

“Horror start” for New Zealand workplace deaths in 2020

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The beginning of 2020 has witnessed, according to a recent Radio New Zealand report, a “horror start” for workplace deaths, with seven on-the-job fatalities in January, two in February and another this month.

Most have been on farms and involved quad bikes and farming vehicles. The most recent case was a driver who was killed when his truck crashed 100 metres down a bank at a South Auckland quarry. In another incident, 24-year-old Mandeep Sandhu died after being crushed by a pack of 30 glass sheets at manufacturer Stake Glass in Christchurch. His friend Rahul Badhu said the news “has destroyed his family.”

The figures point to an impending higher death rate than in 2019, the worst year since 2011, with 108 fatalities, compared with 63 in 2018. These figures only cover single incidents. They exclude deaths from occupational disease or self-harm, such as job-related suicides. New Zealand workers die from long-term exposure to harmful substances 10 times more often than from “accidents.”

Following the 2010 Pike River Coal mine disaster, which killed 29 men, laws were passed by the National Party government in 2013 and 2016, and endorsed by the Labour Party and the trade unions, ostensibly to strengthen workplace safety. They required businesses to identify risks and do what was deemed “reasonably practicable” to eliminate or manage them. They also introduced up to \$600,000 in fines for workplace accidents.

The government claimed the laws would lead to a 25 percent reduction in workplace deaths and injuries by 2020. Instead they have escalated. One of the worst disasters happened last December when the White Island volcano erupted, killing 21 people, including tour guide Hayden Marshal, and injuring 26. Regulators had taken no action to stop tour groups visiting the

island, despite the known risk of eruptions.

Scandalously, the government regulator WorkSafe admitted in January that it had been under-reporting workplace deaths for years. After aggregating data collected by the police and other government agencies, WorkSafe announced there had been 413 deaths in the six years from 2013 to 2018, up 40 percent from the previously reported total of 291 deaths.

Radio NZ (RNZ) reported on March 9 that there has been a reduction in WorkSafe investigations since 2016. In one example, a decision was made not to formally investigate incidents relating to last year’s huge SkyCity fire in the Auckland CBD. Tina Barnett, a Unite Union safety delegate at SkyCity, said dozens of staff had spoken to her about the negative health effects of the fire, and one worker was hospitalised, yet WorkSafe concluded the company had not breached regulations.

A lawyer representing several businesses, Garth Galloway, told RNZ: “It suits my clients not to have investigations.” He mentioned a case involving another large construction site that could have resulted in multiple fatalities, saying “WorkSafe’s response was: it doesn’t meet our threshold. We’re not investigating.”

WorkSafe is currently investigating two workplace deaths at separate meat processing plants. The industry is representative of NZ industry as a whole, which has seen widespread cost-cutting, attacks on conditions and intensified exploitation to increase profits, resulting in frequent injuries and sometimes deadly consequences.

Alfred Edwards, 61, a father of five, died at Affco’s Wairoa meatworks where he had worked for 40 years on February 5. Edwards was crushed by over-stacked pallets in a freezer and his body was not found for hours, despite a rule requiring workers to operate in

pairs.

Workers told *Stuff* that the plant was storing additional meat unable to be shipped to China, New Zealand's main export destination, due to the coronavirus outbreak. Alfred's son Moana Edwards said some workers had walked off the job the previous month over safety concerns. Another worker almost had his hand severed last December.

NZ Meat Workers Union (NZMWU) official Darien Fenton, a former Labour Party MP, said talks with the company had secured "some guarantees" that workers would be "supported" through interviews with WorkSafe and police. In return, full production was allowed to resume after two weeks, before investigations were completed. Negotiations about workers' pay while the plant was closed were described as "ongoing."

Incredibly, Fenton declared that it is "unusual" for a meat worker to die on the job. In fact, on December 19, Robin Killeen, 74, a cleaning contractor, was crushed to death by machinery at Anzco Foods Plant in Eltham. Workers told the media they were given minimal training for machinery which didn't have adequate safety guards, and felt pressured to cover staff shortages.

Anzco's record betrays Fenton's absurd claim. In February 2019, a 28-year old worker was admitted to hospital after accidentally stabbing himself in the face with a knife. A month later a woman suffered arm lacerations while cleaning machinery. In 2013, a 17-year-old worker's hand was crushed when working unsupervised on a beef hover removing machine. Another worker lost the top of his finger in a conveyor belt, with the company paying a paltry \$54,000 in fines and compensation.

The NZMWU is complicit in the unsafe conditions in the industry. In 2017, the WSWs exposed the role of the NZMWU in collaborating with the Taylor Preston processing plant in Wellington in suppressing information after a worker died. To this day no public statement about the circumstances of the tragedy has been made by the company or the union.

The list of workplace injuries and deaths in other industries is extensive. In July 2019, RNZ reported that construction deaths were at their highest level in a decade. Eleven people died by mid-year, the most for any year since 2009, when 19 people were killed. The

massive growth in housing and high-rise building was a major factor, with four of the fatalities caused by falls from heights and another six involving vehicles.

The forestry industry remains among the most deadly, with seven fatalities last year. Following one recent court case, the log exporter Guru NZ was ordered to pay nearly half-a-million dollars in fines and reparations over the death of Leslie Laing in 2017. The father of four was hit by a one-tonne excavator grapple while trying to close a container full of logs.

In 2014, in the wake of an earlier spate of deaths, a Forestry Industry Safety Council was formed, including business leaders, WorkSafe and trade union officials. The latter hailed the body as a model of union-company collaboration, falsely claiming it would improve safety.

Governments of all stripes have aggravated falling safety standards by cutting funding for inspectors and effectively leaving companies to self-regulate, while the unions have suppressed opposition from workers.

The contempt with which the ruling elite treats the lives of workers was exposed by opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges this month in his first policy announcements for the coming September election. National is promising a US Trump-like "bonfire on regulations," doing away with two regulations for every new one introduced. One of the key elements of the policy, Bridges declared, is to replace "burdensome" and "costly" workplace regulations with a "health and safety common-sense test."



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