

Australia: Worker injured at BlueScope's Port Kembla steelworks as pattern of dangerous incidents continues

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A worker was injured at BlueScope Steel's Port Kembla steelworks on June 30 when a 200-kilogram metal drive gear fell and landed on his feet. He was transported to Wollongong Hospital by NSW Ambulance. The man, a rigger in his 50s, was working on the plant's hot strip mill during a maintenance shutdown.

This is the latest in a series of dangerous incidents involving falling objects at the steelworks, highlighting the ongoing risk to BlueScope workers after the tragic death of 24-year-old worker Jack McGrath last year. McGrath was working as a rigger on BlueScope's No. 6 Blast Furnace reline project when he was fatally struck by a steel beam that fell from a moving crane on November 17.

A company spokesman sought to downplay the severity of the latest incident, emphasising that the worker's injuries were "minor" and that he was wearing "correct PPE including steel-cap boots." The reality is that the worker could easily have become the second to be killed on the job in eight months at a workplace where reports of dangerous conditions are all too common.

On May 5, a three-metre-long steel pipe fell 15 metres, piercing a grid mesh floor on its way down and coming to rest bowed from the impact. BlueScope's incident report, according to the *Illawarra Mercury*, revealed that 70 metres of vertical pipes were being installed, held in place by u-bolts while awaiting welding.

"The u-bolt loosened at the time of the event was the only support holding the pipe in place," wrote BlueScope supervisor David Kilpatrick. "This released the full length of the vertical pipe above, resulting in it falling vertically 15m directly down to ground level."

On May 15, three steel brackets weighing 16 kilograms each fell during a lifting operation and smashed through the roof of a toilet block 5.5 metres below, continuing to

fall a further 2.5 metres to the ground.

Like McGrath's death, the May incidents took place in the vicinity of the \$1.15 billion reline project. After reading about them, McGrath's mother, Tamara Carlson, told the *Mercury*, "It made me quite upset to see that nothing has changed."

Speaking about her son's death, Carlson said, "Everything was totally preventable. Knowing your son shouldn't die going to work and it could have been prevented is just heartbreaking. I would never wish this on my worst enemy."

Following the June 30 incident, a spokesperson for SafeWork NSW claimed the agency has been taking "a proactive approach to monitoring safety at BlueScope's Port Kembla site." This outrageous statement underscores that workers cannot afford to place their lives in the hands of the so-called safety regulators.

A SafeWork NSW investigation into McGrath's death remains ongoing. The regulator has noted that "complex matters" can take up to two years to complete, while Carlson has reportedly been told that this could stretch to more than five years if there is a coronial inquest.

Such long, drawn-out investigations—standard practice for all the state workplace safety regulators—allow the anger among colleagues, family and more broadly to dissipate, clearing the way for a finding that whitewashes the company's culpability for killing a worker.

With opposition to unsafe working conditions diverted behind illusions in these protracted official investigations, companies are free to carry on operating and amassing profits as if nothing had happened, despite the ongoing risk to workers. The recent spate of incidents at BlueScope demonstrates just how dangerous this can be.

These cover-ups would not be possible without the assistance of the trade unions. In the immediate aftermath

of McGrath's death, both the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU)—of which he was a member—and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) declared they were working with the “relevant authorities” to investigate. The CFMEU later declared that, in addition to assisting SafeWork NSW, the union would “do our own investigation and drill down to ensure that this never happens again.”

The real purpose of these statements was to tell workers to get back on the job and leave their safety in the hands of the union officials and government authorities.

On May 20, following the two incidents that month and clearly responding to concerns that nothing had changed in the six months since the 24-year-old worker was killed, the CFMEU wrote on Facebook:

Since Jack McGrath's death, the union has been on site regularly pushing safety and compliance at Bluescope.

We've raised issues around white cards, hygiene and site conditions with subcontractors and management, and won weekly safety walks with workers involved, replacing the old monthly inspections by Bluescope with no worker input.

We've raised concerns with management about safety procedures.

10 new health and safety representatives have also been elected and are now undertaking training.

This was followed on June 26 by a video in which CFMEU regional coordinator Dave Kelly complained of “combative management from BlueScope” and that “a lot of workers aren't free to talk to us.” He concluded with the statement that “unless BlueScope starts taking safety seriously and listening to the rank and file, there will be more accidents occurring on the job.”

In other words, the CFMEU says management is “combative,” is preventing workers from discussing safety concerns, and behaving in a way that means further injuries or deaths are likely, and the response of the bureaucracy is to engage in backroom discussions with that same management and plead with them to “start taking safety seriously.”

Meanwhile, the union has ensured workers have been kept on the job ever since McGrath's death and continues to do so.

It is through the same methods that the CFMEU, AWU and the rest of the union apparatus, together with the Labor governments to which they are tied by a thousand threads, and the state safety regulators have presided over workplace deaths and serious injuries for decades.

On average, 191 workers are killed on the job each year in Australia, more than one every two days. In 2024, the most recent year for which figures are available, there were 146,700 serious workers' compensation claims.

Labor's attitude was exemplified by NSW Premier Chris Minns last year, when he said in response to the death of two workers in the Endeavor mine explosion, “We can't stop all accidents on work sites, and we can't promise that. No responsible government can do that.”

The fact is that workplace deaths and injuries are not truly accidents, but the sharpest expression of an economic system, capitalism, under which every interest of workers, including their health and lives, is subordinated to the profit demands of big business and the financial elite. The unions, safety regulators and Labor governments do not oppose this industrial slaughterhouse, because they represent the interests of that economic system and the ruling class that controls it.

To fight for safe working conditions, workers at BlueScope and in every industry need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, run by workers, not highly paid bureaucrats, must be built in every factory and job site to lead the fight against the scourge of workplace deaths and injuries.



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