

Electrician falls 75 feet to his death at Detroit construction site

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Michael Morrison, a 46-year-old electrician, was pronounced dead at Detroit Receiving Hospital after falling 75 feet at a construction site in midtown Detroit Wednesday morning. Morrison, who had been working on the site for eight months, reportedly fell from a catwalk above the unfinished Little Caesars sports arena.

While the exact circumstances of the worker's death are still unknown, there has been an enormous rush to complete the \$863 million publicly-subsidized arena that will host the Detroit Red Wings professional hockey and Detroit Pistons professional basketball teams. The state of Michigan has also seen a raft of fatal falls on construction sites, with half of last year's occupational fatalities and six of the nine this year resulting from falls.

Barton Malow's CEO Ryan Maibach hurried to absolve the contracting company of any guilt in the tragedy, writing immediately after Morrison's death, "After a review of the facts surrounding today's tragic event, we have reached a preliminary conclusion that this event was not the result of a construction-related accident...Additional information may become available as the Detroit Police Department concludes their investigation."

Without presenting any evidence to substantiate its claim, a Detroit Police Department spokesman said, "Based on our investigation, he [Morrison] climbed on that scaffolding with the intent of committing suicide." The local media immediately lined up behind this rush to judgment.

Morrison was a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 58. A statement on the IBEW local's Facebook page also deflected any criticism of management. "In the construction industry injuries are common. We often

work in hazardous locations because our jobs require it. Injuries can be minimized, and we always hope to make it home in the same condition we left our families in...Local 58 Brother Michael Morrison lost his life today. 'What if's' and 'should have's' will not bring this brother back home today. His family is without a father, husband, provider and friend. Our hearts break for them."

If the union refuses to discuss "What if's" and "should have's" this raises the question of whether IBEW local officials were aware of unsafe conditions and did nothing about it. This would be in line with the role of unions in defending the profits of the corporations and suppressing the opposition of workers to speedup and exploitation.

Even if the highly dubious claim that this was a workplace suicide were true this would beg the question: What kind of pressure was this worker under to take his own life?

There has been a major push complete the project for an opening performance by Kid Rock slated for September 12 and the Red Wings' first preseason home game on September 23, with millions in investments on the line. In March of this year alone, two million man-hours were put in by the average 1,400 workers on the job site, employed by 70 companies rushing to complete the job on time.

The construction of the controversial 61,000-square-foot stadium was announced as part of the real estate profit frenzy in the wake of the 2013-14 Detroit bankruptcy. The late Detroit billionaire Mike Ilitch's family-owned company stands to profit the largest off the arena and will collect tax revenues on the enterprise for a century. Public finances made up \$324.1 million of the total \$863 million budget for the arena.

In a broader context, a Bureau of Labor Statistics

(BLS) report reveals an upward trend in workplace fatalities for the first time since 2010. Analyzing data collected by BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, 4,821 people, or over 13 every day, died on the job in 2014. Construction runs the highest risk of on-the-job fatality, making up 899 of the total 2,014 deaths. Slips, trips and falls are the second-leading cause of death in the workplace, at 818 of the total 2014 deaths.

In the state of Michigan alone, the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) investigated 43 on-the-job deaths last year. This figure represents a sharp increase from 29 in 2015 and is the highest in a decade. The actual number of workers killed is three to four times greater because the MIOSHA statute prohibits the agency from investigating cases involving federal, aviation and train workers or the self-employed, or deaths caused by traffic crashes or workplace violence.

Of the state's toll last year, 22 of the deaths were from falls, three times the national average. Peter Dooley, senior project coordinator for the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, said MIOSHA fines for fatalities and serious violations are "pitifully low" when compared with other states and the levels for federal enforcement.

"This sends a message that it's cheaper to violate health and safety standards rather than comply," Dooley told the MLIVE web site. Since the Occupational Safety and Health Act was enacted by Congress in 1970, deaths on the job have tended to decline, despite continuous erosion of OSHA enforcement capability.

With Michigan ranking 48th among states in 2014, its penalties for serious workplace violations are near the lowest in the nation. That year, companies fined by the Michigan agency paid \$4,048 on average, compared with \$11,309 on average by the federal agency.

Commenting on typical safety measures in the workplace, one retired construction worker from Detroit said, "There is always a struggle between what is safe and what is profitable. There is no provision for safety. Workers are given a harness and it is up to them to tie it off. They are under enormous pressure to produce.

"Contractors are constantly taking shortcuts. You can't stop falls unless you spend time and money to

secure the work site. This includes building proper scaffolding instead of half-backed scaffolding. There shouldn't be overlapping two-by-twelves that are a trip hazard. It's legal but it shouldn't be. With the inch-and-a-half overlap you can step back, trip and fall. To be safe they would have to have proper handrails, restraints and toe-kicks.

"Do workers have the time and equipment to work safely or are they forced to take shortcuts too? To ask the question is to answer it."



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