

Australia: Young worker killed on Sydney construction site

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The unsafe working conditions in Australia's construction industry have claimed another victim. On April 13, Matthew Lopez-Linares, a 22-year-old Canadian backpacker, was killed when hit on the head by a falling steel beam while working on a demolition site in the inner Sydney suburb of Camperdown.

The young man, who was in Australia on a working holiday, was recruited by the labour hire company, One Stop Work Force, only one week before the tragic incident happened. He was reportedly digging at the bottom of the building when a slab collapsed, bringing down the metal beams. The major contractor on the project is building company Ceerose Pty Ltd.

There is no doubt that the death could have been avoided had the employers acted on safety issues raised by workers on the site. Equally, inaction by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) also ensured that "an accident waiting to happen" was not prevented, with deadly consequences.

CFMEU state secretary Brian Parker told the media he was "not surprised" by the incident. He said the union had attended the site just two weeks beforehand, after workers raised concerns about the stability of slabs on the site and about the demolition processes being used. Work on the site initially ceased.

Parker claimed that the union had asked for "expertise to be brought into it" and for "engineers to sign off to say that the structure that was holding up these slabs was secure." He admitted: "Unfortunately, we never received that." The union allowed work on the site to resume, however.

The union's role was similar last November when a fire broke out in a tower crane on a site close to Sydney's CBD, leading to the collapse of the crane's massive boom. But for the courage and skill of the crane driver, the boom could have fallen across a busy

intersection, almost certainly resulting in deaths and injuries.

Again Parker admitted that the site had been closed over safety concerns and that the union had known about fuel leaks in the crane that caused the fire. Even so, work was allowed to resume under conditions described by Parker himself as "an accident waiting to happen".

The latest death is the product of the drive by construction companies, assisted by the unions, to cut costs and meet tight deadlines, resulting in cutting corners on workplace safety. Those pressures are intensifying as the construction sector slips further into recession.

According to the Australian Industry Group-Housing Industry Association, the construction sector contracted for the 31st straight month in December 2012. Moreover, the group's Australian Performance of Construction Index showed that all sub-sectors slipped back in performance in March this year, falling by 6.6 points to an index of 39 points: Below 50 indicates a contraction.

The construction unions have been instrumental in the cost cutting agenda and in suppressing potential wildcat strikes over wages and conditions. Their chief concern has been to maintain their role in policing workers.

To this end, the unions, including the CFMEU, fully endorsed the federal Labor government's draconian Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial relations laws that virtually prohibit all industrial action. While railing against the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), set up by the previous Howard government, the CFMEU has tacitly accepted the transfer of the ABCC's extraordinary powers, including to harass and prosecute building workers, to

the FWA's construction division.

The unions collaborate with government and business across a range of bodies. Last year, Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government established the national Workforce and Productivity Agency to facilitate the boosting of productivity throughout different industries. Australian Council of Trade Unions president Ged Kearney sits on the board.

Within the construction industry, union-brokered enterprise bargaining agreements have been the primary mechanism for undermining or eliminating work and safety conditions. These deals have included ending bans on work during wet weather, reducing restrictions on working overtime and allowing the greater use of casual and part-time labour.

The result is a terrible toll of death and injury. Of the 40 industrial-related deaths in Australia to April 10 this year, 11 were in the construction sector. This puts construction fatalities for this year well on the road to surpassing last year's toll of 21 deaths.

Included in last year's fatalities were four workers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), including a 21-year-old concreter, Ben Catanzarita, who was killed when a concrete pouring boom collapsed on him.

Among casualties this year was a 32-year-old worker crushed to death by a one-tonne steel beam on a building site in Hobart in January. In February, a 59-year-old crane driver died when he fell 35 metres from scaffolding on a project being built by the construction company Grocon. In March, three pedestrians were killed by a collapsing wall as they walked past a vacant Melbourne construction site also owned by Grocon.

According to Safe Work Australia, between 2008-9 and 2010-11, 123 construction workers died and 13,640 were seriously injured due to work-related causes. On average, there were 41 deaths and 4,546 injuries per year. Over that three-year period, the construction industry accounted for 11 percent of all serious workers' compensation claims.

This carnage will continue as employers push for even greater productivity increases. Business Council of Australia president Tony Shepherd signalled a renewed offensive earlier this month after the cancellation of Woodside Petroleum's plans for a \$45 billion LNG development. It was "a stark warning," he said, that "Australia has become a high cost and low

productivity place to do business ... placing important investment at risk."



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