

Australia: Five workers killed in industrial incidents within a week

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Over a seven-day period this month, five Australian workers were killed in a series of shocking incidents in construction and transport. Initial reports suggest that these fatalities were avoidable.

On October 6, Ashley Morris, 35, and Humberto Leite, 55 were crushed between two 9-tonne concrete slabs while working in a construction pit on a \$37 million stable development at Brisbane's Eagle Farm Racecourse. The men, both fathers, were already dead when Queensland Ambulance Service personnel arrived on site.

A construction trade union spokesman told the media that the slabs may have been poorly braced by a subcontractor, but he declined to name the firm involved. He said three of four slabs had been placed in the hole when one fell to the ground.

The union revealed that two workers had walked off over safety concerns before the incident. One worker reportedly said "someone's going to die here." The primary contractor, Brisbane-based Criscon, has refused so far to comment on the deaths.

Unsafe conditions in the construction industry were further laid bare on October 10. Marianka Heumann, 27, died when she fell 60 metres down a ventilation shaft from the 15th floor of the 38-storey Finbar and Hanssen luxury apartment construction project in East Perth, Western Australia. The young German woman was on a working holiday and had been employed on the site as an unskilled labourer for only three months.

Heumann was applying silicone to ceilings. She finished the job set for the day but returned when she noticed a small area she missed. She had reportedly already removed the safety harness she was wearing during her shift.

Hanssen Construction managing director Gerry Hanssen told the media that each new worker "gets a

safety induction before they start, on the site." However, one of Heumann's co-workers told reporters that while the German woman was a careful worker, "many times we worked without protection."

Moreover, the industry safety watchdog WorkSafe reported it had received five complaints about safety on the project since construction commenced in late 2015, and issued two improvement notices to the company—one for "edge protection" and another for "excessive debris" on the site.

In 2008, Hanssen Construction was fined \$174,000 by the Federal Magistrates Court in Perth over its treatment of overseas workers in relation to pay and conditions, and was found guilty of 21 breaches of the Workplace Relations Act.

Heumann's death reignited questions about inadequacies in training and induction of inexperienced backpackers and young workers in one of the country's most dangerous industries. Anyone can easily obtain a "White Card" qualification to work on a building site, just by paying a small fee and completing a short online course. Previously, applicants were required to attend one-day courses.

In the transport sector, two truck drivers, Chris Blake, 46, and Peter Cardilini, 50, were killed on October 6 in the Sydney suburb of Erskine Park. A prime mover owned by the A.K. Group and driven by Blake swerved onto the wrong side of the road, colliding with a loaded Austral Brick truck that had just pulled out of the company's yard. Both vehicles instantly exploded on impact.

Police investigating the crash said they found evidence of poor fatigue management by the A.K. Group after searching the company's premises and reviewing driver logs. Eight defect notices were issued for two trucks on the site, including for mechanical and

brake issues as well as oil and fuel leaks. Several other trucks were taken to a Roads and Maritime Service facility for closer inspection.

More workers die in the transport, postal and warehousing sector each year than in any other industry. Safe Work figures show that 48 of 184 workplace deaths in Australia last year were in this sector. Only agriculture, forestry and fishing, with 46 deaths, had a comparable toll.

With increasingly cut-throat competition for contracts, transport companies seek to slash costs by cutting back on vehicle maintenance and placing pressure on drivers to meet shorter delivery deadlines, leading to fatigue, speeding and the overloading of trucks.

Such conditions are becoming the norm. In a 2015 survey of more than 1,000 trucking businesses by statutory authority Safe Work Australia, 20 percent admitted they broke safety rules to complete work on time. One in five agreed they “consider minor incidents a normal part of daily work.”

So far this year, there have been 132 industrial-related fatalities in Australia. Of these, 42 were in the transport, postal and warehousing sector and 21 in the construction industry.

The deaths, many of which are preventable, stand as a damning indictment of the capitalist system and all its political servants, who put profits above the lives of ordinary working people. Successive governments, Liberal-National and Labor, have backed corporate restructuring and deregulated safety, including cutting spending on regulation and sharply reducing the number of safety inspectors.

In the wake of every industrial death, the trade unions ritualistically feign concern for safety. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) national secretary Dave Noonan said the union would provide grief and trauma counselling for the construction victims’ co-workers. “This is a high-risk industry. We lose too many lives in these types of accidents,” he said.

However, the unions are wholly complicit in the undermining of conditions. For decades, they have worked to contain opposition by workers to the relentless elimination of jobs, the removal of safety practices, the imposition of longer shifts and around-the-clock working, all in the name of making employers

competitive. The ongoing workplace deaths are the deadly consequence of this process.



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