

Two high-rise workers in China killed in strong winds

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On May 10, two high-rise maintenance workers were trapped in a suspended scaffold during a heavy thunderstorm with strong winds and killed. Both workers were cleaning the outside of the glass outer wall at the 17th floor of a skyscraper in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in central China.

A witness posted a video of this horrific incident online, in which one could see how the suspended scaffold was repeatedly blown meters away and then crashed into the wall of the building. The suffering and eventual death of the two workers, which was viewed more than 10 million times, not only sparked widespread anger over the company's disregard for the lives of workers, but also revealed a tip of an iceberg of the exploitative and dangerous working conditions of high-rise constructions workers.

The two workers, Han, 54, and Yang, 34, worked for the Hubei Skyscraper Decorative Arts Engineering Company but without a proper labor contract or any insurance. The construction of the skyscraper was under the supervision of the Wuhan Railway Group Cooperation, which then contracted the construction out to Shanghai Baozhi Ltd. Baozhi subcontracted the outer wall decorative work to the company from Hubei, which employed Han and Yang. Layer on layer of subcontracting is very common in the construction industry in China, giving rise to a blurring of responsibility for workers' wages and safety.

The decorative company directed the two workers to do the cleaning work at 1:30 p.m. on the day of the tragedy. An hour later, at 2:30 p.m., the two workers attempted to seek help by making phone calls, saying that "electricity was cut off and the metal swing stage [had] stopped working." Around the same time, a strong wind started buffeting the scaffold, as filmed by the witness, trapping the workers. Twenty minutes

later, the suspended scaffold was finally anchored, but both workers were already fatally wounded.

According to the official notice published by Wuhan Emergency Management Bureau, the project manager has already been detained for further investigation. The two workers were sent to the hospital and pronounced dead after attempts made to save their lives. However, this notice is vague on when the workers were sent to the hospital and is at odds with the account given by the relatives of the two workers.

Posts made by relatives on social media stated that they were not notified for about three hours. When they arrived at the scene, the bodies of the two workers had simply been left on the 17th floor of the building covered with plastic canvas. No one from either the Wuhan Railway Group Cooperation or the Shanghai Baozhi was present to speak to them.

At around 11 p.m. that night, dozens of unidentified people wearing identical clothes arrived where the bodies were, robbed the relatives of their cell phones, beat them up, and took the bodies away without any explanation.

The tragic deaths of two workers are completely avoidable and the negligence of the company utterly criminal. Per regulation of Classification of High-Rise Work, high-rise work is strictly prohibited when winds exceed level 5. On the day, the wind in Wuhan reached level 10 in the midst of a thunderstorm.

In an interview, a staff member of the company employing Han and Yang reported that all departments in the company had been notified of upcoming strong winds and were ordered to halt ongoing work around 11 a.m. However, the two workers were still sent up to work in the afternoon and given meaningless advice to take serious precautions.

These terrible deaths have exposed the dangerous

conditions faced by high-rise maintenance workers on a daily basis, not just in China but around the world. Most workers spend 8–10 hours suspended in the air each day and are exposed to a number of risks, including the burning temperatures of glass walls in summer, as well as heat stroke and sun burns, and freezing temperatures during the winter.

The greatest danger of all is, of course, of falls—many have witnessed the severe injury and death of co-workers. According to a survey by the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018, there were 1,732 incidents and 1,752 deaths across the construction industry during the first half of the year, of which 48.2 percent were high-rise, work-related cases.

Responding to popular anger on social media over the Wuhan deaths, the state-run Xinhua news agency published an article two days later, entitled “One needs to keep vigilant about production safety at every single moment.”

This article, full of platitudes about the importance of workplace safety, concluded: “One must keep in mind safety in production, must not leave anything to chance, and should not just remember that human lives are more important than anything once the price in blood has been paid.”

Such empty phrases are simply ignored by companies intent on making profits at the expense of the safety and lives of workers as was demonstrated just two weeks later.

On May 26, despite warnings of thunderstorms and strong winds, three high-rise workers were trapped in a scaffold suspended outside a skyscraper in Tianjin, a city in northeastern China. The scaffold was dashed against the building many times by the wind before the three workers were eventually safely rescued.

The Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has presided over the restoration of capitalism in China, has long been complicit and responsible for the exploitative conditions facing workers. A huge percentage of the working class in China consists of migrant workers coming to big cities for better employment opportunities. On a daily basis, they suffer attacks on wages, wage arrears, prolonged working hours, working without a proper contract (like Han and Yang in this case), and are denied most social services in the cities.

All of this takes place as a result of the CCP regime

which protects the profiteering of corporations, has integrated the super-rich into the party apparatus, and uses police-state repression against the struggles of workers.



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