

# Australia: One worker dead, two injured after incident at Woolworths warehouse in Western Sydney

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A warehouse worker in his mid 30s died at Westmead Hospital last Wednesday, after being crushed by a falling pallet while working at the Woolworths Sydney Regional Distribution Centre in Minchinbury, Western Sydney, on Tuesday afternoon.

Two other workers, who tried to assist him, were seriously injured and taken to hospital but have since been released.

The warehouse was shut down after the incident but reopened late Wednesday. The temporary closure resulted in shortages of some goods, particularly fresh produce, for several days at a number of Woolworths supermarkets across Sydney.

The deceased man has been identified by co-workers and friends on social media as Baz Brikha, a man of Assyrian heritage who previously lived in New Zealand.

One former co-worker wrote, “Myself and the rest of woolies will miss you deeply. You’ve made family with both sides of the warehouse and I can’t thank you enough for being a great friend to me and everyone else.”

Another wrote, “Such a beautiful, happy, funny man. Always helping me with the heavy and awkward things, THANKYOU!!”

Brikha’s death and the serious injuries sustained by his two colleagues point to the unsafe conditions that exist in many Australian workplaces.

According to Safe Work Australia, 69 workers were killed on the job between January 1 and June 22 this year, an average of one every 2.5 days. Of the workplace fatalities this year, 24, more than one third, have been in the transport, postal and warehousing sector.

State government safety regulator SafeWork NSW reports that between 2012 and 2015, 17 workers in the state were killed by falling objects, while 214 were permanently disabled and 15,553 were injured.

The Minchinbury incident will be investigated by NSW Police, SafeWork NSW and the Coroner, but these inquiries will likely amount to nothing more than a whitewash.

The United Workers Union (UWU) which covers workers at the site, wrote on social media on Wednesday that it was “deeply saddened that a member from Woolworth’s DC died on shift yesterday. ... Every worker should be able to go home to their family unscathed.”

Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) NSW Branch Secretary Bernie Smith told the *Sydney Morning Herald* the union was calling upon SafeWork NSW to carry out an “industry-wide audit.”

These statements serve as cover for the role that the unions themselves have played over an extended period in allowing unsafe conditions to exist in workplaces.

In 2021, a Coles warehouse worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* how he had been abandoned by the UWU after the company attempted to deny him proper treatment and compensation for a workplace injury.

He said: “When I saw that Coles had denied responsibility, I contacted the National Union of Workers [which merged with United Voice to form the UWU in 2019]. I rang, left a message. I did that two times a day for three or four days in a row. In the end, I thought, this is no good, I need to do something, so I contacted an outside solicitor.”

The unions’ attitude towards workplace health and safety is in line with the role that these thoroughly corporatised organisations play. They do not represent the interests of workers, but those of management, enforcing speedups and cuts to jobs, wages and conditions in order to deliver continual increases to shareholder profits.

In the second half of last year, as the price of groceries and other basic essentials soared, Woolworths recorded a

0.48 percentage point gross profit margin increase to 30.7 percent and \$1.439 billion half-yearly earnings before tax, 18.2 percent higher than in 2021. At the same time, enterprise agreements brokered by the UWU and SDA ensured workers' pay fell sharply in real terms.

The Minchinbury warehouse is one of three Woolworths distribution centres slated for closure in the coming years, after the company opens a new highly automated facility in Moorebank, South West Sydney. The new shed will require just 650 workers, less than half the number employed at Minchinbury and Yennora in Sydney, and Mulgrave in Victoria.

The UWU is playing a critical role in ensuring there is no organised opposition of workers to the planned closures. The union peddles the lie that the mass destruction of jobs is an inevitable product of technological advances and all workers can ask for is a slightly better redundancy payment when they are thrown on the scrapheap.

The UWU rammed through the final enterprise agreement at Minchinbury in quick time late last year, announcing a "union win" on the eve of planned strike action. The deal locked in nominal wage increases far below the official inflation rate, meaning workers' pay will continue to decline in real terms until the facility is shut down.

In order to help Woolworths avoid an exodus of staff before the closure, as workers seek new, long term employment, the union negotiated a loyalty scheme, under which workers accrue \$1,250 every six months until the warehouse shuts down, payable upon departure.

Woolworths' main competitor, Coles, is carrying out the same process across the country. In April, the supermarket chain opened a new, highly automated warehouse at Redbank in South East Queensland as part of a \$1 billion investment in job-cutting technology.

Once Redbank and a second automated distribution centre (ADC), to be opened next year in Kemps Creek, NSW, are both operational, Coles will close five existing warehouses in the two states, slashing thousands of jobs.

As at Woolworths Minchinbury, the UWU has worked hand-in-hand with Coles' management to clear the way for these closures, despite the opposition of workers.

The sharpest expression of this occurred in 2020-21 at the Coles warehouse in Smeaton Grange, southwest Sydney, where management locked out the entire workforce for more than three months. Aware that the facility was slated to close within a few years, workers demanded improved redundancy pay as well as a wage

increase.

Any struggle by workers against the closure of the plant itself was blocked by the United Workers Union leadership, which insisted from the outset that the destruction of hundreds of jobs was inevitable.

The union starved workers out with no strike pay and kept them cut off from the rest of the working class. This brought the workers, who were determined to fight, into conflict with the UWU bureaucracy, repeatedly voting down the virtually unchanged union-management offers, even after the union declared the dispute over.

The unions are facilitating these "orderly closures" of workplaces, or even entire industries, because they defend the capitalist system under which every technological development is used to erode workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Under socialism, in which factories and warehouses are democratically run by workers themselves, automation and other technological developments could be used to make workplaces safer, eliminate onerous tasks and reduce working hours, with no loss of pay for workers.

The tragic accident at Minchinbury last week is a stark reminder 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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