

Australian construction worker dies after being struck by tub of concrete

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A construction worker died at a site in the Melbourne suburb of Box Hill after a horrific incident on Thursday afternoon. The worker was struck by a tub that fell from a crane and was then submerged in the wet concrete that it contained.

Two other workers were injured at the site where a multi-storey apartment block is being built. One is in a critical condition at Royal Melbourne hospital having sustained life-threatening injuries.

The death is the latest in a spate of industrial fatalities, especially in the building industry. They have underscored the subordination of workers' health and safety to the drive by companies, aided by the unions, to extract maximum profits from the construction and property boom.

The incident occurred at around 12:20 p.m. on Thursday. The chain of a crane on the site reportedly broke, sending the "kibble," or container of wet concrete, that it had been holding to the ground below.

The three workers were on the lowest part of the site, in a pit that was reportedly to be used as a basement or an underground carpark. At least two of them, the man who died and the worker who was critically injured, were struck by the kibble. They were then effectively buried alive in the wet concrete.

Gary Robertson, a senior paramedic who attended the site, described horrifying scenes in comments to the press. He said the worker who died was "submerged" in the concrete.

Robertson said the critically injured worker was also "partially submerged." He stated: "It was wet concrete and obviously as you can appreciate there's a timeline with that as well, because concrete sets." The worker "had to be extricated" by firefighters, paramedics and other workers.

Assistant chief fire officer Brendan Angwin told the

Australian Broadcasting Corporation that it had "been a very difficult incident as it's a building site." Around 40 firefighters were involved along with state rescue teams.

The worker who perished was pronounced dead at the scene. His colleague suffered extensive injuries including two broken arms, fractures, internal bleeding and wounds to his chest, head and abdomen.

Victoria Police, along with WorkSafe, a state authority, have launched investigations. Such investigations, however, are invariably whitewashes which fail to hold those responsible for industrial deaths to account.

The site was operated by CRC Group and the crane by Clark Cranes. It is not clear what caused the chain to break.

Already, serious questions have emerged about safety practices at the site. Chance Ang, who lives nearby, told the *Age* that at the end of the workday on Wednesday, he had seen the crane parked facing the road, with a weight above cars.

Ang said: "I thought that's a really strange spot to leave the crane because it was outside of the construction site, and if it fell it could land on a car. It struck me at the time as being quite weird..."

In July, a crane operated by Clark Cranes almost collapsed on a building site in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Richmond amid strong winds. The crane damaged nearby homes, forced nearby small businesses to cease trading for several days and led to the evacuation of up to 300 local residents. It is still unclear why the crane almost toppled.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining, Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) responded to Thursday's tragedy by posturing as a defender of workers' health and safety.

Media articles stated that CFMMEU officials were “fuming” over the accident. The union has issued safety notices for 80 Clark Cranes across Melbourne. This will likely prevent their use until they are inspected for any mechanical faults.

Union officials have said nothing about what they did in the wake of the July accident in Richmond. The fact that they have now issued a safety notice suggests that they did not do so after the July incident.

Thursday’s tragedy is the eighth workplace death in Victoria this year. According to federal government figures, 35 workers were killed in the construction industry in 2016. Similar rates of workplace fatalities appear to have persisted in the industry in the two years since.

The incident in Box Hill occurred two days after Criscon, a Brisbane building company, was fined \$405,000 after pleading guilty to failing to comply with health and safety standards. In 2014, two construction workers at a Criscon-operated site in Queensland were crushed to death after concrete slabs toppled over and fell on them.

Other cases have directly highlighted union complicity in workplace deaths. In March 2017, Tim Macpherson, a 32-year-old rigger, was crushed to death on a wharf construction project at Barangaroo, a tourist hot spot on the Sydney harbour. He was working on a barge at the site, when an unsecured concrete and metal beam was knocked by another beam being moved by a crane, and fell on McPherson’s head and torso killing him instantly.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which is now part of the CFMMEU, had been told in late 2016 that the barge did not comply with maritime standards. The union claimed that it demanded to access the site, but was rebuffed by operators. The MUA did nothing further to address the dangers, and only made them publicly known after McPherson’s death.

In 2013, Matthew Lopez-Linares, a 22-year-old Canadian backpacker, was killed when he was hit on the head by a falling steel beam while working on a demolition site in the inner-west of Sydney.

Officials from the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, which also forms part of the new CFMMEU, stated that they were “not surprised” by Lopez-Linares’ death. They had been to the site just two weeks before, where workers raised concerns about

the stability of slabs on the site and about the demolition processes being used. After a brief stoppage, the union allowed work to continue on the site, creating the conditions for the tragedy.

Similar instances have occurred involving cranes. In 2012, a fire erupted in a 65-metre hydraulic tower crane in Sydney’s CBD, causing a 20-metre boom to crash onto a building site. The CFMEU and Lendlease, which operated the project, had been aware of fuel leaks and other crane maintenance problems before the incident. CFMEU officials subsequently said that it had been “an accident waiting to happen.” They had not acted to prevent the continued operation of the crane leading up to the incident.

The role of the unions in enforcing unsafe conditions underscores that they are not workers’ organisations. Instead, they function as labour hire entities, no less indifferent to the dangerous conditions facing construction employees than the major corporations.

The Royal Commission into union corruption revealed that the CFMEU had extensive links to property developers. In 2016, for instance, it emerged that the union had received \$700,000 from companies linked to George Alex, who has owned contract labour and property development businesses accused of underpaying workers. The union also operated charities and training organisations which were vehicles for receiving payments from the corporations.

The CFMMEU’s health and safety officers, like all union bureaucrats, seek to prevent any political or industrial struggle by construction workers against the dire conditions they confront. At the same time, they work to ensure the union’s position at the bargaining table, where it negotiates away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent.



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