

Two New Zealand port workers killed in one week

John Braddock
5 May 2022

The atrocious safety record at New Zealand's semi-privatised port operations was highlighted last month when two workers were killed in separate incidents during the same week.

The first fatality was a young worker, Atiroa Tuaiti, at the Ports of Auckland (PoA) on April 19. The 26-year-old, who was working alongside his father at the time of the accident, leaves behind his partner and two young children—his youngest born last October.

Tuaiti reportedly fell while working on a container ship, the *Capitaine Tasman*. A video posted to Facebook showed the grieving and shocked father, supported by colleagues, with his hand on his son's covered body.

Tuaiti, a recent immigrant from the Cook Islands, worked for Wallace Investments, the largest private operator at the port. Wallace Investments general manager Felix van Aalst confirmed Tuaiti fell from height, but said it was too early to determine what happened. An investigation is underway, led by Maritime NZ. It is the agency responsible for workplace safety on ships and at sea, while WorkSafe oversees safety at workplaces on land.

Tuaiti's was the fourth death involving the PoA since 2017 and the sixth fatality in six years at New Zealand ports nationwide. Former PoA chief executive Tony Gibson resigned under pressure in May last year following a scathing independent health and safety review into operations at the port. The review was ordered by the Auckland Council, which owns PoA, after multiple injuries and two onsite deaths.

The report, released in March 2021, revealed multiple major safety failures and laid the blame on management. Among other issues, it noted that line management often failed to follow up on health and safety issues, dismissing workers raising problems as

“troublemakers.” The report recommended that the chief executive “prioritise safety over productivity and profitability.”

Nothing has changed. Of the report's recommended 45 areas for improvement, PoA had completed less than half by last month. The board's latest update to council showed the port already missed its target of reducing lost-time injuries by half. There were 12 in the final three months of last year—up from nine in the previous quarter.

Last August, Gibson was charged with the death of stevedore Pala'amo Kalati the previous year. Last June, worker Janesh Prasad was killed at the port's transport hub in South Auckland during a tornado. In December 2020, a judge fined PoA over the death of young father, Laboom Dyer, who was critically injured after a crane toppled. In July 2020, PoA was again fined over the death of a swimmer who was struck by a pilot boat owned by the port.

Six days after Tuaiti's death, the second worker was crushed by coal while loading the ship *ETG Aquarius*, berthed at Cashin Quay in Lyttelton, near Christchurch. Lyttelton Port Company acting chief executive Kirstie Gardener confirmed the man had died while the vessel was being loaded with coal for export. The worker, who was in his 70s, was preparing for retirement. His family has applied to the coroner for a non-publication order of his name.

The Christchurch port came to a standstill on April 28 as more than 100 port workers marked International Workers' Memorial Day with a solemn service. The workers were a close-knit group and those who witnessed the fatal incident were reportedly particularly traumatised.

Lyttelton Port Company has also overseen previous fatalities, with three workers killed in 2014. The

company was subsequently ordered to pay a paltry \$138,000 in fines. In one case, father of three Bradley Fletcher died when a scissor crane toppled after he had been instructed to mount it. Fletcher was not trained to operate the lift. No risk assessment was done, nor had the lift been maintained and operated according to the manufacturer's instructions.

A Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC) inquiry into both recent port fatalities will now run with investigators beginning in Lyttelton, before moving on to Auckland. TAIC is not charged with laying "blame" for deaths, but addressing the circumstances and causes of accidents, and identifying any safety "lessons."

The Maritime Union, backed by the NZ Council of Trade Unions, is calling for an inquiry into port safety and the establishment of national operating standards. Labour's Workplace Relations and Safety Minister Michael Wood told Radio NZ he was "seriously considering" this, but wants a formal proposal from the union.

Wood also claimed: "Unions have confirmed some positive work on safety has taken place at ports." This is absurd, and points to longstanding union collaboration with governments and port managements to keep the lid on an ongoing disaster, despite purported "fractious relations" between management and union heads, particularly at PoA.

While industrial action on health and safety is one area that is legal under the restrictive Employment Relations Act, passed by the Labour-Alliance government in 2000, strikes led by the unions have been few and far between. Workplace deaths over the past three years totaled 110 in 2019 (including the White Island volcano disaster), 66 in 2020 and 52 in 2021, despite pandemic lockdowns. That is, on average more than one worker is killed at work every week, with the numbers double those per capita in Australia and the UK.

Under the privatisation mania initiated by the 1984–90 Lange-Douglas Labour government, and intensified by subsequent governments, the ports were transformed into competing entities with share listings, driven by the demands for profit. Private companies such as shipping giant Maersk Line, and Fonterra-backed logistics company Kotahi took financial stakes in ports they used.

The jobs, health and safety and conditions of the workforce inevitably suffered. At PoA, restructurings beginning in 2011 saw a series of major attacks. In 2011 workers went on strike over the company's plan to introduce a flexible roster, with management declaring the changes were needed to provide an "adequate financial return" to the council. The company's statement of corporate intent set out a return on equity forecast of 12 percent by 2016.

Under the "centre-left" Auckland Council and Labour-aligned mayor Len Brown, a program of mass sackings was brought forward and proposals sought from five stevedoring companies to replace the workforce. The Maritime Union sought to accommodate PoA's demands, indicating that it was prepared to discuss "flexibility" and "productivity" improvements so long as they did not affect union coverage and dues.

By 2014, the company boasted that 60 percent of the workforce was on a flexible roster and it had reached its 12 percent financial return two years ahead of schedule. It declared a net annual profit of \$74 million on the back of record productivity, and a dividend of \$66.6 million up 126 percent on the 2012–13 dividend.

The attacks on workers have since then continued and, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and global supply chain crisis, escalated. During 2020–21, frequent disruptions and lockdowns caused extensive backlogs on the wharves. After the Ardern Labour government ditched its COVID-19 elimination strategy last October under pressure from big business and the media, the drive for profits revived in earnest.

Under-capacity on the wharves and "just-in-time" delivery demands have intensified speed-up and performance pressures on port workers. It is no coincidence that deaths and injuries have re-emerged since COVID restraints were lifted. The unions have acted throughout the pandemic crisis as loyal partners of the Labour government, enforcing the "return to work" drive regardless of the dangers to workers' health and safety.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)