

Nashville, Tennessee construction workers experience deadliest two-year period in decades

By Warren Duzak
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Nashville, Tennessee's upper middle-class boosters like to refer to the city as the "It" city with an ever-growing selection of restaurants and expensive homes and apartments. However, behind the glittering facades and growing neighborhoods, the feverish building boom rests heavily on the backs of the construction workers who have paid with their health and lives for the prosperity and comfort of the well-to-do.

Sixteen construction workers were killed on projects in Nashville between 2016 and 2017, marking the "deadliest two year stretch in more than three decades," according to a recent report in the *Tennessean* based on state and federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) figures. Two more construction workers have already died in 2018.

There were more construction deaths in Nashville in 2016 than cities with a similar sized workforce and growth rate, according figures compiled by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Among those municipalities Nashville surpassed in construction workers' deaths were Austin, Texas; Orlando, Florida and Memphis.

Although the Nashville skyline has recently been the backdrop for more than a dozen giant 200-foot construction cranes used for high rise condominiums, exclusive apartments and office buildings, it has been the ongoing residential housing boom that has claimed the most lives.

"Most died at single-family residential construction sites or at apartment buildings. The number of fatalities exceeded the pace of deaths during the previous boom in 2004 and 2005, when adjusted for the number of residential building permits issued," the *Tennessean*

reported.

Alfonso Dominguez, 60, was one of those workers. He made only \$10 an hour transferring shingles on the roof to where they were needed. The temperatures in June of last year were in the 80s Fahrenheit, according to the *Tennessean*, so the 60-year-old would have been exposed to the heat working on a steeply pitched, hot roof while carrying bundles of shingles that weighed between 60 and 80 pounds.

Dominguez apparently lost his balance and fell 24 feet into a backyard, suffering internal bleeding and head injuries. After 11 days in a coma he died. He was not wearing a safety harness which federal law requires employers to provide. Neither his employer nor the builder, who did not have a building permit, reported the death as required by law.

"I would tell him, 'Don't be working there. It's not safe,'" his brother Hermenegildo Dominguez, who also works in construction told the *Tennessean*. "But it's very difficult. We all need work. They would tell him they needed to finish a house soon, but they're working without any safety equipment."

Two months later, a 63-year-old worker was checking a metal staircase when a retaining bolt pulled loose and he fell 17 feet to a concrete floor. He died the next day from internal bleeding, a herniated brain and other injuries.

His employer attempted to place the blame on the worker. "He was supposed to be checking each one (each bolt) he did, making sure they were safe and secured," a company representative told the *Tennessean*. "He did not, I guess. He just got into a little bit of a hurry." He did not explain why there was no safety harness and the newspaper's reporter did not

ask.

Ten out of the sixteen construction workers died from falls because of lack of safety equipment employers are required to provide any time a worker is six feet or more off the ground. Federal law requires some sort of fall protection such as a harness and lanyard, a safety net, guard rails or a combination of safety measures and devices.

Even the “experts” never look at the drive for profit and the exploitation of labor as a cause for injuries and death when, instead, they can find fault with the workers.

“When there’s a big boom going on like there is in Nashville the companies start digging down into the labor pool and there’s a greater need to train people,” Fran Ansley, a retired professor at the University of Tennessee College of Law who researched construction deaths in Tennessee, told the newspaper, “You start hiring people who are less qualified than those who were there before.”

The federal and state agencies supposedly tasked with protecting workers have been doing less and less each year as cities and states attempt to bolster their business-friendly credentials. The Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration (TOSHA) conducted 760 unannounced, random construction site inspections in 2008 but by 2016 inspections dropped to only 172 statewide.

What has happened in Tennessee mirrors the increase in construction deaths in New York and the nation reported by the WSWS in February.

Construction deaths in the state of New York reached a 14-year high in 2016, with 71 workers killed on the job. This amounts to a nearly 30 percent increase from 2015, when a total of 55 construction workers were killed on the job in the state. There were 5,190 fatal workplace injuries recorded in the United States in 2016, an increase of seven percent from the 4,836 workers killed on the job in 2015.

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