

Australia: Worker killed at Sydney harbour building site

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Early this month, a 32-year-old rigger, Tim Macpherson, was crushed to death on a wharf construction project at Barangaroo, a tourist hot spot on the Sydney harbour and adjoining the city's business district (CBD).

Macpherson was working on a barge at the Barangaroo ferry hub site when an unsecured metal and concrete header beam, sitting across two pylons, was knocked by another header beam being lifted by a crane. The unsecured beam fell onto his head and upper torso.

Macpherson died at the site, leaving behind his pregnant wife, Ashleigh, and two-year-old-son, Jack. The young couple had just bought their first home in Maitland, an approximately two-hour commute to the Sydney ferry work site. He began working on the project six months before the fatal accident.

According to official figures, 29 workers were killed in industrial accidents in Australia between January and March 1 this year. Macpherson, who died on March 1, is the seventh construction worker to have lost his life in building site accidents during this period or almost one fatality per week in the industry.

Ten workers have died in the transport, postal and warehousing sector, four in agriculture, forestry and fishing, three in electricity, gas, water and waste, one in manufacturing, one in public administration and safety, one in accommodation and food services and two in arts and recreation.

The Barangaroo ferry hub construction is a \$57.5 million New South Wales (NSW) government project, designed to facilitate access to a new upmarket restaurant and retail strip and a multi-million dollar casino still under construction. The project includes three ferry wharves, with fully accessible pontoons, seated waiting areas, weather protection and service

information, and a predicted average daily throughput of 60,000 people.

The work has been contracted out to McConnell Dowell, an Australian building contractor with an annual turnover of over \$2 billion. The project is running behind schedule and was due to be opened in late 2016.

Safe Work NSW is currently investigating the tragedy and there will be a NSW Coroner's inquiry. While few details have been released about this accident, numerous questions are posed.

Was the contractor increasing pressure on workers to increase productivity and complete the job? How thorough was the training that Macpherson was given? Why was a metal header beam, resting on two pylons, unsecured? Why was Macpherson in the vicinity of an area where heavy lifting was being carried out?

Was there a "muster point" providing a clear safety area on the barge, and if so, was it kept clear? It has been noted that another barge, 200 metres to the north, had a muster point that was obstructed by two pylon covers. Was the barge large enough to accommodate this type of operation?

These questions need to be answered as construction workers continue to die on the job. Builders and developers, seeking to maximise profits are demanding quicker completions, cutting basic safety standards and increasingly employing larger numbers of youth and untrained workers.

The ferry hub site and the multi-storey adjoining Barangaroo project—the largest urban construction site in Australia—has a history of workplace safety failures.

In April, 2012, asbestos was discovered in one part of the Barangaroo site, resulting in a temporary closure after belated quarantining and removal. There have been 13 other asbestos discoveries since construction

began.

· January, 2014, a 23-year-old Aboriginal man plunged 30 metres to his death from a scaffold after participating in an eight week off-site training course. He had been employed as a trainee scaffolder on a two-week contract and apparently was left to wander around unsupervised. Lendlease the principal contractor was paid federal government grants to take on the young worker under the Koori Job Ready Program.

· March 2014, a large fire broke out at the site. It took fire crews from 20 stations and personnel from hazardous material (HAZMAT) 24 hours to extinguish the blaze.

· August 8, 2015 a worker aged in his 40s, suffered critical injuries at the site when a pallet of scaffolding weighing around one tonne fell off a forklift onto him.

In August last year the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed that Lendlease's Barangaroo project had one of the highest rates of reportable workplace incidents in NSW. Over 120 incidents were reported between 2014 and 2016, including workers exposed to live electrical wiring, explosions, crushed body parts and numerous near-misses from falling objects.

Lendlease claimed that the ABC report, which was obtained through a freedom of information request, was an indication of the company's stringent reportage and the "high priority" it placed on workplace safety. This was rejected by a former Lendlease environmental health and safety manager.

The health and safety manager told the ABC that Lendlease's attitude towards safety was "an absolute disgrace" and that workers were bullied into not reporting incidents to safety regulators and internal management.

To hide industrial accidents internally, he said "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."

Paul Keating from the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) told reporters that he and another MUA official had attempted to inspect the site in November 2016. The union, he said, had been told that the barge being used on site failed to comply with maritime standards.

Keating said that that he was "met with opposition from the contractor, McConnell Dowell, in assessing the site, after which I contacted Roads and Maritime Services to find out whether the vessel was up to standard ... These companies refuse our right of entry even when we raise these issues of safety with them."

No action, however, was taken either by the MUA or the construction industry unions and, once again, the official concerns about lax safety standards have only come to light after a worker has died.

The conditions which has led to growing numbers of industrial accidents on Australian building sites and in other industries, in fact, are a result of union-brokered agreements that have slashed construction costs, driven up productivity and undermined work safety. The unions, which heavily invest their members' superannuation funds in the construction industry, defend the profit system and have a commercial interest in preventing any action that delays building projects.



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