

Australia: Worker killed in building accident at inner-west Sydney school

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Worker Alistair Bidmead was killed in a tragic construction site accident on Friday morning at Fort Street High School in Sydney's inner west.

The 35-year-old stonemason was crushed under "several tonnes" of stone and brick, after a piece of the third-storey facade he was working on broke loose.

Bidmead was found pinned under debris on the scaffolding and could not be revived. He was pronounced dead at the scene by paramedics. New South Wales (NSW) Ambulance Inspector Michael Corlis told Nine News: "His injuries were [such] he could not be resuscitated... unfortunately there was nothing we could do."

Bidmead, a specialist in heritage stonemasonry, was working on a project to restore the main building of the 170-year-old government high school.

Originally from the Cotswolds, in southwest England, Bidmead was a highly regarded and award-winning stonemason.

On Facebook, B R Masonry wrote: "Alistair was a great friend and we are all deeply saddened by this. Alistair worked for us as a stone mason in 2016 at Mosman. I'm thankful for this time with you mate as you taught us a lot about working and shaping stones your knowledge was endless."

The Kyneton Dry Stone Walling Centre wrote: "During my time with Alistair he was in constant demand from some of the most highly respected builders doing some of the most high profile work.... His style and knowledge were exceptional and the way he approached problems and his application of skills and communication were the best we have seen."

Having worked in the industry since becoming an apprentice at the age of 16, and studied stonemasonry at Bath College, Bidmead established his own small business in the UK at 19, before relocating to Australia

in 2017.

The recovery of Bidmead's body from the site took more than five hours, as rescue workers needed to use a crane to remove the heavy fallen stone and debris. NSW Fire and Rescue Superintendent Adam Dewberry described the operation as "complex and protracted."

Dewberry told reporters that no children witnessed the shocking accident. The students were sent home early and the school remained closed on Monday. Teachers and other school staff have been instructed not to speak to the media.

While residents of the area surrounding the school told the *World Socialist Web Site* there was a large media presence at the site on Friday, little has been reported in the Australian press since the initial coverage.

This expresses the criminal indifference to workers' lives (and deaths) of the corporate media and political establishment, including the unions.

The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), which covers workers in the construction industry, has said nothing about the death, and declined to provide a comment when approached by the WSWs.

The reality is that the CFMMEU, along with all other unions in construction, is responsible for enforcing unsafe conditions in the industry. The unions, acting as an industrial police force of management and government, have suppressed any opposition by workers to the tearing down of building regulations by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, and allow the official "safety" agencies to serve as a rubber stamp for developers.

Although the accident occurred at a public school, on a project involving Heritage Stoneworks, a state-owned entity, the NSW Liberal-National government has

remained silent on the tragedy.

Beyond a few token comments, representatives of the NSW Labor Party have done little more than express crocodile tears and promote illusions in SafeWork (formerly WorkCover), the pro-business government safety body that has presided over dangerous working conditions in construction and other industries for decades.

After a single tweet on Friday, Inner West Council Mayor Darcy Byrne has said nothing, and his office did not respond to a request from the WSWS for further comment.

Sophie Cotsis, Labor's shadow minister for work health and safety, told the WSWS: "I wrote on Friday to Minister [Victor] Dominello, who is responsible for SafeWork, seeking an urgent and thorough investigation into this tragedy."

Asked whether she thought such an investigation would bring about meaningful change to safety conditions in the construction industry, Cotsis said she believed it was necessary to "conduct a review into SafeWork."

SafeWork, confirmed that it was conducting an investigation into the death, but declined to comment further. The modus operandi of the agency is to conduct protracted investigations over several years, before handing down a ruling that does nothing to hold those responsible for industrial deaths to account.

Bidmead's horrific death underscores the dangerous conditions workers face every day on construction sites.

SafeWork reports that, between 2012 and 2015, 15,553 workers in NSW were injured by falling objects, while 214 were permanently disabled and 17 died.

According to WorkSafe Australia, in 2020, 36 construction workers were killed across the country, making it the third most deadly industry in the country, in terms of both total number of deaths and fatality rate.

Construction ranks second for the number of "serious" workers' compensation claims for workplace injuries, with a total of 15,567 in 2020.

Across all industries, worker deaths have increased from fewer than 150 in 2018 to almost 200 in 2020. The fatality rate has also increased, from around 1.1 per 100,000 workers in 2018 to 1.5 in 2020.

This carnage will continue as long as workers' safety remains in the hands of government safety bodies,

which serve to cover up the underlying cause of dangerous working conditions, the subordination of workers' health and lives to the interests of corporate profit.

The WSWS urges workers, family and friends who have any further information about Alistair Bidmead's tragic death, or other serious workplace incidents, to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact