Workers' bodies remain in rubble of New Orleans Hard Rock hotel four months after collapse

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Over four months since the collapse of a Hard Rock Hotel construction site in New Orleans, Louisiana killed three construction workers and injured 18 others, the bodies of two of the three workers who died remain in the wrecked building. City officials claim they are irretrievable until the site is fully demolished due to safety concerns.

Quinnyon Wimberley, 36 and Jose Ponce Areola, 63 were killed when the construction site collapsed in October. For several days in January the legs of one of the workers were left exposed to public view after a tarp covering his corpse blew away in the wind.

Wimberley, an air conditioning contractor and supervisor on the project, was a father of two and was soon to marry his fiancé, Bianca Boone. Boone told ABC News that she was on the phone with him at the time of the crash. "What was that?" she heard him say over the phone as the loud crash of collapsing floors came down.

Boone attempted several times to reach Wimberley, but he wasn't answering, "At that point, I knew in my heart he was gone," she told reporters.

Months after their deaths, the workers' families and loved ones are still waiting to give a proper burial to their loved ones, and there has been no effort to provide them with any sort of compensation.

Frank Wimberly, Quinnyon's brother, told ABC News of the devastation and frustration he has felt toward the city and Mayor Latoya Cantrell. "(Cantrell) said they would have to demolish the building with him in it," Wimberly said, "I don't think words can describe the way my family and I feel. It's one thing to lose him in such a freak accident … but then, you pile on top of that, we don't get a chance to say a proper goodbye."

Jose Ponce Areola, a Mexican national, had been working for 15 years in the United States with plans to retire soon after the Hard Rock job was completed according to his niece Karen Martinez Ponce.

"I just want to see if someone is going to take responsibility for all of this," Martinez told nola.com in October. "We know so little about what happened to my uncle and we still don't know."

Activists and family members of the victims have recently set up a memorial of photos and ribbons along with flowers alongside a chain link fence that separates the collapse site from pedestrian traffic. "This hurts my family every day—knowing that building is still there," Angela Margrette, sister of the third worker killed in the collapse, Anthony Margrette, told WWL News at a memorial vigil in February. "I don't understand why they don't take it down. Get them out, and take it down."

Visitors and locals gathered around the site last week to observe the building and the makeshift memorial expressed their confusion to the *World Socialist Web Site* as to why the bodies are still unrecovered so many months after the accident.

Fatima, a member of the National Economics and Social Rights Initiative visiting the city expressed her frustration over the conditions of the site and the lack of safety and concern for immigrant workers, "That a city with so much money can't properly care for these workers is a disgrace and a tragedy." She also noted that corrupt and wealthy contractors often depend on immigrant workers' fear of deportation to exploit them and skirt safety issues and concerns.

A local worker who is employed at a neighboring

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athletic club lamented the site as a stain on the city, especially during heavy tourism associated with the Mardi Gras carnival week. “Tourists are coming around here taking pictures. There’s no respect for the families, no respect from the city for these workers or their families.”

When asked about the excuses given by officials for not recovering the bodies of the workers still inside, “I think it’s B.S. I’ve seen four white shirts [investigators] inside that building walking around. If it’s safe enough for them they can find a way to get those people out.”

In recent weeks, activists and supporters have protested outside city hall demanding attention be called to the site. Soon after the Mardis Gras festivities last week a series of tweets went viral decrying the tragedy and the abysmal response. Many on Twitter were shocked that workers bodies would be left to rot in the rubble.

Plans to demolish the site have shifted over time as initial attempts were unsuccessful. The city has hired a demolition firm, DH Griffin, to implode the site sometime in April as of the latest estimation, though a contract has yet to be signed between the city and the firm due to stalled negotiations.

The details of the latest implosion plans have not been released, but a statement from the mayor’s office this week noted that the bodies of the workers still inside will not be removed before demolition. The estimated overall cost of the demolition and recovery will be upwards of $11 million.

While there are at least four ongoing investigations, involving insurance companies and contracting firms, no criminal charges have been filed. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has been investigating the cause of the collapse and a report is expected in April.

Last week it was revealed that two city inspectors in charge of ensuring the building site was operating safely are currently under investigation over discrepancies in their reports and their qualifications for inspecting buildings the size of the Hard Rock Hotel project.

There are currently lawsuits among the various insurance companies involved ligating who would be responsible for paying for the demolition of the building. Cantrell and the city council are currently in negotiations with Hard Rock International in an attempt to get the hotel and entertainment giant to help pay for the demolition.

A tensely worded letter was sent from Hard Rock representatives to city officials blaming them for the lack of urgency in resolving the situation and denying their request for $2.4 million in funding for the demolition and clean-up of the site. Hard Rock’s denial is a part of their consistent claims that they had nothing to do with the construction process of the hotel, and therefore bear no responsibility for the disaster.

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