

“They said that to protect the company”

Coworkers denounce false report of suicide after Detroit electrician falls to his death

Tim Rivers
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The June 28 death of an electrical worker who fell 75 feet at Little Caesars Arena in Detroit was an industrial accident, not a suicide as initially claimed by local police, the general contractor for the project and the media, according to a report issued by the Wayne County Medical Examiner’s Office.

Michael Morrison died of multiple injuries in an accidental fall, said Lisa Croff, director of Communications and Media Relations for the Wayne County Department of Health, Veterans and Community Wellness. The official report repudiates earlier statements by Detroit Police Media Relations Director Michael Woody made in harmony with those of Ryan Maibach, CEO of Barton Malow Corporation, general contractor for the project, that the worker’s death was not construction-related, but a suicide.

With a rush to complete the job for the arena’s opening in three months, city authorities and the media immediately rallied about the billionaire family of the late Mike Ilitch, the owner of the pizza chain and the Detroit Red Wings hockey and Detroit Tigers baseball teams, to deflect concerns over the sacrifice of workers’ safety for corporate profit. After the claim of suicide was widely broadcast, neither the police department nor the news media have retracted their now disproven reports.

Workers at the site were livid at blatant misreporting and rush to judgment by the police, construction bosses and the media. As work resumed on Wednesday, July 5, after the holiday, many building trades workers still did not have any details about what happened a week earlier.

“Everything is hearsay right now,” a carpenter with 18 years’ experience told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“We started 12 hour days today, and we’re working 12 tomorrow,” she continued. “We don’t know beyond that.”

An electrician, who knew Michael Morrison well, was especially angry at the assertion that he had taken his own life. “It was just not possible. They planted that seed [of suicide] so fast,” said the worker who spoke anonymously to avoid retribution.

“They said that to protect the company. They don’t want OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] up their ass, and they also want to stiff the family.”

Morrison, he said, “was the kind of guy who, if he felt you were having a bad day, he would make sure that he got a smile out of you. That was tearing me up,” he added. “I am really glad you are here to tell the real story,” the worker said, expressing anger over the pain and humiliation the official story must have added to the devastation suffered by his wife and family. He said he had felt compelled to call out coworkers who accepted the lies of the media barrage.

Referring to the dangers on the job, he added, his coworker’s death “opened my eyes wide. Every step I take now my head is on a swivel.”

“It was too soon to make a declaration,” said a young worker. “They couldn’t have had an investigation.” Referring to the decades-long class war against workers in the city, she added, “My daddy and my grand-daddy both worked at Chrysler. They took both their pensions. They said they ran out of money.”

Morrison was killed at 8:00 in the morning and the site and workers were sent home for the day without the slightest explanation. “They don’t tell us anything,” said another worker passing by. “They sent us home

and have keep us in the dark.”

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During an earlier period, a serious injury or death would have provoked an immediate response with job site meetings to explain to every worker what happened and the measures that were being implemented to make sure that anything similar would not happen again. This was predicated on the logical conclusion that if the conditions which produced the incident were not understood and corrected immediately, other serious incidents would inevitably follow.

The decades-long abandonment of the interests of the working class by the trade unions, which have suppressed any struggle by workers to defend their jobs, living standards and working conditions, has given a freehand to the employers to speed up workers, cut corners and imperil their lives. Meanwhile, the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) has basically outsourced safety regulation to various union-management “partnerships,” that essentially end surprise inspections and reduce fines for safety violations. There was one such meeting at the Little Caesars jobsite in May, supposedly to prevent falls, but the collaboration between the union and management only subordinates workers’ safety to corporate profit—as the death of Morrison shows.

Morrison was a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 58 in Detroit. The union has not issued any statement condemning the lies by the police and the media, nor posted the Medical Examiner’s report on their Facebook page. On the day of Morrison’s death, the IBEW Local 58 posted a craven statement, saying, “We often work in hazardous locations because our jobs require it... ‘What if’s’ and ‘should have’s’ will not bring this brother back home today.”

Rank-and-file workers must find out all the “what if’s” and “should have’s” to prevent more deadly accidents. The answers, however, will not come from the IBEW or MIOSHA. In every location workers should organize their own independent committees to investigate and control the conditions of work, and organize collective opposition to unsafe conditions.

From the standpoint of the wealthy investors that own and control everything in the city—and their servants in

both political parties, the media and the unions—nothing can be done to delay completion of these construction projects. Like the residents whose homes were condemned to make way for the new stadium, the health and safety of construction workers is nothing but road kill in the path of their pursuit of profit.



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