

Construction worker suffers life-threatening injuries after 30-foot fall at Amazon site in Massachusetts

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A construction worker suffered life-threatening injuries after sustaining a 30-foot fall at a job site in Massachusetts on the morning of Saturday, May 15. The worker, whose name was not released, was on the roof of an Amazon facility under construction when he fell through a skylight and hit the ground. The facility straddles the towns of Kingston and Plymouth, and firefighters from both towns responded to the scene. After receiving treatment on site, the worker was flown by helicopter to a trauma center in Boston. Information about his current condition was not available at the time of writing.

It is more than likely that this terrible accident could have been prevented. The fact that the worker fell from the roof of the facility provides *prima facie* evidence of a safety failure. The incident raises legitimate questions about whether necessary and effective safety precautions were in place. This accident must be investigated fully to identify the failure and the parties responsible for it.

Pressure to meet an unreasonable deadline may have contributed to this accident. Amazon is notorious for demanding that workers, including contractors, adhere to strict timetables. Warehouse workers are monitored at every moment and expected to complete a task every six to nine seconds. Intrusive surveillance is used to exert relentless pressure on workers during 10-and-a-half-hour “megacycles.” Even though they do not work directly for Amazon, delivery drivers are forced to install an application called “Mentor” on their phones so that they can be tracked constantly during their grueling routes.

But even aside from the potential role played by Amazon in this accident, the construction industry is

notoriously dangerous. A total of 1,061 US construction workers died on the job in 2019, the year for which the most current data are available, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is the highest number of deaths of any industry in that year and the largest total since 2007. This total includes 392 fatalities from falls. The fatality rate per 100,000 full-time workers for 2019 was 9.7 in the construction industry, compared with 3.8 for private industry overall.

Serious injuries also are more common in construction than in other industries. In 2019, the rate of serious non-fatal injuries per 10,000 workers was 112.3 in the construction industry, compared with 86.9 in private industry overall. An estimated 79,660 construction workers required days away from work because of serious injuries.

Falls are among the most common accidents in the construction industry. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports that the most frequently cited construction violation in 2020 was related to general requirements for fall protection. Two other construction violations in the top 10 also were related to fall protection. This indicates that the terrible fall in Massachusetts was not unique to that construction site. Rather, it reflects a serious problem within the construction industry overall.

Construction firms were the subjects of the highest fines that OSHA levied during the first quarter of 2021. Among the companies fined for inadequate fall protection were Carework Construction in Newark, New Jersey (\$404,811); Boak & Sons in Youngstown, Ohio (\$218,197); Cunyas Roofing in Bismarck, North Dakota (\$207,802); and Lifetime Contractor Corp. in

Trenton, New Jersey (\$201,090). OSHA also fined Eastern Constructors in Geismar, Louisiana, \$170,534 when two workers fell approximately 54 feet to their deaths while building a new Amazon fulfillment center.

One construction disaster in particular gained national attention in recent years. In October 2019, several stories of a Hard Rock hotel being built in New Orleans collapsed. Three workers, Quinyon Wimberly, Jose Ponce Arreola and Anthony Magrette, were killed, and at least 30 were injured. In an insult to the workers' dignity, the bodies of Wimberly and Ponce Arreola were not retrieved from the wreckage for nearly a year, partly because of disputes over who would pay for recovery and demolition work.

Although no official cause for the collapse has been announced, an OSHA investigation identified "willful" safety violations that compromised the site's structural integrity. Yet the total amount of fines that OSHA levied against 10 responsible companies was no more than \$306,000. Ten of the surviving workers filed a lawsuit alleging that the developers had used unskilled, underpaid and poorly supervised labor.

In some parts of the country, such as New York City, construction deaths have been increasing. Within one week in April 2019, three construction workers died in separate accidents in New York. In midtown Manhattan, 51-year-old Nelson Salinas was killed after a stone slab struck him in the head while he was on scaffolding seven floors above street level. In Brooklyn, Erik Mendoza, 23, who had been on the job for less than a week, fell from the roof of a 13-story building. In the Soho section of lower Manhattan, a 7.5-ton counterweight on a crane fell and crushed 34-year-old Gregory Echevarria. There is little doubt that these deaths resulted in part from shortcuts taken by developers and construction firms to save money at the expense of safety.

As developers and speculators have raked in enormous profits in recent years, construction deaths have risen. The pandemic and the ensuing financial crisis have only intensified companies' drive to extract profit from the construction workers, and from workers in every industry. In addition to the reduction or abandonment of necessary safety measures, workers face renewed attacks on their wages, health benefits, hours and working conditions.



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