Australia: A year after Jack McGrath's death at BlueScope, no one held responsible

Martin Scott
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Two days after 24-year-old rigger Jack McGrath was killed at BlueScope's Port Kembla steelworks, south of Sydney, work on the project that killed him resumed. The rest of the steelworks never stopped. A year later, no one has been held responsible for his death, no charges have been laid, and the workers who returned to the job have since faced a string of further dangerous incidents.

McGrath, employed by the contractor Ventia on BlueScope's No. 6 blast furnace reline, was struck by a steel beam that fell during a crane lift on November 17, 2025. He died at the scene. SafeWork New South Wales (NSW) says its investigation is continuing and could take up to two years. The state coroner has not yet decided whether there will even be an inquest.

"We need answers… as to what went wrong, and how they're going to fix this and stop it from happening to another family," his mother, Tamara Carlson, told the *Illawarra Mercury*.

The record of the past year at the steelworks shows Carlson's concerns are well founded. On May 5, a three-metre steel pipe fell 15 metres, penetrating a grid mesh floor. Ten days later, three steel brackets, each weighing 16 kilograms, smashed through the roof of a toilet block. On June 30, a rigger in his 50s was hospitalised after a 200-kilogram drive gear fell on his feet during maintenance at the hot strip mill.

By July, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation had reported six dangerous incidents involving falling materials and tools since McGrath's death. SafeWork also alleged that BlueScope had failed to notify it of a May 4 incident in which a steel plate fell four metres and partially penetrated a roof.

On October 29, a 23-year-old scaffolder working on the furnace reline fell 4.3 metres into a pipe and was hospitalised with a hip injury, according to the *Mercury*.

The ongoing record of serious incidents is an indictment of the role played by the unions, which have ensured workers stayed on the job since McGrath's death.

On the day he was killed, the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), of which he was a member, and the Australian Workers Union both promoted illusions in the official SafeWork investigation.

Now, a year later, the CFMEU bureaucracy has written a letter calling on the Coroner's Court to hold an inquest into McGrath's death. Union official Stewart Edwards said its investigation had identified 15 separate safety breaches, raising questions about lifting methods, supervision and the planning and control of dangerous work. The union has not publicly set out what those breaches were, and its letter to the coroner states that the CFMEU "does not suggest that any person has committed an offence."

Workers should ask: If the union knew of 15 breaches, when did it know, and why were the workers on the site, still doing the same work, not told? Why was its response to channel their concerns into the same official process that has delivered nothing in a year?

The request for an inquest is a further appeal to that process. A coroner can make findings and recommendations but cannot impose penalties. McGrath's family has been told the coronial process alone could take five years.

The union's cynical manoeuvre is aimed at ensuring that the anger of BlueScope workers and McGrath's family over his death and the ongoing safety issues at the steelworks is contained within official channels and does not take a form that would threaten the company's profits.

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At BlueScope's annual general meeting on November 16, one day before the anniversary of McGrath's death, chief executive Tania Archibald declared safety the company's "number one priority." She outlined a "Global Safety Uplift Program," which she said would be a "sustained, multi-year effort."

Workers and their families can place no stock in such pronouncements. In July 2024, BlueScope began a global "Refocus on Safety" program. But the company's latest annual report shows a dramatic increase in "serious"—that is, fatal, potentially fatal, or permanently incapacitating—injuries, from 10 in 2022–2023, to 19 in 2025–26. Of the 62 serious injuries recorded in that period, 47 were considered potentially fatal, in addition to McGrath's death. Over the same period, the total recordable injury frequency rate (TRIFR) rose from 7.7 per million hours worked to 8.5.

The reality is that, for BlueScope and its financial backers, these grim statistics pale into insignificance beside the figures of real interest: The company reported a net profit of $802 million, based on underlying profits doubling year-over-year to $851 million, and announced it would lift returns to shareholders.

McGrath's death is part of a far broader pattern. According to Safe Work Australia figures released in October, 222 workers were killed by traumatic injuries at work in 2025, the highest annual toll since 2012 and well above the five-year average of 197. Falls from height killed 28 workers and falling objects another 21.

Uncovering the truth about McGrath's death, and the prevention of further fatalities, cannot be left to SafeWork, the Labor governments or the union apparatus, who preside over the ongoing scourge of industrial murder. Official investigations into workplace deaths are invariably protracted whitewashes, resulting in, at most, a slap on the wrist and a token fine.

The purpose is not just to cover for individual companies, but to conceal a more fundamental fact: These deaths are not accidents. They result from an economic system in which production is organised for private profit, and in which the speed of work, staffing levels and spending on safety are all subordinated to that goal.

Workers at Port Kembla must take the fight for safety into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the company and the unions and democratically controlled by workers themselves, with the power to halt any job they consider unsafe, without loss of pay or victimisation.

These committees should demand the immediate public release of every report and document relating to McGrath's death and the incidents since, and protection for workers who expose dangerous conditions. Together with McGrath's family, they should conduct their own investigation into what happened.

Such committees must unite directly employed and contract workers, and establish links with steelworkers and other workers internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The fight for workers' lives, as well as their wages and conditions, requires a common struggle against the insatiable demands of big business for cost-cutting and increased productivity.

This means a fight against capitalism itself, and for a new political perspective, socialism. Steel and other key industries must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, so that human life and social need, not corporate profits, determine how production is organised.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Level 1/457-459 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, NSW, 2010, Australia.

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