

After death on Australian construction site, evidence emerges of widespread safety violations

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4 April 2019

Following the tragic death of 18-year-old apprentice Christopher Cassiniti on Monday, evidence has emerged of widespread safety violations throughout the construction industry.

Cassiniti died after 15 metres of scaffolding collapsed on a building site in the Sydney suburb of Macquarie Park and was pronounced dead at the scene. It took around three hours for his body to be freed by colleagues and emergency workers from rubble and twisted piping.

A 39-year-old worker, who was also crushed by the debris, suffered critical injuries. He is in a stable condition in hospital.

With between 300 and 350 workers on the site, there could have been many more injuries and fatalities. The accident occurred at a \$220 million residential apartment development commissioned by Greenland Australia, which is being built primarily by construction company Ganellen.

Fatal accidents in the sector are the inevitable outcome of the gutting of safety measures by governments, property developers, the major builders and the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU).

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported yesterday that in 2018, SafeWork New South Wales, a pro-business government safety body, issued more than 100 breach notices to building companies across the state over safety violations related to scaffolding.

In the course of 12 months, SafeWork inspectors handed out 1,258 breach notices, with the majority of them reportedly over fall risks.

The large number of notices was the result of a

“crackdown” launched in the wake of widespread outrage over a number of serious accidents stemming from unsafe conditions. That hundreds of construction companies were found to have violated safety standards demonstrates that they have been allowed to operate with impunity for years.

In late 2017, SafeWork introduced on-the-spot fines for breaches. They were capped, however, at just \$3,600. While it issued over a thousand breach notices last year, on-the-spot fines totalled just \$265,000, an average of \$265 for each violation. This represents a minute fraction of the billions of dollars in revenue flowing to the construction industry each year.

The figures demonstrate why the construction sector has been ranked in the three most dangerous industries by workplace fatalities for a number of years. This year five construction workers have died on the job. Thirty-five construction workers were killed on the job in 2016 and there were 30 deaths in 2017.

On Tuesday, the ABC’s “Hack” website featured comments from anonymous young construction workers. One responded to Cassiniti’s death by stating: “The amount of times that I’ve had to do things that are against safety ... makes you think could it have been me? Could I have fallen off a scaffold, or down a razor shaft? It really kicks you in the feels.”

The worker added: “Every morning, the last thing I think about is not coming home and you put it to the back of your head but this is a reality and it’s messed up.”

Others said that they had been pressured to work after complaining of safety violations. One young worker told *Hack*, “It’s all about money at the end of the day, the CEOs have to show they’re implementing safety

but their main goal is to make money and get jobs over the line at any expense. If you complain about it, there's a chance you'll lose your job or get mocked for it."

Cassaniti's family has responded by issuing a statement which declared that they did not want his death to be "just another statistic." It stated: "We ask that the government step in and take immediate action and implement stringent measures regarding safety on construction sites."

Senior Labor and Liberal-National Coalition politicians have responded to the tragedy with crocodile tears. The NSW Labor opposition's planning spokesperson, Tania Mihailuk, declared this week that she had written to the state Coalition government's incoming planning minister, Rob Stokes, asking what he would do to "reassure the community" that construction sites are safe.

This is a cynical attempt at damage control. Successive Labor and Coalition governments, at the state and federal level, have collaborated closely with construction companies to ensure rapid job completions so as to maximize profits.

NSW Labor governments, in office from 1995 until 2011, were notorious for their close ties to property developers. Labor governments stripped back building regulations, allowing companies to bypass basic safety measures previously required in the industry.

Most glaring of all is the responsibility of the CFMMEU. A number of workers at the Macquarie Park site were members of the union, and its officials were at the scene shortly after the accident occurred.

Dave Noonan, CFMMEU assistant national secretary, told the media on Monday: "If scaffolding is erected, maintained and loaded properly, then this should not happen."

In a revealing comment, he added: "The role of the union and of government safety regulators is to make sure sites are compliant." Noonan complained, however, the pro-business government regulators were "under-resourced."

In order to divert attention from its own complicity, the CFMMEU has called for the introduction of industrial manslaughter laws, for the criminal prosecution of companies responsible for workplace deaths. The union has also promoted illusions in the investigation to be conducted into Cassaniti's death by SafeWork NSW.

The truth is that the CFMMEU, like every other union, functions as an industrial police for the corporations. At sites it covers, the union often has paid health and safety officers who are able to stop work on a job if safety issues are unresolved. The widespread safety breaches in 2018, however, make clear that they have done little or nothing to ensure compliance.

Following a number of construction fatalities, it has emerged that union officials were warned by workers of unsafe conditions. Invariably, the union did nothing to halt work and only publicly reported the dangers after a tragedy had occurred.



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