Teenager killed on Australian building site

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The death early this month of 17-year-old Wesley Ballantine at a building site in Perth, the Western Australian state capital, further exposes the rundown of basic safety standards as employers, working in conjunction with the construction trade unions, speed up projects and cut costs.

Ballantine was one of seven workers killed in industrial accidents in Australia in the first week of 2017. Four workers died in the transport, postal and warehousing sector, one in agriculture, forestry and fishing and one in arts and recreation services.

Ballantine plunged 12 metres to his death at about 4.30 a.m. on January 5 while attempting to install glass-ceiling panels at the old Post Office building in Perth's central business district. According to press reports, he was not wearing a safety harness.

The heritage-listed building, which is being remodelled into a retail outlet for the Swedish fashion giant H&M, was supposed to have been finished in mid-November, in time for the Christmas retail season. In what has become commonplace throughout the industry, work continued round the clock. Ballantine was on a night shift and due to finish at 6 a.m.

Ballantine was employed by contractors for interior construction company Valmont, which issued a public statement of condolence, as did H&M. Neither company offered any explanation, however, for the teenager working without a harness.

Tyrone Buchanan, Wesley's father, told the media he was not aware that the teenager was working in a high-risk area and would have tried to stop him. "I just can't comprehend how a kid could go up there at his young age—and not to be wearing a harness," he said.

"This kid, my son, he was not trained and, if he was, he didn't have enough experience to go up there. Was he supervised? If he was, who sen[t] him up there without harness on? I want the person who's responsible brought to justice," Buchanan said.

Few details have been released about the accident. It is one of a growing number of fatalities in the construction industry as builders and developers maximise profits by demanding quicker completions, cutting basic safety standards and employing larger numbers of youth and untrained workers.

The teenager died less than three months after another young, inexperienced worker—Marianka Heumann, a 27-year-old German backpacker—was killed on a Perth building site. She died after falling 13 floors through an open lift shaft on October 10. Heumann was working alone while applying sealant to wall panels at the Finbar Concerto construction site.

Simon Waters, a self-employed trainer and assessor and former Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) safety representative, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that conditions at the Concerto site were "deplorable."

Waters decided to leave the Concerto site after six weeks because of the lack of proper safety procedures. He feared that "someone would be seriously injured or killed on that job." He said there were no safety exclusion zones at the site and "a lot of young kids weren't supervised properly," including many who were "working on their own." He said numbers of builders in Perth were hiring apprentices as cheap labour.

An apprentice carpenter, who had also worked at the Concerto site, told the ABC that building employers were making increased demands on workers because there was more competition for jobs in construction as work declined in the mining industry. "The biggest factor," he said, "is the pressure to get the job done. We were doing massive hours, one break a day … It was compulsory to do six days a week but I was doing seven days a week, at least 10 hours a day."

Fearing victimisation, an apprentice carpenter wanted to remain anonymous. He explained that workers were

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being forced into dangerous situations. “I was putting up [temporary supports] underneath the suspended [concrete] slab, which was only held there by a power crane. So it was moving around a bit and it would have easy weighed over five tonne. You’re not supposed to stand underneath a suspended load at any time,” he said.

Last year 30 workers were killed in the Australian construction industry, almost double the number of fatalities in 2013, when 17 building workers died. Last October, five construction workers, including German backpacker Heumann, were killed within three weeks:

* On October 6, two men were crushed to death by a 10-tonne concrete panel at the Mirvac Eagle Farm Racecourse in Brisbane.

* On October 25, a worker died after falling from a formwork deck onto reinforced steel bars at the Trinity Building & Construction site in Porter Street, Ryde, a Sydney suburb.

* On October 26, a boilermaker, who was working alone, was crushed to death while operating a knuckle boom (a small portable crane) at the Probuild Plenary Group site at the Melbourne Convention Centre expansion.

The inadequate health and safety conditions in the building industry are not restricted to small sites. They are prevalent on large projects. Lendlease’s Barangaroo casino and resort construction site on Sydney Harbour, which at its peak employed over 3,000 workers, has one of the highest rates of reportable workplace incidents in New South Wales.

Last year an ABC report revealed that these incidents included workers exposed to live electrical wiring, fires and explosions, as well as falling steel and other building materials. Between 2014 and 2016, there were at least 123 incidents—approximately five times the rate of other major Sydney building sites.

Lendlease claimed that the high number of incidents at Barangaroo demonstrated the company’s stringent reportage procedures and the “high priority” the company placed on workplace safety.

Speaking anonymously with the ABC in October, Antony, a former electrician at Barangaroo, said workers were “scared” to report incidents. In December, an ex-Lendlease health and safety manager told the network that workers were bullied into not reporting incidents.

The coverup was “not only to hide [worksite incidents] from the regulator, but to hide [them] internally,” the ex-manager said. “To hide it internally means that the company’s incident and injury statistics are kept as low as possible, which helps for future tenders … On a number of occasions we were instructed by some of the most senior level people within the project itself to do our best to hide things, not report the little stuff.”

None of this could happen, however, without the role of the construction unions. Decades of union-brokered agreements with building employers to slash costs have created these dangerous conditions.

After Wesley Ballantine’s death, CFMEU state secretary Mick Buchan told the media it was “sad to report” another death so early in the new year. At the same time, he said the CFMEU “would like to remind all workers to stay safe,” suggesting that workers were to blame for the fatalities, not the employers.

The union said it was concerned about possible pressure on workers from tight building completion dates, but said it did not know if that was a contributing factor in this case. In fact, the unions have collaborated with employers to create an “investment friendly” climate for the construction industry by undermining worker’s hard-won conditions, including health and safety standards.

The construction unions, moreover, have substantial investments in the building industry through the multi-million dollar CBUS superannuation fund. This means they have a direct commercial interest in preventing any industrial action or other disruptions that delay construction projects.

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