

Death of 31-year-old construction worker in Seattle highlights health and safety issues amid carpenters' strike

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4 October 2021

On Monday, September 20, 31-year-old construction worker Bryan Phillips died on the scene at the Washington State Convention Center project site in Seattle. Bryan, a member of Cement Masons Local 528, was a plasterer and was fatally injured when his lift equipment fell from the second level of the construction site. The Seattle Fire Department was called to the 9th Avenue scene to perform a “rescue extrication” but was unable to save the worker’s life.

The \$1.9 billion Summit Addition to the Washington State Convention Center broke ground in 2018 and building has continued despite the spread of coronavirus and concerns that the pandemic would dampen travel and tourism, undermining the financial viability of the Convention Center.

The incident triggered an outpouring of support, with over 700 individuals donating a total of \$68,816 on a GoFundMe page for the Phillips family. Workers from a wide range of building trades and other occupations posted comments with their donations, offering condolences to the family and remembering Bryan as a dear friend and coworker.

At the time of the young worker’s death, 2,000 carpenters throughout Western Washington were entering their fourth day of striking over wages, benefits and paid parking. Rank-and-file carpenters fought to shut down job sites around the Seattle area as part of their strike, since without their labor none of the other building trades can complete their work. The Washington State Convention Center site should have been shut down as part of the strike, but the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) and other building trades unions pledged not to strike the construction site, under the terms of a so-called Project Labor Agreements (PLA). These sweetheart deals negotiated by the unions and state and local Democratic Party officials at largely government-funded projects have been used to keep 10,000 of the 12,000 area carpenters on the job during the strike.

Executive Secretary-Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters and other union officials issued perfunctory statements about their “shock and grief” over the young worker’s death. But the NWCU and other building trades union executives have long collaborated with the giant construction firms and corporate-controlled politicians to increase the exploitation of construction workers and undermine their health and safety of workers.

Rank-and-file carpenters, who have been on strike since September 16, have rejected four concession contracts pushed by Shapiro and the NWCU. Workers have sought to expand their strike in the teeth of the bitter resistance of the union bureaucracy, which has red-baited them and threatened legal action against workers involved in “unsanctioned” picketing. With negotiations resuming Tuesday, the union is rushing to push through another sellout deal and shut down the strike even before workers get to vote on it.

Severe injuries and deaths are common in the industry, as construction workers use extremely heavy equipment, physically labor on their feet all day long and work on high-rise structures. In April 2019, two ironworkers, Travis Corbet, 33, and Andrew Yoder, 31, were killed, when a crane they were dismantling at Google’s downtown Seattle campus collapsed. Two bystanders were also killed in their crushed vehicles.

In January 2018, a worker died by falling down an elevator shaft while building a new dormitory at Seattle University. Also in 2018, construction worker Ducas Aucoin, 59, was crushed to death when a forklift unloading materials flipped on a sloped pavement at a Madison Valley construction site. In May of 2015, a construction worker in his 40s was injured in a 20-foot fall from construction equipment at a site near Capitol Hill Station.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), 5,333 US workers died on the job in 2019, averaging more than 100 per week or 15 deaths every day. One out of five (1,061) of these deaths were in the construction industry. Falls are the number one cause of construction worker deaths, comprising more than one-third (36.4 percent) of the total fatalities in the industry. Struck-by incidents (15.4 percent), electrocutions (7.2 percent), and caught-in/between incidents (5.4 percent) make up the next most likely fatal hazards in 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Between 2003 and 2017, construction workers ranked number three in non-fatal falls behind retail workers and health care workers. In response to the growing anger of workers, OSHA began their Fall Prevention Training and the National Campaign to Prevent Falls in Construction along with the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA), Construction Sector Council, the Center for Construction Research and Training (CPWR) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and

Health (NIOSH). Despite this training and sharing of information, the rate of construction worker falls and fatalities has remained relatively constant.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new dangers to the construction trades. Labeled “essential” by state officials from both the Democratic and Republican parties, construction workers were forced to continue full speed ahead on construction projects. The physical, hands-on and collaborative nature of the job means many workers are close proximity to each other in enclosed spaces, so minimal mitigation measures implemented by the employers and the unions have done little to stop the spread of infections and death.

