

Australia's construction industry claims another life

By Terry Cook
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A 23-year-old Aboriginal worker died last Thursday when he plunged 30 metres from a scaffold on the \$6 billion Lend Lease Barangaroo project in central Sydney. While the causes of his death remain unclear, the circumstances again raise questions about poor working conditions and safety standards on construction sites.

The New South Wales state police ended its investigation last Friday, declaring the incident was not being treated as “suspicious” or “work related.” NSW WorkCover, the state’s industrial safety watchdog, is continuing its inquiries. Unconfirmed media reports indicated that the young man might have suffered a heart attack before falling or that his death was a suicide.

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) state secretary Brian Parker claimed that the man, who was employed as a trainee scaffolder on the site for just two weeks as part of a Koori Job Ready Program, was not adequately supervised at the time and should not have been in the area where he fell.

Under the program, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are given a basic eight-week course in construction before being employed by contractors working for developers such as Lend Lease. Parker said the only mentoring for the trainees occurs before they start on site.

Whatever the exact cause of death, an inexperienced trainee should not have been left unsupervised on the intensely busy site. Parker and the CFMEU only raise the issue now to deflect attention from their own responsibility for allowing such conditions to prevail on building sites.

Union-brokered enterprise bargaining agreements have been the primary mechanism for undermining or eliminating work and safety conditions. Over a

protracted period of time, hard fought-for gains such as bans on work during wet weather, restrictions on working overtime and limitations on the use of casual and part-time labour have been systematically eroded.

A Lend Lease spokesman dismissed Parker’s remarks as using a tragedy “to point score,” declaring that the company “works tirelessly to eliminate incidents and injuries on its worksites.” The company is well aware that the union is simply posturing and has no intention of taking action to improve safety on construction sites.

Lend Lease made similar statements in November 2012 when a fire in a 65-metre tower crane on its Sydney University of Technology (UTS) site caused the boom to collapse, narrowly missing a busy intersection. Having ignored warnings by construction workers that the crane was leaking fuel and presented a fire hazard, the company blandly declared that it “regularly audited to ensure on-site safety.”

Cost cutting has led to the increased use of contractors and sub-contractors in the construction industry, sanctioned by the unions, and the hiring of inexperienced workers, with little time or money spent on their induction and supervision. Last week’s death was not the first.

Last April, Matthew Lopez-Linares, a 22-year-old Canadian backpacker employed by labour hire company One Stop Work Force, was killed when hit on the head by a falling steel beam on a demolition site in the inner Sydney suburb of Camperdown. He worked on the job for just two weeks. CFMEU official Parker described the incident as “an accident waiting to happen” but the union took no action to close the site.

Symptomatic of the poor conditions on the Barangaroo project was the fact that employer contributions to workers’ compensation insurance had

not been paid for the young Aboriginal man killed on the site. He was employed by a Lend Lease subcontractor.

Lend Lease issued a statement declaring that it provided cover for its direct employees but “was not able to effect workers’ compensation insurance for employees of its subcontractors.” Subcontracting is a convenient system to not only cut costs by squeezing smaller companies, but also evade responsibilities such as workers’ compensation.

Workers on the site initiated a collection to assist the dead man’s family and called for the company to match it dollar for dollar.

Construction is one of Australia’s most dangerous industries, with companies under intense pressure to cut corners to meet ever-more stringent deadlines. According to Safe Work Australia, an official agency, injuries at work resulted in the deaths of 223 workers in 2012, 30 of whom were on construction sites.

If the death on the Barangaroo project was a suicide, it highlights what has become a disturbing trend in the construction industry. According to one report, “mental health is now an accepted as a construction industry safety concern.” A community organisation, Mates in Construction, operates suicide-prevention programs on a number of building sites, including the Barangaroo project.

Anxieties among construction workers about the risk of injury or death are exacerbated by the constant threat of unemployment in what is a highly itinerant industry. According to the Building Employees Redundancy Trust, the average redundancy pay-out for workers in the sector is less than one year’s contributions.

The fear of becoming unemployed is further heightened by the slowdown in construction as a result of falling investment in new projects. In December last year, the seasonally adjusted Australian Performance of Construction Index fell abruptly from 55.2 in the previous month to 50.8. The fall was driven by a drop in engineering construction activity associated with mining, which has been affected by falling commodity prices and demand in Asia.

The impact on the mental health of construction workers is graphically illustrated by grim statistics from the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention (AISRAP) showing that suicide rates for males employed in construction are now close to twice

the national average for men. For young construction workers, the rate of suicide is 2.38 times higher than the general rate among young men of similar age.

In the case of the young man who died on Barangaroo project such pressures are magnified by the appalling social conditions facing indigenous people, compounded by the gutting of social programs by Labor and Liberal governments at every level.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 996 suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders reported across Australia between 2001 and 2010. One in every 24 indigenous deaths was by suicide.

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