

Two New York construction workers die at separate job sites

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Two construction workers fell to their deaths in separate incidents at New York City construction sites last Thursday, September 21. Juan Chonillo of the borough of Queens, a father of five who had immigrated to the US from Ecuador, fell from the 29th floor. He landed on a section of the building near street level. His death came one day after the city issued a partial stop-work order for what the order listed as “POSSIBLE UNSAFE CRANE OPERATION.” Following his death, all work was halted. The project when finished will be a nearly 700-foot-high luxury condominium building.

The second accident happened later that same day at 1 Manhattan West, a building going up as part of the Hudson Yards construction project near midtown Manhattan. Two workers fell approximately 35 feet from an outside construction elevator. One worker died at the scene. The other was taken to Bellevue Hospital and was listed in stable condition. The identities of these workers have not been made available at the time of this writing.

The lead construction company on the job, Tishman Construction, told reporters that the workers fell out of a lift while it was descending. Tishman did not give further details of the accident.

The workers in the second incident were working on a tower being developed by Brookfield Properties at Hudson Yards. Brookfield is a major real estate company with some \$40 billion in assets. It is headquartered in New York City, Toronto and Sydney. It has holdings in cities around the globe.

The Hudson Yards project, according to the development’s web site, is “the largest private real estate development in the history of the United States and the largest development in New York City since Rockefeller Center. The site will include more than 18 million square feet of commercial and residential properties.”

Last June saw the death of another worker at 1 Manhattan West. Sixty-two-year-old Roger Vail died

when he fell some 10 stories, from the 16th floor to the 6th. Following his death, the city shut down the construction site, issuing a full stop-work order that faulted the site for “site conditions endangering workers.”

The New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH) released a report earlier this year entitled “Deadly Skyline: An Annual Report on Construction Fatalities in New York State.”

The report noted that construction worker deaths are rising in New York. It also reported that many construction employers across the state are consistently violating regulations and code requirements.

According to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 55 workers died within the construction industry in 2015 in New York.

Some key findings of the NYCOSH report with respect to the New York City construction industry were published by the law firm Block O’Toole & Murphy:

- 464 workers died in construction-related accidents in New York State in the 10-year period from 2006 to 2015.
- The New York City construction sector, which employs 3 percent of the city’s workforce, has the highest occupational death rate: 34 percent of all workplace deaths across various industries. For Los Angeles and Chicago, the rates are 32 percent and 24 percent, respectively. The New York City sector with the next highest occupational fatality rate was the trade, transportation, and utilities industry, accounting for 20 percent of all workplace deaths.
- Work-related incidents involving deaths and injuries increased 88 percent from 2014 to 2015 (231 incidents in 2014 and 435 in 2015).
- The majority of sites where workers were fatally injured had violated OSHA safety standards: 80 percent in 2014 and over 90 percent in 2015.
- The fatality rate of the construction workforce climbed 38.9 percent from 2011 to 2015.

New York's construction industry has traditionally employed many immigrants. This is reflected in recent fatality figures by a high number of Latinos and members of other immigrant groups.

Real estate prices remain sky-high, and the banks, construction and real estate companies turn to attacking the workers to extract greater profits. These attacks come in the form of speed-ups, ignoring safety practices, pushing workers to work longer hours, and the lowering of wages and benefits. These conditions disproportionately affect lower-paid immigrant workers. While it is true that union construction workers fare somewhat better in terms of on-the-job safety, the unions have collaborated with the construction industry to increase productivity, which in turn increases the number of accidents.

Democratic politicians have paid lip service to worker safety, but both New York Governor Cuomo and New York City Mayor de Blasio are beholden to the moneyed interests of the real estate industry.

The growing number of fatalities among construction workers coincides with New York City's continued and frenzied real estate boom, which is giving rise to its own contradictions.

Recent reports indicate a rising vacancy rate in the massive speculative development projects that are being completed. At the same time, the city's homeless population continues to grow and housing prices remain stuck in the stratosphere. Few if any of the city's construction workers can afford to live, whether as renters or owners, in the developments they themselves build. In neighborhoods such as Corona, where Juan Chonillo lived, workers often live in very crowded conditions. Boarding houses—small one-family homes often shared by multiple workers and their families—are not uncommon.



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