

Australia: Worker dies at Cleanaway's Ravenhall waste facility

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A worker's death at Cleanaway's Ravenhall waste facility in Melbourne's western suburbs on December 17 is the latest in a horrifying series of fatalities linked to the recycling and waste management company.

The worker, employed by a waste management subcontractor, was killed after being struck by a truck at the site, which handles solid waste and recycling. A Cleanaway spokesman immediately sought to downplay the company's involvement, declaring the incident "occurred when a customer's truck struck a worker from another customer vehicle."

Australian Workers Union (AWU) Victorian secretary Ronnie Hayden declared in a press release that both Cleanaway and Comcare (the national workplace safety regulator) had been repeatedly warned about lethal hazards at the company's sites.

"We have documented the risks," Hayden said. "We have advocated for stronger protections. We have warned that without meaningful intervention, more workers would die. We were right. And we take no satisfaction in that," he continued, adding that executives "ought to start being locked up."

The AWU was particularly critical of Comcare, which it said had "consistently failed to provide the rigorous oversight that workers in waste management and resource recovery desperately need." The union called for Cleanaway to be removed from the national safety regulation scheme and overseen instead by the state-based safety regulators.

The union's focus on Comcare is a diversion, aimed at covering over the role of all the so-called safety regulators, at state or federal level, as well as the unions themselves in presiding for decades over unsafe and deadly workplace conditions at Cleanaway and more broadly.

The "transport, postal and warehousing" industry is

responsible for more workplace deaths than any other in Australia. Over the past five years, an average of 58 workers each year have been killed in the sector, out of the overall average of 191. This year, the data paint an even darker picture. Of the 167 worker deaths so far recorded by Safe Work Australia—likely an incomplete figure—62 have been in the transport industry, well over one third.

In per capita terms, only "agriculture, forestry and fishing" is more dangerous, recording 13.7 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2024, compared with 7.4 in the transport sector.

The latest Cleanaway fatality occurred barely three months after the death of 25-year-old international student Prabhjot Singh at the company's Coolaroo Materials Recovery Facility in Melbourne's northern suburbs on September 19. Singh, from Haryana, India, was crushed between a reversing loader and a trailer. He had only been in the country for a short time, one of many migrant workers compelled to accept exhausting, low-paid, insecure and unsafe work in the waste sector.

Cleanaway is the largest waste management company in Australia, operating more than 350 sites and employing more than 8,000 workers. In the 2024–2025 financial year, the company recorded \$3.85 billion in revenue and net profits of \$198 million, a 16 percent increase on the previous year.

In the wake of Singh's death and other incidents in the 2024–2025, Cleanaway was compelled to make a public display of reducing executive bonuses because the company had failed to meet its safety targets. In October, Cleanaway's board announced a 30 percent cut to short-term incentive payments for the company's leadership, on top of the 10 percent already withheld because it was conditional on zero fatalities for the year.

Underscoring the cynical character of the safety-related bonus cuts, they coincided with the board raising overall executive bonuses, supposedly to bring them in line with Cleanaway's competitors. In total, despite the board's pantomime of punishing the bosses, Chief Executive Officer Mark Schubert received more than \$2 million in bonuses, bringing his total remuneration for 2024–2025 to over \$4.2 million.

Cleanaway's annual report noted that the company had recorded three workplace fatalities in the 2024–2025 financial year, although it provided scant detail about the deaths.

- On August 2, 2024, a 68-year-old woman died after being run over by a Cleanaway truck while cycling in Werribee, on the southwestern outskirts of Melbourne.
- On September 24, 2024, a 31-year-old tipper truck driver was killed at Cleanaway's Lucas Heights landfill in Sydney. The man was hit by a compactor truck while trying to clear a blockage behind his vehicle. Paramedics attempted to treat him, but he died at the scene.
- Early in 2025, an equipment service driver died in a single-vehicle accident in Wingfield, South Australia, according to the *Australian Financial Review*.

The annual report also noted 16 serious injuries at the company, up from 12 the year before, and that its Total Recordable Injury Frequency Rate (TRIFR) had risen from 4.6 to 4.7 reportable injuries per million hours worked.

Asked about Cleanaway's safety record during an investor call, Schubert said the company was focussed on improving its safety performance and was two years into a "five-year Health, Safety and Environment roadmap." The two recent deaths expose the hollow character of such claims.

Moreover, Cleanaway has made similar declarations of its "heightened focus on safety" in every recent annual report. But, since 2021, at least nine people have been killed in workplace incidents at the company, including three in 2022 alone, and the TRIFR has increased by more than 30 percent.

The company has largely escaped regulatory scrutiny or significant punishment over its safety record, even in the face of compelling evidence of its responsibility.

A particularly notable example is the case of an incident in South Australia in 2014. A Cleanaway sewage tanker crashed into a car at a speed of some 151

kilometres per hour, killing Thomas Spiess (57) and Jacqueline Byrne (41) and severely injuring Cleanaway driver Darren Hicks, who lost a leg in the accident.

Hicks had joined Cleanaway just two days earlier, held a truck licence for barely a month, and was given no proper training. The company had allegedly been told more than three weeks prior to the crash that the vehicle's brakes were faulty and needed to be repaired before it was driven again. Cleanaway was found guilty of multiple work health and safety breaches, but through repeated appeals has managed to drag the case out for more than a decade, with a final ruling still forthcoming.

These are not random tragedies but the predictable outcome of the capitalist system, in which safety is subordinated to profit. The scourge of workplace deaths cannot be fought within the framework of the unions, because these organisations are themselves an integral component of the capitalist system and serve as an industrial police force of management.

To end the slaughter, waste?industry workers must take matters into their own hands. Rank?and?file committees, controlled by workers themselves rather than union bureaucrats should be established in every depot, facility and collection route, to fight for safe working conditions throughout the company's operations.

Such a struggle can succeed only by linking up across industries—transport, logistics, mining and manufacturing—where similar conditions prevail. Cleanaway's record exemplifies the logic of capitalism: the relentless drive to reduce costs, raise output and reward investors at the expense of those whose labour sustains the system. The defence of workers' lives requires a direct challenge to that logic, and with it, to the rule of corporate profit itself.



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