

Five construction workers injured in explosion in Auckland, New Zealand

Tom Peters
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Many questions remain about an explosion at a construction site near Auckland's waterfront on Friday, which seriously injured five workers. All five were hospitalised, and Middlemore Hospital told the media on Saturday that two were in a "critical but stable condition."

The blast happened at 6:30am in the Wynyard Quarter, on a Pakenham Street West site run by Hawkins Construction. Hawkins, a subsidiary of Australian-based Downer Group, is a major company with 12,000 employees across New Zealand.

Initial reports said that the cause was believed to be a gas cooker inside a portable worksite building. An unnamed worker told *Stuff*: "One of the boys was cooking some leftover meat last night and I think the gas cooker must've accidentally been left on. This morning when people opened it up, it exploded."

This remains unconfirmed, but it raises the question of why such portable cookers are allowed on building sites, which are often unstable and full of combustible materials. Hawkins is refusing to comment while the government regulator WorkSafe conducts an investigation.

Firefighters arrived soon after the disaster and performed first aid, using hoses to cool the workers' burns. Firefighter Ringo Harwood described a horrific scene, telling *Stuff* that the injured workers "had skin hanging off, some of their clothes had been blown off and what clothing did remain had to be cut off for us to reach the burns." One of the five workers was "lying on the deck only semi-conscious."

"After about four or five minutes the first ambulance arrived, but there were only enough ambulance personnel to take the first three injured parties. The final two had to wait 15 minutes before they were evacuated from the scene," Harwood said.

The delay has not been explained. Firefighters have held nationwide strikes over under-resourcing, low pay and a staffing crisis, which also affects ambulances. The situation has been made worse by the Labour Party-led government's removal of public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, causing significant staff shortages due to illness.

Wynyard Quarter has been the site of intense residential and commercial construction activity for years. Auckland Council, which owns the land, describes it as "one of the largest urban regenerations" in the country.

Eventually, the area is expected to accommodate 25,000 workers and 3,000 residents. Hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private money are invested in various projects, including apartments, luxury hotels, retail, restaurants, office buildings and public infrastructure.

The site where the explosion occurred was part of a five-building development which will have 48,000 square metres of office space. Construction began this year and is planned for completion in 2025.

James Dunphy, who lives in Wynyard Quarter, told Radio NZ that he and other residents had previously raised concerns about procedures at the construction site. Dunphy owns the company Dangerous Goods Compliance, which carries out inspections of sites that store hazardous materials.

Dunphy said: "The first was the spillage of soil over the fence... and I said: What was the soil, where's the incident report please, so we can understand what's happened? Was the soil contaminated?" The incident report was never provided.

Then, he said, residents "started noticing that [workers] were using hazmat suits or protective equipment—but not religiously, sporadically." Hawkins

told Dunphy that the suits were being worn as a precaution, because the ground was potentially contaminated with heavy metals and hydrocarbons.

Questions must be raised as to whether short staffing or stress and fatigue from long hours contributed to the explosion. Construction workers are under increasing strain, with a nationwide shortage of 20,000 workers according to the New Zealand Building Industry Federation. The information service EBOSS reports that the price of building products has increased 32 percent over the last 12 months, adding pressure to cut costs.

A survey by suicide prevention organisation Mates in Construction, released in June, found that 47 percent of workers felt their mental health had worsened since the pandemic began. Only 73 percent of respondents felt that they were able to manage stress most of the time (down from 78 percent last year.)

Mates in Construction spokesperson Slade McFarland told *Newshub* that workers are “really hurting because of the shortage of manpower, let alone the shortage of resources... Eight to 10-hour jobs mostly end up being 16-18 hours long for the day.”

WorkSafe figures show there were 12 deaths in the construction sector last year—the second-highest toll in the last 10 years for which figures are available on the WorkSafe website. From October 2020 to October 2021, there were 6,189 construction worker injuries bad enough to result in more than a week away from work.

Responding to the explosion, Council of Trade Unions president Richard Wagstaff told Radio NZ the construction industry has a “terrible record of workers being killed or injured on the job.” Far from calling for a campaign by workers to defend their safety, he encouraged illusions in WorkSafe, calling for a “full and detailed investigation” and “steps taken to better protect workers.” This was echoed by First Union leader Dennis Maga, whose members include construction workers, although not those at the Hawkins site.

These statements reflect the unions’ role as the adjuncts of big business. WorkSafe is a pro-corporate agency; its investigations typically drag on for months or years and hardly ever result in serious consequences for big companies like Hawkins.

The agency, previously called the Department of Labour (DoL), was rebranded in 2013 after being

discredited by the 2010 Pike River coal mine disaster, in which 29 men were killed in an underground explosion. The DoL and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) knew about the extremely dangerous conditions in the mine, but took no action to protect workers and kept the mine open.

To this day, no one has been prosecuted for the profit-driven decisions that turned Pike River into a death trap; charges initially laid against chief executive Peter Whittall were dropped by the DoL in an unlawful backroom deal.

The most damning indictment of the unions and regulatory agencies is their enforcement of the government’s “let it rip” pandemic policy. The Labour government, acting on the orders of big business, ditched its previous elimination policy late last year and proceeded to reopen schools and workplaces, allowing COVID-19 to spread everywhere. Around 2,000 people have died and more than 12,000 have been hospitalised as a result of this criminal policy.



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