

Australian worker killed in fall on Sydney construction site

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In an all too common occurrence, another construction worker has been killed in what has been described as a preventable workplace incident.

Just after midday on August 21, 38-year-old building worker Mohamad Riche died after plunging 30 metres down a shaft in an apartment block on the Jordan Springs development near Penrith in western Sydney. The block was being built by Coplex, a construction company specialising in multi-unit buildings, new developments, luxury apartments and commercial projects.

Rescue crews and ambulance services along with a Care Flight helicopter were rushed to the site after receiving what one media outlet described as “frantic calls” from Riche’s co-workers. Despite the efforts of specialist paramedics who abseiled down the shaft to reach Riche, he was found to be dead having suffered severe injuries. In a display of concern and solidarity, workers refused to leave the site until the man’s body was recovered.

SafeWork NSW, the state government safety agency, and the NSW Police announced last week they will conduct a joint investigation into the incident. They have not yet issued any statement on the circumstances that led to Riche’s death.

Remarks to the media by NSW Ambulance Inspector Craig Thomas, however, strongly suggest it was the result of a lack of even the most basic safety requirements. Confirming Riche “had fallen several floors through a void in the ceiling, like a service void of a lift,” Thomas declared: “It is an avoidable type of incident. It is just a real tragedy.”

A worker who witnessed the entire incident also told media: “The guy was working on the roof to remove building material which was immediately adjacent to the shaft roof. He then tripped over and has fallen down

the shaft.”

These comments point to the absence of any safety rails or barriers around the shaft opening, an obvious precaution that would have prevented the tragedy.

Basic safety standards have been gutted for decades by property developers and major construction companies, leading inevitably to deaths and serious injuries.

Pro-business governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have stripped back building regulations. Inspectorates that once enforced health and safety procedures now merely provide a rubber-stamp for the corporations.

The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) has played the central role in this process. The union functions as a labour bargaining agency and industrial policemen. It seeks to suppress all opposition from workers, including to the dangerous conditions they face.

The unions have been instrumental in dismantling the old site and job committees elected by rank and file workers that often sought to enforce safety standards. These have been replaced by paid union health and safety officers that above all seek to ensure continued production, and that collaborate closely with management.

The construction sector is now ranked as the third most dangerous industry by workplace fatalities. Riche is the sixth worker killed in the sector this year. Thirty-five construction workers were killed on the job in 2016, 30 in 2017 and 45 in 2018.

Patrizia Cassaniti, the mother of Christopher Cassaniti, an 18-year-old apprentice who was killed in a scaffolding collapse in April told the media that she was “truly gutted” to hear of Riche’s death. Cassaniti’s family had at the time issued a statement calling on the NSW state government to “step in and

take immediate action and implement stringent measures regarding safety on construction sites.” Their appeal was ignored.

The decades-long undermining of safety has also produced similar deadly results across industry as a whole. Safe Work Australia figures reveal that on average a worker is killed every two days on the job, while one is injured every five minutes. In 2018, preliminary data show there were 149 workers killed at work and 190 in 2017.

While government safety agencies, such as SafeWork NSW and Safe Work Australia issue notices to companies for workplace safety breaches, many of the culprits either avoid prosecution altogether or receive penalties that amount to a slap on the wrist.

Figures revealed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in April this year underscored the token character of penalties to construction companies that breach safety laws.

In late 2017, SafeWork NSW introduced on-the-spot fines for safety breaches, but these were capped at just \$3,600. While over a thousand breach notices were issued in 2018, 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.

Construction workers cannot put any faith in the unions to halt the carnage in the industry or rely on pleas to big business Labor or Liberal governments.

What is required are new independent organisations of struggle, such as rank and file committees, that will take action to defend jobs and working conditions, including vigorously enforcing safety. These must be based on a socialist perspective and the fight for a workers’ government to reorganise society to meet social needs not private profits.



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