Death toll rises to six in Miami bridge collapse as new information emerges about contractors

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Six people, including one student, have been confirmed dead so far in the collapse of a pedestrian bridge under construction at Florida International University (FIU) in the Miami area Thursday afternoon.

A statement released late Friday evening by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) revealed that the lead engineer on the bridge project had called and left a voice message with FDOT on Tuesday reporting cracks in the north end of the span. W. Denney Pate, an engineer employed by FIGG Bridge Group, noted the cracking was "not good" and that it would have to be repaired but insisted that it was not a safety issue.

According to the FDOT statement, the call was not heard until Friday as the employee responsible for the line was out of their office but the state agency had not been responsible for checking on the bridge since none of the firms involved in construction of the bridge had ever communicated a "life-safety issue."

Meanwhile, as rescue crews continue to dig through the rubble of the 950-ton bridge span that fell on motorists, new information has emerged showing a history of safety violations by the two companies responsible for its construction.

Munilla Construction Management (MCM) is a South Florida-based company with deep political connections in the state. The *Miami New Times* reports that the company is currently fighting a lawsuit by a TSA employee who was injured while walking across a "makeshift bridge" built by the company during an expansion project at Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood International in October of 2016.

Jose Perez was walking across the platform leading to the bathrooms when it broke under his weight. His lawyer, Tesha Allison, told the *Times*, "They built this makeshift bridge in the area where all the employees work, and it was poorly done. He fell and hurt himself really badly…he had multiple broken bones and damage to his spine... They did shoddy work."

MCM has been fined over $50,000 since 2013 over the course of eight inspections of its worksites by federal inspectors. According to the *Miami Herald*, the company was ordered to pay a judgment of $143,000 to one of its subcontractors, Southeastern Engineering Contractors, after the workers walked off of the job due to safety concerns. The project in question, a $13.5 million "bridge reconstructing" job, was abandoned by the company due to multiple safety concerns including, according to court documents cited by the *Herald*, "arguable collapse" due to "failure of temporary sheet piles on the south bend of the site."

FIGG Bridge Group, the other major contractor and the designer of the collapsed pedestrian bridge, is a Tallahassee-based company that has been involved in many large construction projects, including the replacement of the Interstate 35 bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota that collapsed in 2007. In 2012, the company was fined $28,000 by the Virginia Department of Labor following a near catastrophic accident during the construction of the Jordan Bridge in South Norfolk, Virginia.

According to court documents, FIGG modified a girder used in the construction of the bridge against the recommendations of the manufacturer. The girder failed, sending a 90-ton piece of concrete falling onto the railroad tracks beneath it. Four workers were said to suffer minor injuries in the accident.

An article in the *Virginian-Pilot* at the time of the accident quoted one of the citations issued: "The citation also says Figg did not do daily, weekly and monthly inspections of the girder, that it did not provide adequate training for the equipment, and it did

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not have certain safety procedures in place for its maintenance and repair."

Both companies have benefitted from political connections throughout the state of Florida. MCM is owned by five brothers who have collectively donated more than half a million dollars to various politicians in Florida since 2000. According to the *Miami Herald*, this includes over $60,000 to Florida Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, a Republican, who is said to have helped secure federal funds for the FIU bridge.

MCM also has close connections with Miami-Dade County's Republican mayor, Carlos Gimenez. The *Herald* notes that one of the mayor's sons, Julio Gimenez, worked as construction executive for MCM at one time while another, C.J. Gimenez, registered and worked as a lobbyist for MCM.

The company, founded by the father of the current owners, Fernando Munilla, has historic ties to both the Pentagon and the CIA. According to the company's website, prior to the Cuban revolution, Munilla was "one of Cuba's premier builders and a pioneer in construction methodology. His enterprises included an engineering firm, three of the largest concrete plants, and a construction management company that built a good portion of the nation's pre-cast and pre-stressed construction projects."

Munilla's company was subsequently seized by the Castro government. The four oldest sons fled to the U.S shortly before the Bay of Pigs invasion while the father "stayed, fighting for his country's freedom, leading covert operations along with the CIA." Since 2000, the family has donated more than $100,000 to the far-right US-Cuba Democracy Political Action Committee.

In 2012 MCM won a $66 million contract to build a new school at the US military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. All told, the company has some $130 million in Department of Defense contracts.

FIGG has also been a prolific contributor, donating more than $99,000 to various candidates in the last twenty years, according to the *Herald*. The bulk of this sum, $60,000, went to the Republican Party of Florida in the year 2001.

At that time another construction company, Odebrecht-Metric, was under investigation for dumping cement into the Pensacola Bay during construction of the Garcon Point Bridge in Santa Rosa County. FIGG was responsible for overseeing the project and performing inspections. While Odebrecht-Metric was ultimately fined $4 million, Figg was never charged with any violations.

Thursday's bridge collapse is just the latest disaster highlighting the abysmal state of America's infrastructure. According to the quadrennial report released last year by the American Society of Civil Engineers the average age of bridges in the U.S is 56 years. The *2017 Infrastructure Report Card* gave a grade of C+ to the nation's bridge infrastructure, citing the fact that 56,007 are deemed to be structurally deficient, or over 9 percent. Since 2000, bridge collapses have occurred in a dozen different states, leading to 163 injuries and 40 deaths, not counting the FIU collapse on Thursday. The report estimated that $123 billion would have to be spent to properly rehabilitate the nation's bridges.

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