

Spate of deaths in New Zealand's forestry industry

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New Zealand Coroner Wallace Bain released findings earlier this month from an inquest into the death of 23-year-old Robert Epara, one of 10 forestry workers killed on the job in 2013. The inquest was one of eight carried out into recent deaths in forestry, New Zealand's third largest export industry.

The findings came after five more fatalities at logging operations in the first quarter of 2016, making it still one of the deadliest occupations in the country. With the most technologically advanced equipment, such deaths are largely preventable. The majority of companies continue to operate with cheap harvesting gear, and many have lax procedures and poor safety training.

In 2014, Epara's employer Complete Logging Limited was fined \$60,000 and ordered to pay reparation of \$75,000 for "failing take all practicable steps" to ensure his safety. Epara was hit by a log felled by another worker. In violation of an industry code of practice, he did not have a radio to communicate his location with the rest of the crew.

Bain criticised the company but, according to the *Rotorua Daily Post*, said forestry's safety record had "dramatically improved" following an industry-led review in 2014, and several inquests and prosecutions over deaths. Bain said: "The industry is now a far safer place to work and families will not have to go through the heartbreaking process of losing a loved one when that death was preventable."

The coroner was forced to concede, however, that this year's deaths were a "concern ... especially after all the publicity and education in the sector." In fact, the five recent deaths are a significant spike that gives the lie to official claims of a "dramatic improvement."

This year's toll is already higher than 2015 (three deaths) and 2014 (one death). In the past decade there

have been 54 deaths—27 since 2010—and some 2,000 serious harm incidents. Forestry workers are 70 times more likely to be killed on the job than the average NZ worker. The industry's death rate is 34 times higher than Britain's and seven times that of Australia.

The deaths this year include Blair David Palmer, a 53-year-old foreman with over 20 years' experience. He was crushed by a falling tree on March 31 while working for contractor DG Glenn Logging at Pan Pac's Pohukura forest block near Napier. A week earlier, Damian Lee Tai, a worker in his thirties, was hit by a log and died in Pakotai near Whangarei.

On March 10, 31-year-old Matangaroa Taramai was killed, apparently by a tree that fell on him on a block managed by Forest Enterprises east of Masterton. A few days earlier, three-year-old Felyx Rhys Hatherley was killed by a rolling log while visiting his father's workplace with his mother, at Point Lumber Washdyke's operation in Timaru. Gaddum Construction worker Miki Butler-August died on February 17 when he was run over on a block in the Bay of Plenty.

In addition to five worksite deaths, there have been at least eight logging truck accidents this year. A collision between a car and a truck in Waikato last month killed one woman and seriously injured two others. Five serious incidents involving logging trucks in the Northland region between April and mid-May prompted a 150-strong public meeting in Whangarei recently to confront Transport Agency officials over the ongoing danger to public safety.

The spate of deaths comes after a public relations campaign designed to create the impression that the industry and the government regulator WorkSafe NZ had learned from the 2013 toll and, with the collaboration of the trade unions, made significant

safety improvements.

In 2014 the industry launched an “Independent Forestry Safety Review.” Its task, as the WSWS noted, was to whitewash the responsibility of the forest owners, contractor companies, governments and unions by not assigning “blame” and making vague calls for safer practices.

Far from being independent, the review was led by the business owners themselves. It included Forest Industry Contractors and the Farm Forestry Association, alongside WorkSafe and the Council of Trade Unions (CTU).

The review resulted in the formation of the Forest Industry Safety Council (FISC), which includes business leaders, WorkSafe representatives and FIRST Union leader Robert Reid. In February, the council trumpeted the reduction in deaths and injuries in 2014-2015 as a “dramatic improvement.”

After insisting that the FISC would lead to safety improvements, the CTU described the latest deaths as “totally unacceptable.” CTU president Richard Wagstaff asked whether companies were “putting additional pressure on those working to get the logs cut in order to maximise profit.”

Reid similarly told the media: “We need to make sure that if the market for wood goes up, the price of wood goes up, it’s not workers who are going to suffer and lose their lives.” Neither union leader explained why their collaboration with big business and the government had failed to prevent the deaths. The unions’ role in the FISC is precisely to keep the industry profitable and prevent any industrial campaign among workers to demand decent working conditions.

FISC distributes “health and safety information” to forest workers, their supervisors and managers, and aims to make “everyone as accountable for their safety as their roles allow.” There is no legal requirement for businesses to adopt the safest technologies. Shifts up to 12 hours are common, leading to fatigue among workers. Regulation consists chiefly of occasional inspections and advice. In a number of cases, WorkSafe has refused to prosecute companies over workplace deaths.

The decline in forestry deaths in 2014–2015 appears to have been due, not to improved safety, but a downturn in activity. The 2013 toll coincided with the biggest forestry harvest ever seen. By August 2014, an

industry group estimated that 50 small contractors had left the industry amid falling export prices, largely due to China’s economic slowdown. In 2015, the volume of logs harvested dropped 3 percent, the first decline in seven years.

While the precise causes of the latest deaths are not yet clear, they correlate with an upswing in the industry. By November 2015, demand had rebounded and log prices were at a seven-month high of \$92 a tonne, driven by a decline in the New Zealand currency and falling international oil prices. By April 2016, the wharf gate price rose a further 30 percent to \$119 a tonne.

The opposition Labour Party’s workplace relations spokesman Iain Lees-Galloway declared on April 27 that the toll of at least 46 workplace deaths in the past year was “a damning indictment” of the National Party government. In reality, both Labour and National governments are to blame for the deregulated environment that inevitably results in fatal incidents.

In 1987, the Lange Labour government, as part of a global market “liberalisation” offensive, transformed the NZ Forest Service, which owned most plantation forests and directly employed workers, into a state-owned enterprise, in preparation for privatisation. The 1990s’ National government then sold off more than 500,000 hectares of forests.

Today there are 15,000 forest owners and approximately 400 logging companies, which compete for harvesting contracts. There is intense cost-cutting at the expense of workers’ pay and conditions. Workers’ wages as a share of industry profits have dropped from 70 percent in the 1980s to 19.6 percent today. Many workers earn little more than the minimum wage, while putting their lives at risk to generate expanding profits for the forestry companies.



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