

Boilermaker Simon Mukwarami killed at Worsley Alumina refinery in Western Australia

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Simon Mukwarami, a 47-year-old boilermaker, was killed at work on Saturday March 14 at South32's Worsley Alumina refinery, near Collie, 200 kilometres south of Perth.

Emergency crews were called to the refinery around 3:50 a.m. and first aid was attempted, but Mukwarami was pronounced dead at the scene.

According to the *West Australian*, Mukwarami died after “falling from a significant height through grid mesh while working on a digester”—a pressurised vessel in which bauxite ore is cooked in caustic soda to separate alumina hydrate from sand.

Little more information has emerged since the fatality. Descriptions of the incident refer to a fall “through grid mesh,” though the condition of the flooring and exact circumstances remain unclear. Refineries like Worsley Alumina use grid mesh extensively to provide access to machinery and elevated areas. These panels are typically heavy and secured in place but may be removed or repositioned during maintenance.

A police report is underway and the state safety regulator WorkSafe WA is also investigating the death.

South32 issued a perfunctory media release expressing condolences and pledging to assist regulatory inquiries. “Work not critical to the safety and stability of the site” was suspended.

The company mines bauxite in Western Australia and processes it into alumina powder at the Worsley refinery to export it for smelting into aluminium. Opened in 1984 and previously operated by BHP Billiton, Worsley has been run by South32 since its 2015 spin-off from BHP and is the company's second-largest alumina operation.

Around 1,600 workers, with several hundred additional contractors work at the Worsley refinery. In October last year, South32 announced 100 jobs would be cut at the

refinery as part of a cost-cutting operation linked to “global market pressures.”

The recent tragedy is the not the first at Worsley. In September 2014, 66-year-old electrician Colin Whitton, who had worked at the plant for 24 years, was fatally crushed between a moving lift car and shaft while doing maintenance work on the elevator.

A 2018 investigation by the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety (DMIRS) found “the company had failed to ensure that there were clear written safety procedures that could have prevented Mr Whitton's exposure to the hazards,” according to the *Australasian Mine Safety Journal*.

Andrew Chaplyn, then DMIRS mines safety director, said “Bypassing the safety circuit effectively rendered what was theoretically a safe system unsafe.... Allowing a person to attempt to resolve technical issues without enforcing its policy for providing an integrated system for isolating and controlling hazards led to a dangerous situation.”

South32 pleaded guilty to exposing Whitton to hazards and was fined \$65,000. This was nothing more than a slap on the wrist for a company which last year reported post-tax profits of \$US213 million. Despite the investigation finding the company had created an ultimately fatal work situation on its site, the company was able to absorb the death as a cost of doing business and proceed.

Mining is the fourth-deadliest industry nationally in terms of raw numbers, but the third deadliest when workforce size is taken into account. In 2024, the industry had a fatality rate of 3.4 deaths per 100,000 workers, exceeded only by transport, postal and warehousing, with 7.4 per 100,000 and agriculture, forestry and fishing, with 13.7 per 100,000.

Recent WorkSafe WA data indicates that bauxite and

alumina continue to record the highest injury rates among the state's major mining commodities, reaching 11.0 injuries per million hours worked. Nickel follows at 7.7, with iron ore at 6.8 and gold at 4.6.

On average, there are 191 workplace deaths each year in Australia across all industries.

The most recent fatality at Worsley is at least the fourth in the Australian mining and resources sector this year:

- On January 2, 59-year-old Jeff Palmer died after a roof collapse at the Mammoth Underground coal mine near Blackwater in Queensland, while he was working underground.

- Also on January 2, a 58-year-old gold prospector died after being hit by falling rocks at a private mine site at Mount Britton, about 300 kilometres (186 miles) north of Blackwater.

- In February, a 47-year-old worker at Newmont's Tanami gold mine in the Northern Territory died following an incident at a construction site, with initial inquiries indicating a possible winch failure during a lift.

Fatalities continue to occur, as official investigations drag on for years and serve as nothing more than whitewashes, at most handing down token fines and admonitions to the corporations responsible for killing workers on the job. Recommendations made by these investigations are rarely implemented and never enforced, leaving workers' lives in the hands of profit-driven corporations.

While the Australian Metal Workers Union (AMWU)—which covers workers at Worsley—has said nothing about Mukwarami's death on their website or social media, they did issue a statement to the corporate press.

AMWU WA secretary Steve McCartney told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation the union would be “investigating this issue” and “making sure that it never happens again.”

Workers at Worsley should take note—these are the same hollow words uttered by union bureaucrats after every workplace tragedy.

Five months ago, an explosion at Polymetals Resources' Endeavor mine near Cobar, New South Wales killed two workers, Patrick “Ambrose” McMullen and Holly Clark, and left another, Mackenzie Stirling, with serious injuries.

The Australian Workers Union and the Mining and Energy Union, whose officials issued empty vows on the day of the blast to “find out what happened and make sure that it never happens again,” have not uttered a word

since, even as the company began reopening the mine just eight days after the fatal incident.

While the state safety regulator's investigation is ongoing and ostensibly inconclusive, it allowed Polymetals to resume blasting operations on the basis of an “internal review.” Officially, this review also failed to determine the cause of the explosion, but was still used as a pretext for a full reopening.

The silence of the unions demonstrates their agreement with the mine being reopened with the explosion's cause unexplained and workers, at Endeavor and throughout the mining industry, therefore at risk of a repeat event.

These previous experiences should be a warning to Worsley Alumina workers, their families and anyone else expecting that the official investigation into Mukwarami's death will reveal the whole truth about what happened.

The reality is that the unions and the so-called safety regulators have presided for decades over countless worker deaths and serious injuries. These organisations work to cover up the responsibility of corporations for industrial accidents as well as their real underlying cause—the capitalist system and the subordination of workers' health and lives to profit.

To defend their lives, as well as their jobs, wages and conditions, workers need to take matters into their own hands. New organisations must be built—rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves, not highly paid union bureaucrats—to enforce workplace safety and fight for demands based on the needs of workers, not the profit interests of management and shareholders.



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