

Australia: Supermarket cleaner Malerato Harrison dies in workplace accident

Robert Campion
6 December 2022

Malerato Harrison, a 39-year-old contract cleaner working at major supermarket chain Woolworths, was tragically killed in a workplace incident in Newcastle, regional New South Wales (NSW) on November 25. Police reported she suffered a cardiac arrest after being crushed by cleaning equipment and are not treating the death as suspicious.

Harrison, a migrant worker from South Africa, had been working for a third-party cleaning service contracted to Woolworths Jesmond for ten months. She leaves behind a husband, two stepchildren, and an international list of loving family and friends.

“She had this infectious smile. She was the kind of person who would do anything for anyone,” a fellow worker and friend, Jessika Abra, told 9News.

Images published in the *Newcastle Herald* show a commercial floor polisher being towed and escorted by police from the loading dock, an area where large trucks and semi-trailers deliver produce. Such polishers can weigh up to 275 kilograms according to manufacturers, and police suspect the device may have malfunctioned and reversed onto her.

While details of the incident remain unclear, cardiac arrests following crush injuries are consistent with the medical condition of crush syndrome, a prolonged state of damaged tissue. When released from this state there can be large releases of potassium and myoglobin within the body, triggering cardiac arrhythmia.

Woolworths employees told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they had been given no information about the incident, but had been warned to avoid discussion with reporters. One worker familiar with the cleaning schedule said that, given the use of the floor polisher and the location of the incident, Harrison may have become trapped under the machine as early as 5:30 a.m., before the beginning of the morning shift at 6 a.m.

A fellow cleaner reacted to the news on social media, raising the inherent risk to cleaners working alone, a common practice as companies seek to drive down labour costs to maximise profits. She said: “I lost a fellow shopping centre cleaner of over 10 years because of a workplace accident that should never [have] happened.”

The worker continued: “In my friend’s case she was unlocking and opening big security gates when it came off its rail and crushed her at a shopping centre. As a cleaner there are some jobs that should not be done on their own, there are so many risks involved in our job.”

Cleaners are a highly exploited section of the workforce, with low pay and high levels of casualisation and labour-hire arrangements. According to friends, Harrison held two other jobs at the time, including as a part-time beautician.

According to Cleaning Accountability Framework, a union-business cleaning industry peak body, international students make up the bulk of the cleaning workforce in metropolitan areas. For inner-city office buildings and retail malls in major cities, international students and other temporary migrants account for up to 85 percent of cleaners on-site.

A 2019 study by University of New South Wales and University of Technology Sydney researchers found that 77 percent of international students were paid below the minimum casual hourly wage, with 26 percent earning half the minimum wage or less (the latter figure remained unchanged from an identical study in 2016).

Many migrant workers and international students suffer these conditions in silence, out of fear that they will be fired or face complications with their visa if they speak up. Harrison herself was in the process of finalising her Australian citizenship, having passed her

test days before she died.

The conditions and wages for cleaners, along with those of the broader working class, have been systematically eroded over time with the trade unions and the Labor Party playing the leading role.

While under the leadership of future Labor Party leader Bill Shorten, the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) signed away penalty rates for weekend, public holiday and night shifts for about 4,000 casual cleaners in 2004 and 2006. In 2010, the AWU struck a secret deal with cleaning contractor Cleanevent that slashed around \$6 million in wages and netted the union a "dues" payment from the company of \$75,000.

Labor and the unions have also presided over the proliferation of subcontracting and labour-hire arrangements in the cleaning sector, which has been used by corporations, including the major supermarkets, to slash costs and outsource responsibility for workers receiving pay and conditions far short of legal minimums.

A 2018 report by the Fair Work Ombudsman found that the use of multiple levels of subcontracting for cleaning services at Woolworths locations in Tasmania had resulted in "significant underpayment of cleaners." In some cases, a chain of as many as four contractors stood between Woolworths and the workers cleaning the stores.

The death of Malerato Harrison highlights the silent epidemic of preventable workplace deaths taking place across Australia. In the year to November 24, 140 Australian workers were killed on the job, according to the government body SafeWork Australia.

The day before Harrison's death, a 57-year old factory worker was killed in a forklift accident in Sydney, just 150 kilometres away. Emergency services workers were called to the Tip Top bread factory in Chullora around 4 a.m. on November 24, but the worker was pronounced dead at the scene.

A SafeWork NSW investigation is underway for the Woolworths incident. Investigations by these government "safety" bodies are drawn out over several years, meaning public attention has long been diverted before any findings are released. When rulings are finally handed down, they typically amount to little more than "recommendations," and nothing is done to hold those responsible for industrial deaths to account or to improve safety for workers.

Workplace safety issues will never be addressed while it is in the hands of the unions and these government safety bodies, which exist to conceal the root cause of dangerous working conditions, the prioritisation of corporate profit over workers' health and safety.

The WSWs urges workers and others with further information about this incident or other workplace accidents and safety concerns, to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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