

Australia: Residents highlight big-business neglect of worker safety after Port Kembla steelworks death

Our reporters
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On November 17, 24-year-old worker Jack McGrath was killed at BlueScope's Port Kembla steelworks after he was hit by a steel beam that fell while being lifted by a crane. McGrath, who was employed as a rigger by contractor Ventia, was apparently working on a major \$1.15 billion project to reline the steelworks' No.6 blast furnace.

Work was temporarily halted in the area where McGrath had been working, to allow SafeWork New South Wales (NSW) inspectors to investigate the scene. However, BlueScope kept the rest of the large industrial complex operating. Employees and contractors, while forced to continue working, were told by the company not to speak to anyone about the incident.

At a moving funeral service yesterday in Kembla Grange, more than 700 people gathered to mourn McGrath's passing. Family and friends, still clearly shocked and traumatised by his sudden death, remembered the young man as generous, loving and fiercely loyal.

In a further testament to the impact of McGrath's death on the local community, a mural of his name was painted on a wall in his home town of Dapto.

McGrath's death is part of a broader trend of workplace tragedy. An average of 191 workers are killed on the job each year in Australia, more than one every two days, according to Safe Work Australia. Last year, 37 construction workers were killed at work, 20 percent of all workplace fatalities in the country. Only two industries, "transport, postal and warehousing" and "agriculture, forestry and fishing," claimed more lives.

This is by no means an Australian phenomenon. The scourge of workplace deaths and serious injuries is on

the rise globally, as corporations impose productivity increases and speed-ups to sate the demands of their financial backers. These are not accidents, but examples of social murder perpetrated by an economic system, capitalism, under which everything, including workers' health and lives, is subordinated to profit.

The very organisations that purport to defend workers' safety in fact serve to cover over the threats. Investigations by SafeWork NSW and equivalent bodies in other states are invariably dragged out over several years, allowing anger to subside before a ruling is made that is invariably a whitewash. Recommendations may be handed down, but are rarely implemented or enforced, and the company escapes with a token fine, amounting to a tiny fraction of the profits made in the intervening period.

These cover-ups would not be possible without the complicity of the trade union bureaucracies.

At BlueScope, union bureaucrats told workers they were working with "the relevant authorities" to investigate McGrath's death. Like the company's gag order, this was aimed at hosing down the development of any independent action by workers to demand health and safety improvements.

Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) NSW deputy executive officer Chris Christodoulou declared that, in addition to working with SafeWork NSW, the union would "do our own investigation and drill down to ensure that this never happens again."

The fraudulent character of this bluster is plainly exposed in the bureaucracy's immediate response to McGrath's death, that is, to tell workers to get back on the job and let the officials and SafeWork NSW handle

it.

Workers can place no more faith in the union's "investigation" than that of SafeWork NSW. Under the CFMEU's watch, construction remains one of the most dangerous industries in the country.

This situation is perpetuated because the CFMEU, and all the unions, work hand-in-hand with management and the government safety bodies to cover over the real underlying cause of dangerous working conditions, the subordination of workers' health and lives to the interests of corporate profit.

To fight this, workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-business union bureaucracies, must be established in workplaces everywhere, as the only means through which workers can fight for improved safety, wages, conditions, and even for their lives.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to local residents about McGrath's death and the broader issue of workplace safety.

Muhammad heard about McGrath's death from a friend who is in the same trade. He said, "She's 17 now, and she's reconsidering her life decisions," in the wake of the tragedy. "Nobody wants to be at work if they're in fear for their life."

Muhammad saw a clear connection between the incident and the rapacious demands of big business for ever-greater profits. He said: "The companies, especially big companies like BlueScope, should pay more attention to the workers and their safety rather than productivity and the revenue they're generating every year. If there were no workers, there would be no productivity.

"Humans and their safety should always be the first priority, instead of putting pressure on workers to be more productive and work longer hours.

"They want people to work more, be more efficient at work, while at the same time they don't pay them enough. They want to pay as little as they can, like minimum wage, but they want them to work at double or triple their strength."

Muhammad was concerned the company would receive nothing more than a slap on the wrist from any official investigation, as is frequently the case. He said: "No amount of money can pay for a human life. But a token fine doesn't do anything—these companies make

a lot of money, they can easily afford it. If you have a lot of money, you can get away with anything."

He agreed that a rank-and-file inquiry was needed to find the truth of what happened to McGrath: "Absolutely! There should be an investigation. If it's left to the company, it's going to be a cover-up. Workers should lead the investigation."

Lorraine, a young customer service worker, said McGrath's death was "very tragic to society as a whole, and especially to his parents, family and friends." At just 24 years old, "he had his whole life ahead of him, but lost his life to work."

"The big corporations should put more money into ensuring that the workers are healthy and safe, because we all know they get lots of money. Companies just see people as numbers and don't really take into account what the employees are saying."

Lorraine connected the drive of management for speed-ups and productivity increases to increased danger for workers: "A smaller workforce doing more work, at the end of the day, can bring tragic deaths, because workers are too tired, especially working big machines or down a mine."



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