

Deadly Kelowna crane collapse exposes brutal working conditions in Canada's construction sector

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A crane collapsed at a downtown Kelowna, British Columbia building site killing 5 people on the morning of July 12. Four of the victims were working at the site of a future 25-storey, 178-unit residential tower when the crane's arm fell to the ground.

The dead workers were identified by family and friends as brothers Eric Stemmer, superintendent, and Patrick Stemmer, crane operator, for the family-owned Stemmer Construction company, crane rigger Jared Zook, 32, and Cailen Vilness, 23. The fifth victim, civil engineering technologist Brad Zawislak, was working in a neighbouring office building.

A police spokesperson told the media that the crane was being dismantled when "something catastrophic" occurred. "It's wrong. Something is wrong. It should have never have happened." Because of the danger to the public, many buildings adjacent to the construction site had to be evacuated for over a week while the rest of the crane was dismantled.

The deaths of the five and the cause of the crane collapse are now the subject of three separate investigations by the BC Coroners Service, the RCMP and WorkSafeBC.

Crane assembly and dismantling are usually completed under tight timelines in high-traffic and congested areas, making it an extremely dangerous job. Each section of a crane can weigh tens of thousands of pounds, often suspended hundreds of feet off the ground. The integrity of the equipment itself can also be compromised because of defective manufacturing, age, and extreme weather conditions.

There are 80 active tower cranes operating in the city of Vancouver and another 200 operating throughout the province. Although tower crane operators require compulsory certification in Ontario, Alberta, and

Manitoba, they do not in British Columbia. Across the country, there is no certification for workers who build and dismantle cranes.

British Columbia says those building and dismantling tower cranes must be "qualified" to do so. However, there are no stipulations as to what qualifications are needed. The province merely states those working on erecting and dismantling cranes must follow the crane manufacturer's instructions, or those of a professional engineer if the installation varies from the manufacturer's instructions.

2020 witnessed a massive building boom in British Columbia. By March of this year, the value of major projects proposed and on the go surged to a whopping \$349 billion.

These projects, many driven by speculation and a wave of migration away from the big cities, have been a boon for the construction industry in smaller communities. In Kelowna, a city of 130,000 in the Okanagan Valley, building is currently at record levels, with permits averaging \$200 million a month and housing sales up 253 percent from 2020. Building projects are getting more elaborate in the downtown core, including an approved 46-storey condominium—four times the previously allowable height—which would be Kelowna's tallest building.

Under these conditions, across Canada, as well as south of the border, crane accidents are becoming increasingly regular. In 2019, a crane collapsed in downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia during a hurricane. Just days before the Kelowna tragedy, a service crane collapsed atop a condo-tower in Toronto, Ontario, where 208 construction cranes currently operate. Remarkably, in both cases there were no injuries.

Across the border in the US, there are on average 42 crane-related deaths per year. In April 2019, a tower crane

being used to construct a Google office building in Seattle, Washington, collapsed onto the street below killing four people and injuring four others.

Municipalities raking in large revenues from permit issuances have no interest in tightening regulations to improve worker safety.

In the wake of the Kelowna tragedy, various building unions are calling for improved safety regulations, including mandatory training and certification of workers who assemble and dismantle cranes. “We are deeply saddened by this catastrophic accident,” said Frank Carr, International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 115 business manager. “We need to do what we can to make sure it never happens again.”

Carr’s statement commits the IUOE, which represents heavy machine operators and others in the province’s construction industry, to absolutely nothing. Treacherous working conditions have been well known in the industry for decades. In 2019, construction accounted for 33 of BC’s 203 officially recognized workplace deaths, the largest of any industry.

Carr himself claims that his union has been lobbying for proper training and certification of crane workers for two decades. This includes during the past four years when the union-backed, purportedly “worker-friendly” NDP has formed the provincial government and done nothing to improve crane safety.

Across Canada, the building unions have played a crucial role in suppressing worker struggles over occupation health and safety issues. In Quebec, when crane operators mounted a wildcat strike in June 2018 to oppose the provincial government’s plans to deregulate their trade—including by drastically reducing the number of hours of training required to gain certification to operate large cranes—the bureaucrats at the FTQ Construction, the building wing of the Quebec Federation of Labour, were livid. They joined with the then provincial Liberal government in threatening the crane operators with harsh reprisals if they did not immediately return to work. Subsequently, the FTQ Construction and the other building unions in Quebec accepted changes to the certification requirements for crane operators only slightly modified from the government’s original plan.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions have collaborated with the construction bosses and the BC and other provincial governments to designate virtually all building sites as “essential” so as to keep workers on the job. Major outbreaks have occurred at construction sites across the country, with workers reporting having been

forced to work under disgraceful conditions that exposed them to a high risk of infection.

The federal Liberal government is also complicit in the dangerous working conditions in the construction sector. It has taken steps to further loosen safety regulations and remove regulatory oversight. The Liberal budget in 2018 included funding to review regulations that led to “bottlenecks to economic growth and innovation” including in the infrastructure industry. The real goal of the deregulation drive is to do away with worker protections and turn a blind eye to criminally negligent employers, facilitating their intensified exploitation of workers and increasing the likelihood of industrial accidents like last month’s tragedy in Kelowna.

Construction employs over 1.4 million people in Canada and generates about \$141 billion in economic activity annually. Canadian-based multinational construction firm PCL raked in \$8.4 billion last year. But with costs for wood and fabricated metal products and other construction materials doubling and even tripling this year, developers and contractors are scrambling to cut labour costs through sped-up production, and from workers who frequently are inexperienced, poorly trained and precariously employed. More and more the industry is relying on migrant workers—who make up a quarter of Canada’s construction workforce. They are often forced to work under the table, and their work permits are typically dependent on them retaining their job with their current employer. This makes it virtually impossible for migrant workers to challenge poor working conditions, even when they are life-threatening.

Safe conditions for construction crews will only prevail when the construction industry is taken out of the hands of speculators and developers motivated solely by obscene levels of private profit and placed under the control of the working class, the only social force capable of organizing society’s economic resources and productive capacity safely and rationally in the service of social need.



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