

Building collapse in Philadelphia exposes corruption, lack of government oversight

Tom Hall
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On Wednesday, a vacant building in the process of being demolished collapsed onto a neighboring thrift store on Market Street in midtown Philadelphia, killing six people. As the dust begins to settle and with rescue efforts abandoned, a picture of the tragedy has begun to emerge. It is a disaster with roots in the profit motive.

In recent days there has been an attempt by sections of the news media to scapegoat a worker at the site, Sean Benschop, who was operating the crane at the time of the collapse. Benschop reportedly tested positive for marijuana and pain killers shortly after the building fell. He has been arrested on involuntary manslaughter and related charges.

The prosecution of Benschop is aimed at covering up the culpability of the state apparatus and the highly-connected corporations involved in the demolition. Government statutes, to the extent that there are any in place at all, were routinely ignored by both the demolition contractor and regulators.

Robert Mongeluzzi, a lawyer for survivor Nadine White, accused the contractor, Griffin Campbell, of violating several safety regulations. Video taken on Sunday shows crews hacking at the building's walls, letting bricks fall onto an open sidewalk. The walls of the building were not laterally braced, a flagrant violation of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations.

However, demolition contractors in Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania are not required to be certified, nor does the city code require contractors to show any competency. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, a Democrat, attempted to skirt the issue in a press conference Thursday, claiming, "Buildings get demolished all the time in the city of Philadelphia with active buildings right next to them." Attempting to portray it as an isolated incident, Nutter claimed,

"Something obviously went wrong here yesterday and possibly in the days leading up to it. That's what the investigation is for."

The mayor also claimed that, "to [his] knowledge," there had been no complaints about the site before the incident. In fact, numerous complaints had been made. One sent to OSHA on May 15th alleged workers were at risk of falling. According to the Department of Labor, the complaint was still open at the time of the catastrophe.

Another warning was made to the city's 311 website by Philadelphia resident Stephen Field a month before. Field described the worksite as "clearly unsafe."

In an interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Field said, "I find it astonishing. I cannot fathom an explanation... There's no question that, day after day, there were unsafe conditions at that building." He went on: "The idea that this is a one-time event that the city could not have foreseen is a most pathetic excuse."

The role the building's owner played in the disaster cannot be discounted either. Richard Basciano, former "porn king" of New York City, hired contractor Griffin Campbell Construction, which has a criminal record, including insurance fraud, for \$10,000, when experts say the demolition should have cost about \$250,000. Basciano apparently has friends in high places, as former Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell has publicly defended him since the disaster.

Rendell said that Basciano "had the best intention in trying to do something spectacular." This is a reference to attempts to gentrify the surrounding area and turn it into the "gateway to Philadelphia's Market Street West." The extent to which Basciano is shielded from any culpability by the authorities is such that even the *Philadelphia Inquirer* felt compelled to comment on it.

In addition, it appears that Campbell was chosen with

the help of one of his associates. Plato Marinakos Jr., an architect who helped Campbell obtain a permit and is listed as an expeditor on his permit application, recommended Campbell along with two other contractors to STB Investments, which is headed by Basciano. However, the extent of the relationship between Marinakos and Campbell remains unclear.

In the aftermath of the disaster, Mayor Nutter has proposed new demolition regulations, including establishing a separate licensing category for demolition contractors. However, he has not proposed any sort of certification process for contractors.

In addition, the mayor has joined the media in scapegoating workers by proposing drug testing and background checks for heavy equipment operators. There has yet to be any suggestion that the companies that skirted regulations be prosecuted.



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