

New Zealand: Official silence over Taylor Preston meatworks death

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23 October 2017

Two weeks after a worker died at the Taylor Preston meat processing plant near Wellington, New Zealand's capital, the company, the NZ Meat Workers Union (MWU) and government officials are maintaining a wall of silence over the tragedy.

Since October 9, when the incident occurred, neither management nor the MWU has released a statement. The media has not reported it. In a written response to a WSWs inquiry, a spokesperson for WorkSafe, the government's safety watchdog, stated: "The incident is currently under investigation. Investigations can take up to a year to complete. We are unable to provide any further details at this time."

The WSWs understands that the worker, a woman in her thirties, died after falling 10 feet from a platform in the beef slaughter board, near the start of the processing chain. The accident occurred near the shift start time at 6:30am.

One witness told his co-workers the victim fell backward off the platform. She was initially resuscitated with a defibrillator, but died some days later in hospital. WorkSafe inspected the site the day of the death. The department was closed for the day while it was certified safe, but the rest of the plant remained in operation.

Several workers reported the incident to the WSWs, speaking on condition of anonymity. One said: "There should be a way to prevent people from falling off the platform, for whatever reason."

There is apparently CCTV footage of the incident, but no one has seen it apart from management, and possibly WorkSafe. There are two health and safety committees. At the time of writing, neither has been called together to discuss the incident. Inside the plant there has been no release of information, and workers are largely in the dark over the circumstances.

One worker told the WSWs the victim was known to have had a Pacemaker fitted some time ago and may have suffered a heart problem. Another said it was her first morning back at work after a week. As the sick leave was due to a leg infection, she may have not been well enough to work.

The company, the worker declared, "is quite notorious in terms of pushing people back into work. You know how they are. They don't want anybody to be on their ACC books. They hate spending money." ACC, the Accident Compensation Corporation, is the government's accident insurance and rehabilitation service provider.

One MWU member said there had been "no official statement from anyone," including the union, although he personally spoke about the death with a foreman. He said the incident "should never have happened," adding "the company is playing wait and see, they'll be lawyered up," because of past incidents where Taylor Preston was taken to court.

The company's silence reveals a contemptuous lack of concern over the fate of the victim and the safety of more than 800 workers. For Taylor Preston, along with the MWU, a key consideration will be the possible consequences for the company's involvement in the ACC's Accredited Employers Programme (AEP).

Introduced by a Labour Party government in 2000, the AEP grants large employers the ability to self-manage their workplace health, safety and rehabilitation procedures. The scheme aimed to cut costs for both employers and the government. In return for meeting "self-management" criteria and a demonstrated "commitment" to injury prevention and rehabilitation, participating employers can reduce their ACC levies by up to 90 percent, in some cases saving millions of dollars.

Taylor Preston has been in the AEP for more than a decade. One worker scathingly described it as ACC “jumping into bed with the big companies, all to get workers back to work.” It was necessary, he said “to find out if there is oversight, if the company is complying.” He complained that injured workers are often ill-informed “about their legal rights and what they can expect.”

The WSWS understands that on October 19, 10 days after the fatal incident, a night shift worker lost three fingers in the mutton department.

In 2015 the company was convicted and fined \$72,500 after a cleaner’s fingers were caught in an unguarded part of a conveyor. The company, then had seven convictions under the Health and Safety in Employment Act since 2005, pleaded not guilty to failing to take all practicable steps to ensure the worker’s safety.

The presiding judge noted the company did “not have a good record,” with a previous conviction coming only months before this incident. In 2013, Taylor Preston had lost an appeal against a fine of \$64,000 after a worker lost two fingers in a membrane-removing machine. Another conviction in 2007 came after a cleaner’s hand was caught in unguarded rollers. A 2005 case involved a machine operator who suffered an amputation of a fingertip while attempting to clear a blockage in an unguarded auger.

None of this is exceptional in the meat processing industry. Ruthless competition in the face of global volatility has seen factory closures, cost-cutting and ramped-up worker exploitation to maintain profits. Taylor Preston, with a workplace regime of wage rates barely above the legal minimum of \$15.75 an hour, widespread casualisation, and highly insecure conditions, sets benchmarks for attacks at other plants.

Principal responsibility for poor working conditions, including health and safety, rests not only with rapacious employers but successive governments, led by Labour and National, who have imposed waves of deregulation, and the trade unions.

In response to New Zealand’s well-documented high rates of worksite deaths and injury, the unions and the Labour Party have promoted the establishment of health and safety committees with compulsory “worker representation.” Changes to the law in 2013 and 2015 to provide for such committees have made no

difference whatsoever.

According to recent Statistics NZ data, workers are still being killed at the rate of one a week—39 so far this year. On average, someone is seriously injured at work every day. Five of the 2017 deaths have been in the forestry industry, which is held up as a model for employer, union and government collaboration under the Forest Industry Safety Council.

These corporatist bodies are a complete fraud. The unions’ role within them is to keep the industries profitable and prevent any fight by workers to demand decent, safe working conditions. At Taylor Preston, the health and safety committee has about 50 worker representatives, yet cannot counteract the relentless drive for profits that is the source of industrial accidents and deaths.



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