Details on the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths among construction workers are difficult to find, due to lack of mass testing and transparent reporting across the United States. However, the data that does exist reveals that construction workers have been hit hard by the pandemic. In Washington state, construction is the sixth-highest source of COVID-19 workplace outbreaks. A study conducted by University of California, Los Angeles, from August to October 2020 revealed that construction workers had the highest case rate of infections out of any other industry, higher than even health care workers. In Colorado, construction workers made up the highest portion of COVID-19 deaths out of all industries, accounting for 111 deaths or 12 percent of the total 5,921 working-age deaths reported by the state.

A bulletin disseminated by the CPWR determined that almost 60 percent of construction workers are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 because of age, medical conditions and other risk factors such as a high rate of smoking. According to data from 2018, 20 percent of construction workers have a kind of respiratory disease such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or asthma, which increase the risk of serious complications from COVID-19. One-quarter of building trades workers have a risk condition such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease or liver disease. These likely conditions put construction workers at a greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and of having severe symptoms if infected.

Construction workers also have a high incidence of chronic pain, substance abuse and suicide. Due to a high risk of injury, many construction workers fall into substance abuse like opioids to keep up at a job site that will not wait for them to recover. In 2020, the CDC did a study that found that men working in construction have one of the highest rates of suicide. In 2016, the suicide rate for men in construction and extraction occupations was 49.4 out of 100,000, which is almost double the total suicide rate for civilian men (16-64 years old) working in 32 states (27.4/100,000), and is five times greater than the rate for all fatal work-related injuries in the construction industry in 2018 (9.5 out of 100,000).

Job strain, long work hours, limited family time, social isolation and employment uncertainty between projects all contribute toward the depression and stress that cause construction workers to turn toward these acts of despair. The tragedies that follow no doubt leave lifelong scars on workers’ families, coworkers and loved ones.

These egregious statistics expose the role of the building trades unions, which have negotiated and enforced the dangerous

worksite conditions and broader environment that have left hundreds of thousands of workers to suffer, get sick and die. This includes bogus “joint labor-management” safety schemes, which always bow to the demands of productivity and profit.

In April, Executive Secretary-Treasurer Shapiro welcomed the rushed reopening of the economy even as the pandemic continued to take its deadly toll. “Today, I have renewed hope,” she said. “Many are choosing to get vaccinated; children are returning to school, small businesses and restaurants are welcoming more patrons.”

The reckless reopening of the economy by Governor Jay Inslee, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan and all the unions has enriched pandemic profiteers like Jeff Bezos and Washington state companies like Amazon, Microsoft and Boeing. For workers it has been a catastrophe. The state, which saw the first confirmed COVID-19 death in the nation in February 2020, has had 664,000 cases and 7,824 official deaths.

The completion of multi-million construction projects for Amazon and Microsoft is not more important than the safety and lives of workers. At the heart of the current strike and the growing struggles of health care workers, educators and other sections of workers across the US and the world is the struggle to halt the relentless sacrifice of life and livelihoods for the profits of the super-rich.

In fighting to take the control of the struggle into their own hands, carpenters and all construction workers must form a network of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. These committees will allow workers to advance demands in their interests for better pay, benefits and workplace conditions, fighting on the principle that workers’ lives and livelihoods must be prioritized above private profit. This means fighting for the immediate closure of non-essential work sites with full compensation for workers, strict mitigation measures to minimize COVID-19 infections on essential sites, and improving general work conditions with higher pay, reduced hours and improved safety conditions. In opposition to the collusion of the NWCU and other unions with the construction bosses, rank-and-file committees will fight for workers’ control over the pace of the job, working conditions and health and safety.

For more information about building rank-and-file committees, carpenters and other construction workers should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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