

Australia: Demolition worker dies on the job at Port of Newcastle

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On May 31, demolition worker Steve Klus was fatally injured at the Port of Newcastle, in New South Wales (NSW), after being struck on the head by a falling pole. Despite the efforts of paramedics, he died at the scene.

Klus was working for a third-party demolition contractor on a site leased by Qube, a major logistics corporation, on Kooragang Island, part of the port 170 kilometres north of Sydney.

Klus, 64, lived in Summerland Point, on the NSW Central Coast, between Sydney and Newcastle. He is survived by his wife Julie, children Chris, Matthew and Margaret, and grandchildren, Kyle, Tyler, Nate, Valerie and Iris.

Friend of the family, Rebecca Friend told the *Newcastle Herald* that Klus was “a hard worker who worked five or six days a week. When he wasn’t at work, he loved watching his grandkids play footy.”

“He lived for his family and football... he was just a typical bloke who wanted to do the right thing by everybody,” she said.

Friend reported that Klus had around 20 years of experience in the demolition industry and was particularly conscious of workplace safety: “If there is one thing that we have been talking about today it is that he was very safe at work. He took safety very seriously.”

Little detail has been made public about the specific circumstances of Klus’ death. But the incident fits into a broader picture of workers being seriously injured or killed at work due to unsafe working conditions.

According to Safe Work Australia, as of 8 June, 57 Australian workers had lost their lives at work this year—more than one every three days.

Less than three weeks before Klus’ death, a worker was killed on a residential construction site in southeast Sydney, after falling to the ground from a height of 10 metres. In March, a 62-year-old worker died after he was crushed by windows he was unloading from a shipping

container in northwest Sydney.

In 2021, there was a total of 169 workplace deaths in Australia. Of these, 24 were in construction, the fourth-most deadly industry per capita with a fatality rate of 2.1 deaths per 100,000 workers per year. Another 33 workers in agriculture, forestry and fishing were killed at work, at a rate of 10.4 per 100,000, while 52 transport, postal and warehousing workers lost their lives, at a rate of 7.9 per 100,000.

The construction industry accounted for 12 percent of the 130,195 “serious” workers’ compensation claims made in 2020?2021, second only to health care and social assistance services, which accounted for 20 percent of all claims.

Workers’ compensation claims for serious workplace injuries were higher among older workers, with more than 16 claims per 1,000 male employees aged 60-64.

This highlights the impact of the attacks by successive governments on the capacity of workers to retire. These include increasing the age of eligibility for the age pension from 65 to 67, and for accessing superannuation from 55 to 60.

Perhaps most significant was the introduction, by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Paul Keating, of compulsory superannuation itself. This was sold to workers as a replacement for the age pension but was in reality a scheme to channel vast amounts of capital into Australia’s investment banks via funds controlled jointly by the unions and big business. While ostensibly paid by employers, compulsory superannuation contributions have effectively come out of workers’ pockets, through cost-cutting measures demanded by business and enforced by the unions.

Despite paying into super for decades, the vast majority of workers will still be at least partially reliant on the meagre age pension. In 2020?21, according to the Australian Tax Office, the median superannuation account

balance of workers aged 60-64 was just \$183,524, while older workers had only slightly more: \$207,540 among 65-69 year olds and \$214,431 for those aged 70-74.

The combined effect of these measures has been to force workers to continue working longer. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2018?19, the average age at which workers intended to retire was 65.5 years, more than 10 years older than the average age at which those already retired had done so.

Klus' death will be investigated by SafeWork NSW, a pro-business government safety body. Typically, such investigations are dragged out over several years, allowing initial public anger to dissipate before a ruling, often amounting to a token fine or a slap on the wrist, is handed down. The purpose is to whitewash the role of corporations and the industry more broadly in perpetuating unsafe working conditions.

Eighteen-year-old Christopher Cassaniti was killed in April 2019, when overloaded scaffolding collapsed on top of him at a construction site in Macquarie Park, Sydney. But SafeWork's case against the companies responsible was only concluded last November, three and a half years after his death.

Synergy Scaffolding Services was fined \$2 million for the collapse, while GN Residential Construction (also known as Ganellen) was fined just \$900,000, after negotiating a plea deal with the safety regulator. Only this year were GN Residential Construction and its director deemed unfit to hold contractor licences.

Cassaniti's mother told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation these penalties don't go far enough. "It's not a deterrent for any company," she said. "Two million dollars for a big builder is nothing... it's laughable but the the thing is that is our maximum penalty."

NSW does not have industrial manslaughter laws, as exist in other states, ostensibly to hold employers criminally liable for causing workers' deaths on the jobs. Many unions, including the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Construction, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) have argued that the introduction of such laws will provide a mechanism for workplace deaths to be prevented.

But even where such laws are in place, workplace deaths have been allowed to continue, with governments resistant to pursue companies in breach or to enforce penalties. In the ACT, where industrial manslaughter laws were introduced in 2004, not a single prosecution has proceeded.

The first ever industrial manslaughter conviction in

Australia took place in Queensland only in 2020, under legislation passed in 2017, after a worker died when he was pinned to a truck by a reversing forklift. The company was fined \$3 million and the two company directors were sentenced to 10 months' imprisonment. However, their sentences were suspended.

The CFMMEU, which covers workers in the construction industry, has not said a word about Klus' death. This cannot be understood simply as indifference to the plight of workers at non-union sites.

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. They have allowed the official "safety" agencies to serve as a rubber stamp for developers.

In the 1980s, the Hawke Labor government worked hand-in-glove with the trade union apparatus to dismantle any trace of rank-and-file organisation, including the smashing up of workers' safety committees, especially in the building industry. This was part of a wide-ranging union-backed assault on the working class as the Hawke-Keating Labor governments deregulated the economy and destroyed hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The record shows that workers cannot afford to place their lives in the hands of the pro-company unions and government safety agencies, which systematically cover over the underlying cause of dangerous working conditions, the subordination of workers' health and lives to corporate profit interests.

Instead they must establish their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the official framework, to develop a genuine struggle for the highest safety measures, together with a counter-offensive against all attacks on pay and conditions.



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