

Five agency workers crushed to death in British scrapyards

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Five agency workers were crushed to death at the Hawkeswood Metal recycling plant in the Nechells area of Birmingham last Thursday.

The men, employed to clear out a loading bay, were loading scrap metal into containers near a large 15-foot wall when the wall, compiled of one and a half ton blocks of concrete constructed to divide bays of scrap metal, became dislodged and fell on them. The scrap metal being held back by the wall then fell on top of the blocks crushing them further. Emergency workers who arrived at the scene had to carefully remove the rubble piece by piece to ensure the remaining upright partition walls did not collapse.

Two of the bodies were recovered late on Thursday evening and the remaining three on Friday.

West Midlands Fire Service told the media as the recovery of the bodies was underway that “the scene is an extremely challenging one for us, involving significant tonnage of concrete and metals and a structure that is still unstable”.

Detective Superintendent Mark Payne of West Midlands Police described the scene: “It’s a wall constructed of blocks that weigh about one and a half tonnes each, they are concrete blocks, huge blocks. That wall was supporting and retaining a body of scrap metal. It appears that the wall has collapsed on top of the men. It’s a very difficult and complex scene.”

A police statement released Friday said a joint Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and police investigation was now being carried out to establish the cause, and warned the process could take weeks. The statement added that one line of inquiry would be to find out whether “any issues of negligence or malpractice” may have contributed to the collapse.

Despite the efforts of the rescue teams, a doctor pronounced the five men dead at the scene.

A sixth worker who managed to dig his way out of the rubble was taken to hospital suffering with leg injuries reported as not being life threatening. While at the hospital, he phoned his family and they alerted the local Muslim community about the disaster. As news spread, friends and relatives gathered at the plant gates waiting for news.

The men were named as Saibo Sillah, married with seven children; Alimamo Jammeh, whose wife and children were due to arrive in the UK to join him Sunday; Ousman Jabbie, who had moved to the UK a week before; Bangaly Dukureh; and Mohammed Jagana, who has a wife and baby daughter. The *Guardian* reported, “Four were originally from Gambia, while one was Senegalese, and it is believed all five lived in Spain before moving to Britain. They came separately to Birmingham but ended up at Hawkeswood Metal Recycling through an external agency.”

It is reported that the workers were poorly paid, with the *Guardian* noting, “Some were working full-time while taking English language classes in the evening. Others appeared to work zero-hours contracts at the site.” The newspaper cited a friend of Jagana and Dukureh, who said they were paid by the hour and sometimes turned up at work only to be told they were not needed after a couple of hours. He added, “Some of them have a language barrier so they can’t get into other jobs straight away, so they have to start at this place.”

The media interviewed friends of the deceased workers outside the gates. They spoke of the men with affection and respect and said some had celebrated Eid together the previous day. In an interview with the *Birmingham Mail*, Hanako Sawo said he became aware of the incident through the family of the man who dug

his way out. “I know all of them ... they would come to work by bus. I knew Saibo Sillah from a community centre where we used to pray together. He had been in the UK for three years.” He added that Sillah had seven children, including two-year-old twins. “He was a very, very decent guy. I’m devastated,” he said.

The West Midlands is awash with small scrap metal operations, which process an estimated 10 million tonnes of scrap a year. These firms collect and sort iron and steel scrap originating from local car plants, engineering works and the demolition sector. Peter Mathews, chairman at Black Country Metals, told the *Financial Times*, “There are more scrap metal operations concentrated in the West Midlands than anywhere else in the UK.”

Hawkeswood Metal began trading more than 40 years ago. According to the company’s web site, it processes more than 500,000 tons of scrap metal a year.

Three serious incidents have now occurred at the plant in the last few years. In July 2012, the company was fined £50,000 and ordered to pay more than £10,000 in costs at Birmingham Crown Court after a worker was trapped and broke his arm in an unguarded conveyor belt. In February this year, the West Midlands Fire service were called out to a major fire incident at the plant, with 700 tonnes of scrap metal going up in flames.

Detective Superintendent Payne ruled out any connection between the fire and the collapse of the steel blocks now being investigated. “Clearly we are investigating together with the HSE, whether there are any issues of negligence or malpractice that have contributed to that wall falling down.” Payne added, “You can imagine it’s a very difficult and complex scene and we’re working to try and understand exactly how that wall came down.”

On its web site, under Health and Safety, the company claims it complies with Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and other safety legislation. It states, “Hawkeswood Metal Recycling Limited’s health and safety objective is to minimise the number of instances of occupational accidents and illnesses and ultimately to achieve an accident-free workplace.”

The deaths of the five workers underlines the dangerous conditions minimum waged agency workers can be subjected to. Compounding these dangers are the reductions in the staffing levels of HSE inspectors.

This has grown alarmingly under the current Conservative and earlier Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition cuts. The sympathy message to the families of the dead tweeted by the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron is a gross act of cynicism.

An article posted on the HSE’s web site on April 16 reveals that “Central government funding [for the HSE] will be £100 million lower in 2019/20 than in 2009/10” and that its “annual funding from central government will be cut by a further 12.5 percent by 2019/20, bringing the total reduction since 2009/10 to 46 percent.”

A large portion of the cuts has come from reducing the number of inspectors. In April, the UCATT trade union highlighted the reduction in inspections in the construction industry. The biggest reduction was in Scotland, which saw a drop of 55.7 percent. In the North East it fell 28.5 percent, the North West 32.5 percent, the South East 19.6 percent and in Wales 3.4 percent.

The *Birmingham Mail* launched a fundraising campaign for the families of the deceased men, saying, “Five men went to work and will never get to go home again. Tragedy has struck in our city, when guests in our country died after a collapse at an industrial plant in Nechells, and while the response happened almost immediately, for many it will never go away. Children have lost fathers, wives have lost husbands, mothers have lost sons.” In 24 hours, it raised £5,000.



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