

Australia: Young apprentice worker killed at Newcastle hospital building site

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Twenty-year-old apprentice building worker Harry Mcwilliam was killed at a Newcastle construction site on Wednesday morning, when he was struck by falling steel reinforcement bars. Mcwilliam received treatment from paramedics at the scene, but, although the accident occurred on the grounds of the largest hospital in the region, his injuries were too severe.

Mcwilliam was working on a new building at John Hunter Hospital in the New South Wales (NSW) city two hours' drive north of Sydney. The seven-storey Acute Services building will house a new Intensive Care Unit and a new Emergency Department.

More than 180 workers are involved in the \$835 million project, which is being overseen by the multinational construction company Multiplex, and is expected to be completed in 2026.

Multiplex declared Thursday, "As a mark of respect for the tragedy that occurred at John Hunter yesterday, we have stopped work on all our Australian sites today." Work at the hospital site itself is suspended indefinitely, pending an investigation by SafeWork NSW.

Mcwilliam lived on the Central Coast, between Newcastle and Sydney. Press reports note he was a talented rugby union player, as well as a gifted actor and singer, who performed in local productions with the Gosford Musical Society and Wyong Musical Theatre Company.

Music teacher Toni Williams told the *Newcastle Herald*, "I was fortunate enough to teach Harry singing for a couple of years and I'll never forget his rendition of Tenterfield Saddler."

Many who knew Mcwilliam have posted messages of condolence and memories of the young man on social media. Nick Meyer described Mcwilliam as a "genuine, big hearted caring young leader that was such a positive

and inspiring person to be in the presence of. Brilliant rugby player, but also an amazing young man."

One comment, from Aaron Black, pointed to the broader safety issues in the building industry: "Construction is still a place where a blind eye is turned to safety in the interest of getting the job done. The industry needs to change. This is such terrible news."

According to Safe Work Australia, construction is the third-most dangerous industry in the country, behind "transport, postal and warehousing" and "agriculture, forestry and fishing." Between 2017 and 2021, an average of 28 construction workers were killed on the job each year, at a rate of 2.4 fatalities per 100,000 workers.

According to Safe Work Australia's preliminary figures, 16 construction workers have died already this year. Across all industries, 78 worker deaths were recorded in the 187 days to July 6, a rate of one fatality every 2.4 days.

These deaths have included other young workers, who, like Mcwilliam, were only just beginning their working lives.

On June 21, 16-year-old Hamiora Sharland died in hospital from injuries sustained when he was crushed by a steel beam at a sandblasting factory in Perth, Western Australia (WA). Just a week earlier, Kieren McDowall, a 20-year-old father of two, died at an iron ore mine in the Pilbara region in WA's north.

Darren Greenfield, NSW secretary of the construction division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining Energy Union (CFMMEU), said Thursday, "It's a sickening day for our industry to lose any worker."

The union official was quick to shield Multiplex from criticism. He said: "You've got a multinational builder, a reputable builder... normally we look at their jobs as some of the safest jobs in our country and something

like this happens.”

But Multiplex’s record is far from spotless. In 2021, the company was fined over the 2016 death of a worker at another hospital work site, in Canberra. Herman Holtz, 62, was killed when an overloaded mobile crane fell on him.

Multiplex and the crane company RAR Cranes pleaded guilty to safety breaches. While facing a maximum penalty of up to \$1.5 million, Multiplex was fined \$150,000 for “failing to comply with a work health and safety duty.”

This is pocket change for Multiplex, a major multinational construction company that has built more than 1,100 projects, with a combined value in excess of \$US100 billion.

Little is known about precisely what occurred on Wednesday, and previous incidents have no direct bearing on the culpability of any company or individual in Mcwilliam’s death.

That only underscores the rotten and prejudicial character of Greenfield’s comments. The CFMMEU leadership, in its haste to line up with a multinational corporation, dispenses with even a pretense of objectivity, the precondition for an impartial investigation and exposure of what has led to the latest death.

The union, in other words, functions as a de facto arm of public relations for management, even at a site where a worker has just been killed.

The CFMMEU itself, moreover, is frequently complicit in or even directly responsible for the unsafe conditions at building sites. At those sites it covers, the union’s health and safety officials oversee conditions and have the authority to keep workers on the job.

More broadly, the unions have suppressed any opposition by workers to the tearing down of building regulations by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

The unions have allowed SafeWork NSW, and equivalent government safety regulators in other states, to function as a rubber stamp for developers. Investigations into workplace deaths are invariably drawn out over several years, and typically amount to little more than a slap on the wrist. The main purpose is to cover over the role of the major construction companies, whose profit-driven decisions and practices result in the continuation of unsafe working conditions.

This underscores the need for workers to take workplace safety, and indeed their lives, out of the hands of the corporations, government safety regulators and the unions. This means establishing rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves, to demand and enforce the highest safety standards, as well as to fight for decent pay and conditions.



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