

Construction accident in Queens, New York kills two workers

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Two workers, crane operator George Smith and flagman Elizandro Enriquez Ramos, were killed in a construction accident in the Briarwood section of Queens in New York City on Tuesday. The accident occurred when a 6,500-pound steel I-beam fell as it was being hoisted into place and crashed onto the cab of the crane. The I-beam fell four stories.

Smith was sitting in the cab, and Ramos was standing just outside it. Several sources have suggested failure of the rigging used to lift the beam may have played a role in the accident. Ramos's daughter, Josseline Ramos, has called for an investigation into the accident. "I want justice," she told the media, "and don't believe the wind [had] anything to do with it." *Crain's New York Business* has reported that one of the men was employed by a subcontractor who was fined \$6,300 in 2015 for not implementing safety provisions prior to the death of a worker in a separate incident.

This is only the latest in a series of construction accidents that have led to deaths or serious injuries of building trades workers. Recent reports have noted a construction worker in Brooklyn who was killed when a piece of equipment broke, injuring his skull, and an elevator mechanic who plunged down a shaft.

There has been a steady rise in the number of construction accidents and related deaths in New York City over the last decade. Many of the victims have been undocumented immigrant workers. During this period the city has been in the midst of a frenzied building boom, primarily centered on constructing luxury condominiums.

In the drive to maximize profit for the construction and real estate industries, the safety and well-being of workers is given a back seat to the demands of the developers and their financial backers.

In an article in September, *Crain's* reports that "more

than a third of construction fatalities last year were not recorded by the de Blasio administration." Combine this with the fact that many construction workers are undocumented and it may be impossible to put an exact figure on the number of workers killed or injured. All indications, however, suggest that the number has been climbing steadily.

A number of spectacular accidents, including a giant crane collapse in a busy area of Manhattan, have attracted media attention and drawn meaningless platitudes from both Democratic New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. Neither has committed significant resources to ensuring worker safety. As the number of building permits has rapidly increased over the last several years, the number of city safety inspectors has actually decreased. Between 2011 and 2014, the most recent period for which figures are available, the number of safety inspectors dropped from 1,171 to 1,105, or a total of 6 percent. During the same period the number of building permits increased from 121,000 to 142,000, or 18 percent.

A quick glance at real estate prices in Long Island City, Queens, one of several areas along the East River corridor seeing tremendous speculative development, reveals asking prices for one-bedroom apartments in excess of \$600,000. Similar prices are found in other rapidly gentrifying areas of the city.

It is virtually impossible for the workers who construct New York's new housing to afford to live in the very places they build.

Despite the high profit margins of New York real estate, developers and their financial backers seek greater returns, and continue to push workers for greater productivity, with deadly consequences.



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