

Worker killed in horrendous incident on Sydney construction site

Terry Cook
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The extremely dangerous conditions rife across Australia's construction industry have claimed the life of another worker, adding to an already grim toll for this year.

Michael Murphy, a 49 year-old contract plumber from New Zealand, was killed on the morning of November 29 at "The Ribbon" construction site in Sydney when a high pressure pipe burst causing severe face and head injuries. Murphy was treated at the scene by New South Wales (NSW) Ambulance officers and taken to St Vincent's Hospital in a critical condition, but subsequently died.

Speaking to the media a NSW Ambulance inspector pointed to the enormous pressure that was unleashed when the pipe burst, noting that some people nearby initially thought it was an explosion. The extent of the horrific injuries the man received was testified to in a media report stating that when Murphy's wife went to the hospital, doctors would not allow her to view his face and she could only touch her deceased husband's hand.

The NSW Police announced in the wake of the death that a crime scene had been established and that they were conducting ongoing inquiries into the circumstances surrounding the incident. They have not yet released any further details on the cause of the tragedy.

"The Ribbon," a hotel building which will also house a new IMAX Theatre in Darling Harbour, is being developed by giant construction company Grocon, which is notorious for having carried out sweeping attacks on the workers' conditions.

In the wake of Friday's death, Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) NSW state secretary Darren Greenfield declared: "It is appalling that another worker has been killed on a

Grocon site."

As was the case in a spate of other deadly incidents on building projects over the past years, however, the union was made aware of the unsafe dangerous conditions existing across "The Ribbon" site prior to Murphy's tragic death. Greenfield admitted that the CFMMEU had "been alerted to a range of issues throughout the life of the Ribbon site at Darling Harbour."

Greenfield also declared: "Grocon has a shocking track record of callous disregard for workers' safety," adding "How many lives must be lost, and people injured before this company wakes up to themselves?"

The question that must be asked is why has the CFMMEU not acted to end unsafe working conditions and enforce safety standards to prevent death and injuries? The truth is that the construction union is itself complicit in creating the conditions for the ongoing carnage.

The CFMMEU, along with other unions in construction, has not mounted any genuine campaign to oppose the stripping back of building regulations by pro-business governments, Liberal and Labor alike at the behest of the developers and construction companies. Inspectorates that are supposed to enforce health and safety procedures now merely provide a rubber-stamp for the corporations.

Moreover, actions by government safety agencies such as SafeWork NSW are little more than window dressing that does little or nothing to address the deadly situation. 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.

The unions have given the construction companies

free rein to skirt around safety requirements and cut corners in the frenzied bid to reduce costs and meet ever more demanding deadlines so as to boost profits. Among other measures, the union worked to dismantle the old site and job committees elected by rank and file workers that would seek to enforce safety standards.

In many cases, such committees have been replaced by paid union health and safety officers who are close to the union bureaucracy and collaborate with management to ensure continued production.

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The unions, including the CFMMEU, fully backed the draconian Fair Work (FW) industrial laws introduced by the former federal Labor government in 2009. These virtually outlawed all industrial action and contain harsh penalties for any breach by workers. In dispute after dispute, the unions, acting as an industrial police force, enforced the FW laws in order to straitjacket workers and prevent opposition to the ongoing corporate assault.

It is therefore no accident that the construction sector is now ranked as the third most dangerous industry by workplace fatalities. There have been 22 deaths in the sector this year. Over the previous three years the total number of construction fatalities was a staggering 110, comprised of 45 last year, 30 in 2017 and 35 in 2016.

In the aftermath of the death on "The Ribbon" site, the CFMMEU has again called for the introduction of industrial manslaughter laws "that hold culpable bosses to account." The union claims that the threat of jail terms would be an effective deterrent.

Even where such laws have been introduced, such as in the state of Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), industrial deaths have continued, with big business governments resistant to pursuing companies in breach or enforcing penalties. In the ACT, where industrial manslaughter laws were introduced in 2004, not one prosecution has proceeded. No one has been charged under the Queensland legislation, which was passed in 2017.

Construction workers cannot put any faith in the unions to halt the carnage in the industry or rely on pleas to the corporations, or Labor and Liberal governments. The enforcement of safety, along with the defence of jobs and working conditions, requires that construction workers break with the unions.

What is required are new independent organisations of struggle, such as rank and file committees, that will begin to organise a unified counter offensive across the entire construction industry and turn to other sections of the working class. Such organisations 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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