.” Poor safety standards resulted in 30 fatalities in Australian construction industry during 2010-11, with another 18 to September this year. Many more have been injured.

The unions’ major concern has not been the conditions of workers, but to maintain their position as industrial policemen on large sites and ensure their dues base. This was at the heart of the CFMEU’s dispute with construction company Grocon in September, which erupted when the employer broke with past practice and refused to allow the union to appoint safety officers on its sites who would act as full time union officials paid by the company.

The unions have direct commercial interests in preventing industrial action and delays to construction projects because they have substantial investments in the industry through their \$16 billion CBUS superannuation fund, into which union members’ retirement funds are funnelled.

As is the case right across the construction industry, safety is compromised and shortcuts taken to meet ever tighter construction deadlines and to hold down costs. Over recent years there have been other life-threatening incidents involving equipment failures on tower cranes.

In September, 50 metres of steel cable and a two-tonne crane block crashed to ground when a tower crane terminal fitting failed on the John Holland children’s hospital site in Perth, Western Australia. In January 2010, a mechanical failure caused the boom structure of a tower crane on the John Holland BHP’s Worsley Alumina Refinery project in Western Australia to collapse onto amenities sheds and another crane. Construction workers narrowly avoided serious injury. That crane was also owned by Marr Crane Hire.

The attacks on construction workers’ health and safety will only intensify in the next period as building

companies scramble for declining numbers of projects amid a sharpening economic downturn and the unravelling of the mining boom. In the last seven months alone four major construction groups have collapsed.

Earlier this month, the chief operating officer of BCI Media Group, which tracks construction contract values, warned: “It is highly unlikely there will be a sustainable increase in building construction in the short term as a high portion of mid-tier developers are still encountering difficulties in accessing bank finance.”

The UTS fire and crane collapse is not a one off “accident.” It is a warning that all the conditions already exist to produce a major disaster involving a significant loss of life.



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