

Two construction workers killed in scaffolding collapse near Disney World

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A scaffolding collapse of unknown cause killed two workers early on Wednesday morning at the JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort construction site near Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Thirty-four-year-old Lorenzo Zavala and 46-year-old Jerry Bell were pronounced dead at the scene when rescue authorities arrived. Their deaths are the third and fourth in the area in less than two months.

The workers were pouring concrete between the sixth and seventh floors when they fell. A third worker also fell but was able to grab hold of the scaffolding and pull himself up to safety. He suffered injuries as a result. A fourth worker at the scene survived with no reported injuries.

According to Orange County fire rescue spokesman Mike Jachles, about 20 workers were at the scene when the accident was called in close to 4:15 a.m. Following the incident, authorities blocked off the street and access to the site.

Joe Colon, an iron welder who was working at the site, told the press he didn't understand why such a tragic accident happened. "I'm just thinking of where it could've collapsed, what part. OSHA's there every day, they go around taking pictures, that's why I don't get it."

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) presence at major construction work sites is common. The presence of the organization does not ensure that workers labor in the safest possible environment. Like the building trades unions, OSHA accepts without question the profit prerogative and time constraints of the builders, which lead to such tragedies.

OSHA began an investigation on the day of the accident. OSHA investigations usually take up to 6 months, and are conducted alongside company

management. Wrist-slap fines of just a few thousand dollars are the typical penalties for workers' deaths.

There are several reasons why scaffolding can collapse at a construction site, including poor quality of scaffolding material, old scaffolding and rotting wood, and scaffolding built on an unstable or uneven surface. For the particular job that Zavala and Bell were doing—pouring concrete—the possibility of a several-thousand pound bucket of concrete swinging from a crane and striking the scaffolding can cause a collapse.

The deaths of Bell and Zavala were entirely preventable. Had proper safety measures and adequate funds been spent to ensure that workers had the right training, tools, and equipment, as well as decent working hours and staff levels, such a needless loss of life would not have occurred.

One worker, John Jennings, told ABC WFTV9: "There are rules for scaffolding. There's rules [for] hooking off, there's rules for the workers." But these rules are ignored by construction contractors every day, with little fear of repercussions.

Neither the Orange County Fire Department nor Sheriff's Department provided any information on the investigation of the causes of the two deaths. Despite authorities being present at the site, nothing has been reported on whether or not the workers were wearing harnesses, or on the condition of other scaffolding at the site.

JW Marriott, currently the third-largest hotel company in the world based on number of properties, will operate the resort after it is built. Contractors are in a hurry to complete the \$282 million, 516-room Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort, which started construction in the fourth quarter of 2017 and is planned to open in 2020. The upscale hotel is surrounded by Disney property.

The private equity group DCS Investment Holdings owns and manages the construction of the Marriott Resort. DCS has managed the construction of a number of high-end residential and recreational facilities in Florida. Dwight Schar, owner of DCS, has an estimated net worth of \$1 billion. In addition to DCS, Schar is the co-owner of the Washington Redskins professional football team and a founder of NVR, Inc., one of the country's largest homebuilders.

Rick Goldman, area vice president and district manager of PCL, the general contractor of the Marriott Resort, issued a statement to the press regarding the deaths. "PCL is deeply shocked and saddened by the incident that happened this morning at our JW Marriott Bonnet Creek construction site. Our sincerest condolences go to everyone affected by this tragedy. Safety of all workers is our top priority and we are doing everything we can to investigate this incident and assist local authorities."

What the official investigations will not expose is that the deaths of Bell and Zavala have a deeper cause: the profit interests of JW Marriott, DCS, and PCL. These multimillion-dollar companies make their wealth from the labor of workers who sacrifice life and limb for long hours at low wages and under dangerous conditions.

In stark contrast to the luxury and wealth of its resort areas, construction workers in Florida have faced declining living standards. The poverty rate in Florida was 14.7 percent in 2016, the most recent year for which data is available, compared to 12.7 percent across the entire US. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures from May 2017 show that the average annual income for a Florida resident is just \$44,790 per year, compared to \$50,620 for the US.

Faced with higher rates of poverty and lower incomes, workers in Florida, as in states throughout the US, find themselves with few choices but to take whatever jobs are available, even those which are low-paying with few benefits and dangerous working conditions, like many contract jobs in the construction industry.

The rate of fatal injury in construction work rose from 9.7 per 100,000 in 2008 to 10.1 per 100,000 by 2015. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics' Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries reported 991 construction industry deaths in 2016, the most recent year for which

data is available, making construction one of the deadliest occupations in the country. The number of construction deaths in 2016 rose from 937 in 2015, itself an increase from 885 in 2014.

The Trump administration has worked to eliminate safety measures and training for workers, including funding cuts to OSHA. The groundwork for this was laid by the Obama administration, which proliferated joint labor-management safety schemes that largely ended surprise inspections in unionized workplaces and allowed the corporations to endlessly challenge and reduce any fines.

Workers will not find a way to end the risk of death on the job by appealing to the politicians of the two main capitalist parties or through the reform of OSHA. The only way forward will be through a struggle to build rank-and-file committees to oversee the safety of workplaces and demand that adequate resources be spent to ensure safe working conditions, proper training, and to end speedup and long and irregular working hours. These demands will require a coordinated effort by workers in the US and internationally to fight for an end to the profit system as a whole.



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