

Roof deflection warnings ignored before young Australian construction worker killed

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19 October 2020

On October 13, a glass roof under construction at Curtin University in Western Australia collapsed and Jonnie Hartshorn, a 23-year-old apprentice working on top of it, fell 20 metres, dying instantly.

Rikki Issitt, aged 26, barely survived the 20-metre fall and is recovering from major surgery at Royal Perth Hospital. A third young worker fell 10 metres without serious injury. The three were employed by ABS Façade, which specializes in building glazing systems. They were finalising the glass roof installation, applying sealant and flashings.

The tragedy has again highlighted the dangerous conditions throughout the multi-billion dollar construction industry, enforced by the major companies, governments and the trade unions.

Curtin University tweeted: “The incident happened at 12.32 p.m. at Building 418 at the northern end of Curtin’s Perth campus where a new School of Design and the Built Environment is being constructed. The site is operated by head contractor, Lendlease.” The \$110 million building is a key part of the university’s Exchange precinct, which includes student housing, shops and a hotel.

It has been reported that the crashing glass severed the workers’ safety harnesses. The other 100 workers on the site were out of harm’s way on their lunch break, otherwise there could have been many more injuries. Initial reports indicated the steel framed structure, now a twisted mess, was sagging excessively. The glass roof spanned an open courtyard, and was supported from the top of the five-storey building, creating a semi-enclosed space.

ABC Radio Perth reported that Electrical Trades Union (ETU) organiser, Damian Clancey, was on site at the time of the collapse and heard the injured workers lying on the ground screaming in pain.

Clancey stated that workers on site “visually noticed a deflection in the steel, and there had been surveyors on

site to check it out... several work crews raised it with management.” Construction firm Lendlease, Australia’s second largest construction company, has refused to comment on these issues.

The *West Australian* newspaper reported that a contractor, Michael, who previously worked on the project, refused to continue as it was unsafe. Michael said: “I’m talking about 80mm deflection... it was crazy... Even after the glass got laid (and the exclusion zone was removed), I wasn’t comfortable at all.” He said he “refused to work under (it) while I was there.”

The *West Australian* also noted that Clancey, of the ETU, “had heard from various work crews that the level of sag in the steelwork had reached its recommended tolerance—about 40mm—when just half of the glass had gone up. ‘They surveyed it, they said we’re OK with that and apparently gave the green light for an additional level of deflection when they deemed it safe,’ Mr Clancey said. ‘My understanding is when the glass had finished being loaded, the sag had reached in excess of 80mm.’”

Mick Buchan, state secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) implausibly claimed that his union had not been aware of any safety concerns at the site before the collapse, and only found out about the deflection issues after the accident occurred.

Speaking in a video on the CFMMEU Facebook page, Buchan said that the building was “under designed.” He added, “We’re sick of seeing Y16 bars in a concrete slab being replaced with Y12’s [thinner steel reinforcing]. We’re sick of seeing slabs being reduced from 140mm thick to 100mm thick just on zero tolerances. When they say: ‘We can live with 40 mm deflection, with 50mm deflection.’ It is b***t. It has got to change.”

Buchan concluded by appealing to building commissions and governments to enforce safety standards.

In the comments section beneath the video, one worker raised the obvious question: “But if the workers & the unions know that these short cuts are being taken, why the hell are you on site letting this happen???”

As the main construction union, and given the reports of excessive deflection over the past weeks, Buchan’s claims of ignorance lack any credibility. They are an exercise in damage control that occurs after every major accident on a union site.

In comments to the *Sunday Times*, Clancey said: “There was a time when you could speak up (about safety concerns) and there weren’t repercussions for individuals. You stick your head above the parapet now and you risk being sacked at the drop of a hat. You want to talk about culture—it’s a culture of fear. You keep your mouth shut and plug away or be replaced in a heartbeat. And good luck finding another job, especially at the moment.”

These statements are a self-indictment and a desperate attempt to cover-up the responsibility of the unions.

Workers are compelled to raise safety issues as individuals, because it is the trade unions that enforce dangerous conditions on construction sites. They know that they face victimisation if they speak out, because the unions will not defend them. The case of “Michael,” the worker who warned about the conditions, shows this is precisely what happened at the Curtin development.

For the CFMMEU and the ETU, the priority at Curtin, as at every other site they cover, is to ensure that production continues without any disruption, despite the obvious perils.

All of the parties implicated in the tragedy will now work to prevent any exposure of their culpability. The Western Australian government regulator Worksafe stated that their investigation could take a year or longer. They claimed not to have received any complaints about safety on the site, further indicating the bogus character of the crocodile tears from union officials.

Master Builders Association executive director John Gelavis warned against any attempts to “weaponise” safety concerns, signalling that the dangerous conditions will continue.

The incident is a microcosm of what the unions and companies have carried out in the sector. The unions have smashed up any semblance of workers’ control over safety, and backed the former Labor government’s 2009 introduction of Fair Work Australia legislation, which bans most industrial action.

At the same time, the CFMMEU and other unions have presided over the destruction of full-time jobs, and a vast

expansion of casual and contract labour.

Jonnie Hartshorn’s girlfriend, Kylie Bonita Galende, on hearing of the accident, texted him: “You’re at Perth uni aren’t you? Not Bentley? [Curtin University suburb],” and “Please send me a quick message if you are ok.” Hartshorn, like many contract construction employees, worked across multiple sites. His girlfriend didn’t even know which one he was at on the day of his death.

Reportedly, 20 casual workers employed by the Career Boss labour hire company were emailed on the evening of Hartshorn’s death advising them they were stood down immediately as the site was closed after the accident.

Safe Work Australia recently reported that for the year to October 8, 121 workers have been killed at their places of employment. This was down on the 2019 figure of 144 over the same period, possibly due to the impact of COVID-19 on industrial activity. But construction sector deaths increased from 18 in 2019 to 22 this year.

The role of the unions in Hartshorn’s tragic death is yet another exposure of the anti-working class character of these organisations. They function as an industrial police force, imposing the dictates of management, even if it leads to the deaths of workers, to ensure the privileged existence of the union officialdom.

The fight for safe working conditions requires a rebellion against the CFMMEU and all of the unions and the establishment of organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees.

They would confront major political issues, including the need for an offensive against the governments, companies, unions and the entire framework of the building commissions, and the adoption of a new perspective aimed at placing the construction corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That means the fight for a workers’ government and for socialism.



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