

Australia: Young worker killed in Port Kembla steel plant

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Aged just 24, Jack McGrath was killed this week at the BlueScope Steel complex at Port Kembla in the industrial city of Wollongong, south of Sydney. Emergency services reportedly rushed to the site at about 10:30am on Monday, but the young worker died at the scene.

Few details are yet known about the incident or the conditions under which McGrath was working. According to BlueScope, its “preliminary understanding” was that McGrath was hit by a steel beam that dropped while being lifted by a crane.

It is believed that McGrath died while working on a \$1.15 billion reline of BlueScope’s no.6 blast furnace. The incident happened opposite the no.5 stockhouse, located near the no.5 blast furnace.

McGrath was employed by the contractor Ventia, which has been providing maintenance and engineering services to BlueScope for some 20 years. Ventia is involved in manufacturing, defence, transport, health, education and other sectors across Australia and New Zealand.

Work in the immediate vicinity stopped, reportedly so that SafeWork NSW (New South Wales) inspectors could attend the scene and prepare a report for the state’s coroner, but BlueScope kept the rest of the steelworks operating.

Friends, family and former colleagues paid tribute to the young worker on social media as the “life of the room” with “his cheeky smile and sharp wit.”

Such is the level of public concern over the death and increasingly unsafe working conditions that local federal and state Labor MPs and trade union officials issued hypocritical statements of condolence. None, however, proposed any action, instead leaving any investigation in the hands of government authorities.

Similarly, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and

Energy Union (CFMEU), of which McGrath was a member, put out a perfunctory statement extending its condolences to his friends and family and saying that CFMEU officials were on site conducting inquiries with “the relevant authorities.” Likewise, Australian Workers Union (AWU) NSW secretary Tony Callinan said workers needed to “allow the relevant authorities to do their appropriate investigations.”

But investigations by SafeWork NSW and its equivalents around Australia, New Zealand and internationally are inevitably protracted exercises that hold no one responsible. The average number of workplace deaths annually in Australia over the past five years was 191, which is more than one every two days in a workforce of about 15 million.

Moreover, the unions themselves are responsible for the lack of safety at BlueScope and more broadly, having sold out workers’ struggles for years, imposing cuts to jobs and conditions.

In 2019, the unions used the threat of total closure of the Port Kembla plant to ram through wage-cutting agreements. Four years earlier, in 2015, the unions worked with BlueScope to carry out the destruction of 500 jobs and impose a three-year pay freeze. The unions argued that workers had no choice but to agree in order to prevent the closure. In 2015, the then managing director Paul O’Malley thanked the unions for “making significant contributions and commitments to our cost reduction plan.”

BlueScope Steel has plants in 15 countries, including Australia, the US, New Zealand, China, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. It emerged from a spin-off from BHP Billiton in 2002 and arrived at its current configuration through various mergers and acquisitions.

After McGrath’s death, the company tried to impose

a blanket of silence on workers. The next morning, contractors were called into a meeting and told not to talk with anyone about the incident. However, a worker told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team that some of his managers went to a meeting and that the worker got three different stories about the event, “all of which smelt like sh-t.”

The company and the union officials are trying to preempt any independent response or action by workers to McGrath’s death and the wider toll of fatalities and serious injuries. A similar cone of silence has been imposed by the company Polymetals in the NSW mining town of Cobar, where two mine workers died and another was injured at the Endeavor mine when explosives detonated prematurely.

As the WSWS has reported, work at the Cobar mine has been fully restarted without any results from the official investigations into the tragedy. Earlier this month, the WSWS also reported that a 75-year-old postal worker died in Perth in October after being hit by a car while making her deliveries.

McGrath’s death came just a day before BlueScope’s annual general meeting. After a brief acknowledgement of the accident, CEO Mark Vassella delivered the company’s full-year results, reporting underlying EBIT [Earnings Before Interest and Taxes] of \$738 million and what was described as a strong cash flow.

Vassella claimed that there was a company-wide “Refocus on Safety.” Yet, five employees sustained serious injuries resulting in permanent incapacity in each of the past two financial years. Between 2020–21 and 2023–24, total recorded injuries rose sharply from 271 to 387, before a slight decrease to 363 in 2024–25.

Worldwide, tragedies are happening every day. In Italy, the WSWS reported that one workplace death takes place every six hours. In Canada, 1,056 workers died in 2023, the last year that statistics are available. In the United States, there are over 5,000 deaths on the job annually.

Estimates put annual deaths from occupational diseases, due to chronic exposure to chemicals and other toxins, at as many as 20 times the official figures.

In the US, the WSWS reported on the death of 63-year-old skilled tradesman Ronald Adams Sr. at Stellantis’ Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan. Adams was crushed by a Gantry hoist that activated while he was doing maintenance in April. His family

were promised answers to how his death could have happened, but have not been told anything.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has conducted an independent workers inquiry into Adams’ death, as part of a broader struggle to enable workers to fight the threat of workplace deaths and injuries.

Workplace health and safety cannot be left under the control of capitalist governments, corporate executives and their union partners, who are driven by the imperative to maintain profitability for investors. In 2020, for example, BlueScope was fined \$30,000—a pittance—by the NSW Environment Protection Authority for failing to comply with dioxin air emission limits on six occasions over just two months.

Workers need to take matters into their own hands. In order to defend their lives, safety, jobs and conditions, they need to break out of the pro-employer straitjacket of the Labor government and the union apparatuses and establish democratically-elected rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. These committees would reach out through the IWA-RFC for support from other workers everywhere for a unified struggle against the capitalist profit system.

If you have any information about McGrath’s death or unsafe conditions at any workplace, please contact the WSWS.



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