

One worker killed, another critically injured after scaffolding collapse in Sydney

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An 18-year-old apprentice died and another construction worker was critically injured when 15 metres of scaffolding collapsed at a building site in the Sydney suburb of Macquarie Park yesterday.

The tragedy is one of a spate of horrific incidents that has highlighted the dangerous conditions that prevail in the construction industry. Property developers, building contractors and the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) routinely enforce speedups and subordinate workers' safety in order to complete jobs quickly and ensure high profit margins.

The collapse occurred at around 12:30 pm on the site of a \$220 million residential apartment development commissioned by Greenland Australia and being built primarily by construction company Ganellen. Between 300 and 350 workers were present at the time.

Nine storeys of scaffolding and some concrete reportedly collapsed without warning. According to the trade union, several workers leapt to safety from the scaffolding. Footage showed others running from falling debris.

Christopher Cassaniti, a formwork apprentice, and a 39-year-old colleague were trapped beneath scaffolding and piping. More than 15 workers tried to free the men. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation aired footage of workers angrily confronting police officers who attempted to prevent them from removing the debris.

Emergency workers described the horrifying aftermath. Steven Vaughan, acting inspector of New South Wales Ambulance, told the media that paramedics arrived to "an absolutely chaotic and emotionally charged scene, given the nature of the debris, the location of where it occurred and just the emotional state of all those who wanted to help their colleagues."

Cassaniti was not freed until around 3pm. He was pronounced dead at the scene. His parents were present at the time. The injured worker was rushed to hospital and placed in an induced coma. According to media reports, he has not suffered brain or spinal cord damage, but sustained major injuries, including a broken pelvis.

Little information has been released about the accident, but it raises many questions. These include, when the scaffolding was last inspected, whether it had been certified as safe and whether any other dangerous incidents have taken place at the site.

Trade union officials joined Liberal-National and Labor Party leaders in hypocritically expressing sympathy for the families of Cassaniti and the injured worker, but they are all responsible for the widespread erosion of safety standards on building sites.

CFMMEU assistant national secretary Dave Noonan told reporters yesterday: "If scaffolding is erected, maintained and loaded properly, then this should not happen." His remarks pose the role of the union itself in facilitating the conditions that led to the accident.

A number of workers on site were reportedly CFMMEU members and the organisation's officials were rapidly on the scene after the incident. At large building sites covered by the CFMMEU, the union often has paid health and safety officers who are supposed to ensure that safe work practices are followed. They are able to order an end to work if unresolved issues jeopardise safety.

In a bid to defuse workers' anger, CFMMEU officials said they did not want to "speculate" on the cause of the incident. They promised a union inquiry and promoted illusions in an official investigation, to be conducted by SafeWork NSW, a pro-business government body.

Construction has consistently ranked among the three most dangerous industries in Australia, measured by workplace fatalities. Including yesterday's accident, there have been five deaths in the sector this year already. Thirty-five construction workers were killed on the job in 2016, followed by another 30 deaths in 2017. Statistics for 2018 are not yet available, but 19 workers had died by September.

In many of the fatalities, the CFMEU and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), with which it amalgamated last year to form the CFMMEU, have been directly responsible for ensuring that work continued on sites despite known safety issues.

In March 2017, Tim Macpherson, a 32-year-old rigger, was crushed to death on a wharf construction project at Barangaroo on 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 his head and torso. Macpherson died instantly.

The MUA had been informed the previous year that the barge did not comply with safety standards. The union claimed it demanded access the site, but was turned away. The MUA did nothing to address the dangers, and only raised them publicly after MacPherson's death.

In 2013, Matthew Lopez-Linares, a 22-year-old Canadian backpacker, was killed after being struck on the head by a falling steel beam at a demolition site in Sydney.

CFMEU officials declared they were "not surprised" by Lopez-Linares' death. Two weeks earlier, workers had raised concerns with the union about the stability of slabs on the site and the demolition practices. After a perfunctory stoppage, the union allowed work to continue, creating the conditions for the death.

In 2012, a fire broke out in a 65-metre hydraulic tower crane in the centre of Sydney, resulting in a 20-metre boom crashing onto a building site. The CFMEU had been aware of fuel leaks and other maintenance issues beforehand. Union officials later said it had been "an accident waiting to happen," but they had done nothing to halt operations prior to the incident.

The union functions as a thoroughly corporatised industrial police force for big business. For decades, via cosy enterprise agreements, the union has collaborated

with the major corporations and successive governments in the dismantling of workers' jobs, wages and conditions, while ensuring the privileges of the union officialdom.

A 2015 royal commission into union corruption exposed extensive ties between the CFMEU and property developers. The following year, it was revealed that the union had received \$700,000 from companies owned by George Alex, a developer who has been accused of underpaying workers and operating "phoenix companies"—which are wound up owing entitlements and wages to workers, before being "reborn" under another name.

Now, with a marked construction downturn and the unravelling of the speculative housing market, the union is intensifying its partnership with employers. Last year 40,000 jobs were eliminated across the construction sector, without any opposition from the union.

The slump is prompting companies, assisted by the union, to further speed up operations, so as to finalise projects before a worse contraction. Under such conditions, further fatal accidents are inevitable.



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