

Teenage worker killed at Western Australian sandblasting plant

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Last Thursday, 16-year-old worker, Hamiora Sharland, died at Royal Perth Hospital from injuries sustained in a horrific incident at a factory in Perth, Western Australia (WA).

The teenager was crushed while preparing a steel beam for painting at the TLC Surface Treatment factory in Welshpool early Thursday morning. The business specialises in industrial sandblasting and spray painting to protect equipment from rust at its Railway Place workshop. The factory was shut down on Thursday while WorkSafe WA and police began an investigation into the incident.

At 16, Sharland is among the youngest workers to be killed at work in a WA manufacturing plant in modern times. He was a newly employed painter at TLC, having only recently left school. It is unclear whether Sharland was involved in a formal apprenticeship or trainee program.

Sharland's family, friends and co-workers have spoken of their deep shock. One friend told the *West Australian* they remembered him as "always smiling and laughing."

On social media, dozens of commenters lamented the tragic and untimely death. Very few details of the incident have been released, but numbers of comments pointed to the broader context of increasingly dangerous workplace conditions.

Some called for WorkSafe WA to perform more safety inspections. Others, however, described the pro-business government safety regulator as "useless."

Another wrote, "Too many workplace deaths. It's time for Worksafe to carry out random, no warning, inspections of all tradie workplaces. Complacency kills!" Another Facebook user replied, "worksafe, I wouldn't hold my breath."

Sharland was the fourth person to die in a workplace

incident in WA or offshore in just two weeks.

- Kieren McDowall, a 20-year-old father of two, died on June 14 at an iron ore mine in the Pilbara region in WA's north. He was working for AAA Asphalt Services as a contractor.

- Michael Jurman, a rope access technician working as a contractor on Woodside Energy's North Rankin offshore gas complex, about 135km northwest of Karratha, was killed in a "working over the side" activity on June 2.

- A 62-year-old crane operator died in the south Perth suburb of Applecross on June 2, after falling while climbing the crane's ladder. Although he received CPR at the site, he could not be revived, despite the assistance of an ICU doctor who happened to be nearby.

According to Safe Work Australia, as of June 8, 57 Australian workers had been killed at work this year. With the addition of Sharland and McDowall, there have 14 workplace deaths this year in WA alone.

Asked to explain the state's alarmingly high workplace fatality rate, WA WorkSafe Commissioner Darren Kavanagh told ABC Radio, "a lot more complexity in terms of our supply chains," "climate related risks" and "labour shortages" were to blame.

This essentially meaningless collection of buzzwords amounts to nothing more than an attempt to cover over the agency's failure to ensure safe conditions for workers.

Kavanagh said WorkSafe conducted both scheduled inspections of work sites and spot, or surprise, inspections "thousands of times throughout the year." But the agency has just 130 inspectors to cover tens of thousands of businesses, many of which are scattered in remote areas throughout the vast state.

The reality is that WorkSafe, like its counterparts in

other states, is a pro-business agency whose main role is to cover over the real cause of unsafe working conditions, the capitalist subordination of workers' health and lives to the profit demands of big business.

Investigations conducted by these "safety regulators" invariably amount to nothing more than a whitewash, resulting in a slap on the wrist or minor fines that corporations consider a "cost of doing business."

WA Labor Premier Roger Cook levelled minor criticism at employers, declaring, "there is no excuse for placing productivity outcomes, outputs, ahead of safety."

Ultimately though, Cook said it was up to workers themselves: "There is no substitute for a culture of safety and for everyone committing themselves to making sure that all our people get home at the end of the day."

Cook said he would "take some advice" from Industrial Relations Minister Bill Johnston on whether WA's workplace safety laws were working effectively enough.

In fact, Labor has no intention of cracking down on workplace safety, especially in the lucrative and dangerous mining sector, which, even with its highly favourable royalty and tax arrangements, contributes billions of dollars to the state budget each year.

Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) WA Secretary Mick Buchan said, "My message to employers out there is 'enough is enough.' More emphasis needs to be placed on occupational health and safety, they need to set up properly structured safety committees, and safety representatives."

In other words, the union's response to four deaths in two weeks, and 14 in six months, is to politely ask employers to establish safety committees. But it is these company- and union-appointed safety representatives that have for decades presided over the serious injury and death of workers.

The union apparatus has blocked any organised opposition by workers to the ongoing dangerous conditions they confront, just as it has shut down any fight for real wage growth. Instead, the unions serve as an industrial police force, imposing the demands of management and governments.

The industrial carnage can only be stopped through the independent action of workers themselves. This

means building rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace to fight cost-cutting, exhausting hours, workload increases, speed-ups, and other factors which endanger workers' health and lives. These committees must fight for workers' control of production speed and control over all aspects of health and safety, including protection against COVID-19.



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