

Falling building debris causes injuries and deaths while profits mount for UK developers

Charles Hixson**27 November 2018**

Under signs advertising “Exclusive Skyline Collection—Move In This Year,” lay a man’s body, the upper half covered in a blanket. A broken metal window unit covered his lower half, with broken glass and blood scattered nearby.

Last month, a 53-year-old father, Mike Ferris, became the latest fatality of the frenzied corporate construction industry. Ferris, a coach driver for Clarkes of London, had just used the toilet at the Riverbank Plaza when he was struck by a windowpane falling 250 feet from the penthouse level of the 27-storey Corniche tower block.

Only last year, two carpenters were nearly killed when another window from the same luxury flats collapsed and fell. A spokesman for developer St. James, part of the Berkeley group, said this resulted in a full investigation, which led to a design alteration.

Some days later, senior staff at structural engineer Davies, Maguire and Whitby simply told a junior to declare “no comment.” Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has begun an investigation that first must establish whether the accident was work-related. The three towers of the Corniche are aimed at a rich clientele with the 253 apartments in an “exclusive riverside address” priced between £2.7 million and £6.25 million. Restaurants, a bar, pool, spa and gym are available for its residents.

The *This Week in Facilities Management* website described images of the accident as “disturbing” and is among the groups investigating it. It observed, “The living spaces of the apartments extend into the deep bays that give the scheme its distinctive character—but the curves may also have caused stresses capable of blowing a window panel from its fixings. Another possibility is if the fallen element sheared in high winds.”

This tragedy on London’s South Bank is only part of a wider epidemic of building failures. In August, a 31-year-old woman, Heidi Boyle, narrowly missed being crushed by a huge glass panel falling 10 floors from the roof of Glasgow’s Queen Elizabeth University Hospital. Similar incidents occurred in May and June last year, making it the

third time a panel had fallen from the £842 million building since its opening in April 2015.

Boyle said she could only be thankful that her mother and children hadn’t been accompanying her as they normally would.

A National Health Service (NHS) spokesman stated only that “It is not at this time clear why this happened.” Later in the month, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde continued to insist that it wasn’t possible to divine the cause of the panel’s fall: “The shattered pieces recovered were not large enough to analyse and determine the cause.” Safety netting has now been installed around the building to catch any additional wayward panels.

These incidents only serve to demonstrate the perilous state of health and safety regulations that were revealed so tragically in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy.

On July 4, the HSE released its annual workplace fatalities report, which counted 144 casualties across all industries between April 2017 and March 2018. The construction industry accounted for 38 of those deaths. Over the last five years, the rate in construction has been four times as high as that across all other industries. The largest numbers from all deaths have been falls from a great height.

Two months earlier, a survey of its members by the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) found 75 percent of those surveyed believed that quality management was inadequate. Past-president and chair of the investigative committee Paul Nash observed, “Construction projects should always have sufficient resources allocated to quality management, both financial and human. But a focus on price and programme has driven the wrong behaviours, leading to quality being neglected.”

The main criticisms in the survey were directed towards the construction companies. The issues of sign-off procedures (84 percent), workmanship standards (82 percent), and supervision (76 percent) were overwhelmingly found inadequate. More than half of declared existing codes and standards encompassing building regulations were unfit for purpose.

One commented, “It’s all about building to a cost rather than building to a quality,” while some condemned the “privatisation” of building control bringing “an element of competitiveness into the role, based on price rather than quality.” Another charged, “Developers often use private building control surveyors to circumvent regulations.” Many called for a quality inspector to be present on all projects.

Rather than being random tragedies, such accidents are the direct result of deliberate government policies. Despite Baroness Donaghy’s 2010 call for more funding for the regulatory HSE, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government cut its budget by 35 percent the following year. This “ticking timebomb,” as she called it, aided by the increasing number of casual labourers, ensures an increase in accidents and deaths.

A Freedom of Information request by the Ucatt construction workers union showed that between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, the number of unannounced inspections of construction sites fell by 7 percent, while the number of employers prosecuted for security offenses fell from 456 to 410. Ucatt predicted that deaths on sites would “tragically rise,” yet HSE chief inspector of construction Heather Bryant insisted the organisation was “adequately resourced” and construction remained one of their “priority areas.”

Meanwhile, the corporate pressure and influence continues. In November 2017, the G15 group of landlords and other builders called for supporting Conservative MP John Penrose’s “Build Up Not Out” campaign. Framed as “an immediate and effective step towards solving the housing crisis,” they called for an automatic right to build up to the height of the tallest buildings or trees in the same block without need for planning permission.

Accentuating this trend, in January, the government appointed Esther McVey as secretary of state for work and pensions (DWP), including oversight of the HSE. She had formerly overseen HSE as minister of state for employment in 2013, but had that portfolio removed when it arose that as a director of her father’s demolition company, J.G. McVey and Co., she had been served with two immediate prohibition notices in 2002 and 2003. The first was for scaffolders working without any guardrails, hi-viz jackets or harnesses at a demolition site in Liverpool, and the second given for personnel working at height outside protective scaffolding.

This month, McVey resigned as DWP secretary over the government’s Brexit policy.

London is just one of the cities in a global rush to construct buildings for the super-rich oligarchy at the expense of the working class. The profits to be had in construction projects are immense, and the quicker these buildings can be erected, the greater the fortunes to be made.

In New York, the city Buildings Department reported eight construction deaths in the first seven months of 2018, double that of the previous year. Injuries increased 17 percent, with 469 victims during the period.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio has actively sought projects and wooed investors. As the result of unprecedented construction projects in the city, including the vast Hudson Yards development along West 33rd Street, and lax regulations, there have been 12 accidents this year.

More than 50 people in the city have been hit and injured by falling debris. In May, a 67-year-old security guard died and a 27-year-old construction worker was hospitalised when they were struck by a large glass panel from the construction of a 1,550-foot tower. In July, falling scaffolding killed a worker in the Morningside Heights district.

In February, the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health reported that rampant safety violations were responsible for the rising number of worker fatalities. The majority of deaths occurred on non-union worksites, with falling as the most common cause of death.

The group found a 62.6 percent decrease in Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) inspections between 1986 and 2017. Safety violations took place at 82 percent of OSHA-inspected construction fatality sites in 2016, it said, adding, “Employers regularly endanger their workforce by disregarding regulations, and workers die as a result.”

Given the encouragement to rapacious property developers by the UK government and others, injury and fatality figures will only continue to rise. UK legal firms proudly advertise the £80,000 and other settlements they have won for injured construction workers—a sum that is laughably negligible to a multinational conglomerate seeking to maximise profits by rapid construction.

How many more people must die unnecessarily for the sake of their corporate agendas? Working class people, including victims of these policies and construction workers themselves, must organise independently and call for an end to these hazardous and deadly conditions.



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