

Deadly week for construction workers in New York City

By Mark Witkowski
18 April 2019

Three construction workers died in separate on-the-job accidents at building sites in New York City last week. Headlines in the local media referred to a “rash” of accidents. Whatever term one uses, the fact is construction deaths in New York’s ultra-lucrative real estate industry have been trending upward over the past two decades, along with the enormous fortunes of developers and speculators.

In the early morning hours of Saturday, April 13, 34-year-old Gregory Echevarria was killed as a massive 7.5-ton counterweight on a crane fell and crushed him. The young worker was declared dead at the scene by emergency workers. Echevarria, who survived multiple tours of duty as a US soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaves behind four children, including a three-month-old son.

Two other workers suffered non-life-threatening injuries in the accident, which occurred in the Soho section of lower Manhattan. According to the *New York Post*, the crane company that employed Echevarria, Cranes Express, had a history of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) violations and one other fatality involving one of its cranes.

Three days before, on Wednesday, April 10, Erik Mendoza, 23, fell from the roof of a 13-story building at 1 Pierrepont St in Brooklyn, where he was replacing bricks under the building’s water tower. Mendoza was pronounced dead at the scene. The young worker had been on the job for less than a week, local media reported.

On Monday, April 8, 51-year-old Nelson Salinas was killed while working on a construction project repairing a building façade on the eastside of midtown Manhattan. A stone slab struck him in the head while he was working on scaffolding seven stories about the street. Passersby were horrified to see the severely

injured worker dangling from the scaffolding, repeatedly shouting in Spanish, “I’m going to fall.”

Firefighters climbed ladders to reach Salinas, who was unconscious by the time he was pulled inside the building. He reportedly died in the emergency room. According to one published report, police said they believed the scaffolding at the construction site had failed. The *New York Times* reported that it was not clear whether Salinas was wearing a hard hat or a harness.

The lives of these three workers were cut off prematurely. But the deaths and injuries of construction workers are just part of doing business for the giant real estate developers, construction companies and financial speculators who are cashing in from the building boom in New York City. This is the same gluttonous layer that produced Donald Trump.

Construction is New York City’s deadliest industry, according to statistics published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There were 69 construction deaths in New York State in 2017, the latest figure available from the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH). Fatalities in the state have increased 39 percent in the past five years, and hit a 14-year high in 2016.

Falls are the largest single cause of construction-related deaths. In New York City and State falls account for nearly 50 percent of construction fatalities. Nationally, a record 887 American workers were killed in fatal falls in 2017, according to a new report from the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries. This represents a 4.48 percent increase from the 849 fatal falls reported in 2016.

One of the key findings of the NYCOSH report is that in 2017, 17 percent of New York worker fatalities were Hispanic or Latino, while these workers only

make up an estimated 10 percent of the workforce. This underscores the fact that undocumented immigrants are often fearful of reporting dangerous working conditions or otherwise speaking out against dangerous working conditions which put profit over human life.

The NYCOSH report notes that unionized have a lower fatality rate than non-union workers, and attributes this to training, without further analysis. But conditions in the unionized construction trades have steadily declined over the past several decades, as the unions have collaborated with employers to extract greater productivity, and thus profits, from workers.

The supposed strategy of the unions in response to the increase in workers' deaths has been to appeal to the Democrats to pass measures, such as "Carlos law" which calls for higher fines for employers in instances of worker deaths. To date, the unions have been unsuccessful in getting the bill passed in a state dominated by the Democratic Party machine. Workers should have no illusions that unions or Democrats will defend their interests. On the contrary; local Democrats have deep ties to the real estate industry.

Later this month the trade unions will promote the annual "Hard Hat Mass" at St Patrick's Cathedral to honor workers killed on construction sites. A tradition began a number of years ago when construction deaths started rising rapidly. While the sincerity of those who will attend out of respect for their fallen brethren is genuine, and a remembrance of the fallen certainly appropriate, but the event serves as a grim reminder of the fact that the unions have abandoned any real struggle against the corporate and financial interests who benefit from this carnage.

As the number of construction-related deaths have risen over the last two decades so has the immense profits generated by the real estate industry. The New York Building Congress has predicted that construction activity in the city hit a record-setting \$61.8 billion in 2018, a 25 percent increase from 2017. The organization projected that spending for the three-year period would reach \$177 billion, with 2019 and 2020 spending levels at \$59.3 billion and \$56.4 billion, respectively.

At 570 Broome street, the building where Gregory Echevarria was killed, the lowest-priced unit listed in the development is a 723-square-foot one-bedroom apartment with an asking price of \$1.4 million. The

average price of a unit is \$2.7 million.

Construction workers have absolutely no hope of living in the buildings they labor to construct under such conditions.

Such prices in New York are typical for new construction. As the decade-long speculative building boom in the city continues, so does the growth of the homeless population. More apartments should alleviate homelessness, but under capitalism, as more high-priced apartments are built, more people are left living on the streets.

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