

Construction worker killed at drill site in Phoenix, Arizona

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Authorities have identified the construction worker who was killed last week in drill-rig collapse at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, Arizona as 52-year-old Melvin Self. Known as Wayne to those close to him, Self was described as having “calloused hands with a tender touch.”

A “true father” of five children and a grandfather of five grandchildren, Self was described as a “daughter’s first love” and a “son’s first hero” by his family. “There are dangers in construction but none of us could predict a tragedy like this. You are gone too soon, like leaving the stage in the middle of your song,” Self’s family said in a statement posted on a GoFundMe page set up to cover funeral expenses.

Self was operating a drilling rig on the morning of May 21 when it toppled onto its side at a construction site, Phoenix Fire Department officials reported. Self was thrown from the drill rig and into a deep hole as the sandy ground gave way underneath the machine. As he was blocked in by the heavy machinery and sand that seeped into the pit, a quick rescue of Self was impossible.

The accident happened while construction crews were working on the PHX Sky Train guideway system at the airport. Workers were digging the holes for the concrete columns that would support the track connecting one of the terminals with the rental car area.

Firefighters started the rescue mission on Monday, hoping to save Self before it was too late. By Tuesday, with no signs that Self remained alive, the effort turned into a recovery mission, as rescuers cited the amount of time Self would have been trapped in the hole since its collapse.

According to Phoenix Fire Department Captain Rob McDade, recovery crews found Self’s body on Thursday, after four days of searching, and he was

pronounced dead at the scene.

Among his coworkers and family, Self was known as “a whole lot of hero.” Coworkers reported his last action was to warn others as the drill-rig fell into the hole, yelling for everyone to get out of the way. The tale of Self’s heroics touched the firefighters who responded to the accident, and at least two stayed at the accident site every night until his body was found.

Hensel Phelps, the company overseeing construction on the PHX Sky Train, issued a statement to the *Arizona Republic* distancing the company from responsibility for Self’s death. “All of us at Hensel Phelps and on the project team at Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport are deeply saddened by the death of a team member who worked as a drill rig operator for Case Foundations, a subcontractor to Hensel Phelps at the airport. Hensel Phelps places the highest value on safety and this incident will be thoroughly investigated to understand exactly what happened.”

However, Hensel Phelps has been fined in the past for hazardous working conditions and safety violations. In 2017, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined Hensel Phelps for having employees working at a hazardous job site that resulted in the death of two workers at a multi-employer demolition site. The workers that died were contracted by another company, but OSHA stated Hensel Phelps exposed its workers on site to the same dangerous conditions and failed to protect workers from falling objects.

Notably, the company was fined in 2015 for excavation hazards at a project in Austin, Texas, including failing to provide supports where material was excavated below a structure, and not removing exposed workers from an excavation where the employer identified a hazardous condition.

Self's tragic death comes amid a rise in recorded workplace fatalities in the United States, with levels returning to those recorded prior to the economic crisis of 2007-2008. According to the most recent available data, there was a seven percent increase in the number of workers who were killed on the job between 2015 and 2016, rising from 4,836 to 5,190. An AFL-CIO study released last year found that an average of 150 workers die every day in the US due to hazardous working conditions.

Despite advances in technology and techniques that could prevent many deaths and injuries, construction and extraction remains among the deadliest occupations in the US, with 12.4 deaths per 100,000 workers.

Last week's accident follows a series of high profile worker deaths or injuries, including the crushing of 60-year-old welder Steve Wade earlier this month at the Caterpillar plant in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin and the wounding of 55-year-old autoworker Lynn Hagood at the Ford assembly plant in Flat Rock, Michigan. In both cases workers at the plants have attested to a dramatic decline in safety conditions due to concessions contracts negotiated and enforced by the United Steelworkers and the United Auto Workers unions in the interest of corporate profits.



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