

Dreamworld tragedy underscores unions' role in undermining safety

By Terry Cook
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Revelations concerning serious safety issues at Ardent Leisure's Dreamworld theme park on Queensland's Gold Coast continue to emerge in the wake of the tragedy last week that claimed four lives.

On October 25, Roozbeh Araghi, 38, Luke Dorsett, 35, Kate Goodchild, 32, and Cindy Low, 42, were killed when the park's Thunder River Rapids ride malfunctioned, tipping over the raft in which they were riding. Two children in the same raft narrowly escaped death.

This week, new information surfaced concerning management decisions to cut manning levels on rides and the inadequate training and supervision of operators. At least one ride at the park, the 13-storey Cyclone roller coaster, was run as a one-person operation, contrary to the manufacturers' manual stipulating at least two workers were required.

A former ride operator at the park also told the media that ride attendants were often given only half-an-hour of training before the park opened. He said the trainer would stay with them for a further 15 to 20 minutes and then leave them unsupervised. The tragedy was "avoidable" and "should not have happened," he commented.

This week's revelations followed others that emerged last week about the company's suppression of safety reports and the intimidation of workers who spoke out on safety issues, pointing to a culture of cost-cutting and cover-up that may have contributed to the disaster.

At the same time, the role of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) in assisting the management's suppression of safety concerns is becoming increasingly evident. Numbers of workers at the park, including ride attendants, are AWU members.

Last week, AWU Queensland secretary Ben Swan insisted the union "did hold some very grave concerns

about safety of equipment and the operation of equipment" and had complained to the management about the unsafe practices for a year and a half. However, it is now clear that the union issued no public statements about the dangers, and, after meetings with the company, allowed them to continue.

The union was fully aware that the one-man operations on the Cyclone ride contradicted the recommendations of the ride's Utah-based manufacturer. Dreamworld met with AWU officials in April last year and told them "a one-person operation would not increase the risk profile of either the operator or the guests." Ardent Leisure's group safety manager Angus Hutchings claimed the company had conducted a "long and exhaustive risk assessment process."

The AWU dropped the issue, despite knowing that similar practices were likely to be occurring on other rides. State secretary Swan this week said he was unaware if Dreamworld was diverging from the manufacturer's manning guidelines on the Thunder River Rapids ride. "But if they're prepared to deviate from the manufacturer's recommendations in one instance, does that mean they deviate in other rides?" he said.

In April last year, the company opposed the union's right-to-information requests for documents regarding safety and manning issues. Management visited the AWU's offices to discuss the concerns but the union said no further action was taken. "We've met resistance which has not been constructive or positive," Swan said.

Clearly, however, the AWU decided to let the issue lie. Asked by a journalist why he believed the park's management had blocked the union's document request, Swan said he could not "speculate the motivation." Essentially, Swan justified the company's

secrecy, saying: “To be fair, I don’t think it’s unusual for companies not to want to keep information relating to their internal processes from public gaze.”

It is not surprising that Ardent Leisure wants to avoid any detailed scrutiny of its operations. This week more questions emerged over the company’s claims about manning levels on the Cyclone, now rebadged as the Hot Wheels SideWinder.

In a media statement, a spokesman from Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ) disputed claims made on Monday by Dreamworld chief executive Craig Davidson who said that the ride had been “inspected and approved by WHSQ.”

The WHSQ spokesman said that the government agency did not approve staffing levels for theme park rides and ordered Dreamworld “to produce all documentation relating to the Hot Wheels SideWinder.”

The response of the AWU to the Dreamworld disaster, by referring to its supposed record of expressing safety concerns, is standard operating procedure for the trade unions. It is damage control aimed at diverting from any probing of the unions’ responsibility for helping impose the conditions for such tragedies.

As recent cases show, construction workers die in unsafe conditions, and young inexperienced workers are killed on building sites after receiving no induction and being left to work unsupervised. Tower cranes catch fire or collapse due to lack of maintenance, mine workers die in rock falls and gas explosions because of safety shortcuts and speed ups, and transport drivers, suffering high levels of fatigue, are killed in horrendous crashes.

The unions—fully aware of safety breaches—make mealy-mouthed statements about the right of workers to return home safe and issue empty calls for more vigilant safety reviews. Then it’s back to business as usual, collaborating with the employers to maximise shareholder returns and profits.

That was the reaction of the unions last month when five workers—two from the transport industry and three in construction—were killed in Australia in industrial accidents in a week.

The unsafe industrial conditions are the direct result of the decades-long drive by corporations and their financiers to restructure operations at the expense of

workers. Under the banner of making Australian-based companies “internationally competitive,” the unions have worked in lockstep with governments and employers to undermine and dismantle working conditions and safety standards.

Union-negotiated enterprise agreements over the past two decades have eroded hard-won gains such as safe manning levels, bans on working during wet weather on construction sites, restrictions on excessive overtime and extensive shifts, along with the removal of limitations on the use of casual and part-time labour, often poorly trained.

The unions, which control huge financial resources, including via positions on the boards of superannuation funds, have a vested interest in maintaining the corporate profit system, from which their officials derive substantial benefits and privileged lifestyles.

To this end the unions systematically operate to isolate and break up any opposition by workers to employers’ cost-cutting attacks on health and safety. This assault has also been facilitated by Labor and Liberal-National governments, state and federal, which have introduced so-called self-regulation of safety standards, with the agreement of the unions. In Dreamworld’s case, maintenance inspection was conducted by a private sector engineering firm.

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