

Australia: Massive fire at Sydney's Barangaroo building site

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A large fire broke out on March 11 at the Barangaroo construction site, Sydney's largest building project, highlighting the drastic deterioration of workplace conditions in Australia. The blaze, which engulfed the prestige harbourside project, was the third major Sydney building industry accident within 16 months.

The fire is believed to have been started by a welding accident at around 2 p.m. in the two-level basement of the planned 39-storey Tower 3. A piece of smouldering steel reportedly fell into the basement, igniting highly flammable timber formwork used for concrete pours.

The blaze continued for almost 24 hours before crews from 20 fire stations and hazardous material (HAZMAT) personnel could extinguish it.

While none of the 60 workers working on Tower 3, or hundreds of others in adjoining construction areas were injured, the inferno reached temperatures of 1,100 degrees Celsius.

Thick smoke blanketed the area, shutting down key city thoroughfares—the Western Distributor motorway and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. This caused major disruptions and gridlock traffic conditions for several hours in downtown Sydney and nearby suburbs.

The \$6 billion Barangaroo project, being built by the Lend Lease Group, includes billionaire James Packer's second Australian casino complex—a \$1.3 billion 350-room, 60-apartment tower and luxury hotel.

There is immense pressure on the workforce to complete the project in record time. Lend Lease share prices initially fell after the fire broke out. They recovered the next day, when Lend Lease announced it expected work to resume within a week.

An eyewitness cited by the media reported plumes of smoke at 2 p.m., but said "little was being done to evacuate workers until fire trucks arrived." Whether this was because the workforce was not properly drilled

in evacuation procedures is not clear. Except for the quick response of emergency services, the fire could have led to fatalities.

There are 700 workers on the site and some 2,000 office workers in neighbouring buildings. All were evacuated by emergency services, concerned that intense heat near the foundations of a 50-metre tower crane overhanging the building basement could cause it to buckle and collapse.

Fears were heightened by the possibility of toxic fumes from a cocktail of dangerous contaminants on the site. The area was Sydney's main gasworks for almost 100 years, until the 1920s. Toxic materials were later used as landfill to extend shipping wharves located at the 22-hectare site.

As yet, no official reports have been released about the cause of the fire or possible toxic fumes. Police and the New South Wales state government's WorkCover NSW agency are conducting investigations but no completion dates have been specified.

Perfunctory statements were issued by the state Liberal government, the Labor opposition, the Greens and the building unions.

On March 13, NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell apologised to commuters for the city gridlock and attempted to present the fire as an unpredictable occurrence. "From time to time these events will occur. They're unforeseen," O'Farrell said.

Labor's shadow transport minister Penny Sharpe regretted the traffic chaos but said "this is not the time for finger pointing." Greens MP David Shoebridge simply said the number and seriousness of the accidents on the site was "troubling."

Construction Forestry Mining Engineering Union (CFMEU) state secretary Brian Parker called on Premier O'Farrell to "hold a roundtable conference"

involving industry, trade unions and government bodies. This has nothing to do with defending the health and safety of building workers but seeks to further the union's collaboration with the employers and prevent any long-term delays on this or other sites.

The CFMEU and other construction unions have direct commercial interests in preventing or hosing down industrial action that delays construction projects. They have substantial investments in the industry through their \$16 billion CBUS superannuation fund, into which union members' retirement funds are funnelled.

On March 14, in a political damage-control operation, WorkCover NSW announced a "six-week health and safety blitz" of multi-storey commercial construction sites in Sydney. Thirty safety inspectors will be empowered to issue improvement and prohibition notices. This exercise will only rubber stamp the dangerous health and safety conditions on building sites, which have been permitted by the construction unions.

The Barangaroo blaze was not an "unforeseen" event. It was the third potentially catastrophic construction incident in less than a year and a half in Sydney. That is a direct result of decades of union-enforced undermining of basic work conditions and safety procedures in order to slash construction costs and drive up productivity.

Two weeks earlier, a five-storey scaffolding rig collapsed at a construction site run by Toplace in Sydney's south east. Three people were injured and 100 workers on site forced to evacuate. Two of those injured were workers, who fell 10 metres. The collapsing structure brought down power lines and crashed into a traffic lane, causing a four-hour closure of a key thoroughfare to Sydney's domestic airport.

In November 2012, a crane boom collapsed spectacularly on a Lend Lease project at the University of Technology Sydney. A 45-metre hydraulic crane caught fire, causing cables to give way and sending the boom crashing down onto the site. Only the quick response of the crane operator, who moved the boom, prevented it from falling onto pedestrians and vehicles in the busy Broadway thoroughfare below.

Lend Lease's Barangaroo project itself has seen a spate of recent accidents. These include the death in January of a 23-year-old construction worker who fell

30 metres from scaffolding. On other occasions, a worker was seriously injured in a 3-metre fall; fuel from a generator fire almost burned several workers; and a falling piece of five-metre steel narrowly missed workers.

The construction industry has one of the worst accident records in Australian industry. According to Safe Work Australia, 211 construction workers died from accidents in the five years to 2012—almost one per week. This was nearly twice the national rate for workplace deaths. Almost 14,000 construction workers were seriously injured during the same period.

The Barangaroo blaze shows that it is only a matter of time before a construction site accident results in far more casualties.



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