

Australia: Steel worker dies on the job in Perth

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On the morning of Wednesday, September 13, a man in his 30s was crushed to death by steel beams at a factory in Jandakot, a southern suburb of Perth, Western Australia (WA). The tragedy occurred at a steel fabrication and refurbishment workshop owned by multinational mining and engineering conglomerate Schenck Process.

Several crews of ambulance and police were called to the scene, but the man could not be saved. Police have said the details of what happened and why remain unclear. Investigators stated that they will examine the circumstances of the incident, and whether the business complied with workplace safety regulations.

Steven McCartney, state secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), told the *West Australian*, “My understanding is it was an equipment failure... there were some beams that fell and crushed him.”

McCartney said the company and union would work together “to get to the bottom of how this incident happened.”

This was the 15th workplace death in Western Australia since July 2022. The most recent fatality also involved a worker being crushed by a steel beam in a sandblasting facility. In June, 16-year-old Hamiora Sharland died from injuries sustained in an incident at TLC Surface Treatment, where he was a trainee.

Sharland’s death was the fourth in a two-week horror run of workplace fatalities in the state:

- Kieren McDowall, a 20-year-old father of two, died on June 14 at an iron ore mine in the Pilbara region in WA’s north. He was working for AAA Asphalt Services as a contractor.

- Michael Jurman, a rope access technician working as a contractor on Woodside Energy’s North Rankin offshore gas complex, about 135km northwest of

Karratha, was killed in a “working over the side” activity on June 2.

- A 62-year-old crane operator died in the south Perth suburb of Applecross on June 2, after falling while climbing the crane’s ladder. Although he received CPR at the site, he could not be revived, despite the assistance of an ICU doctor who happened to be nearby.

In February, a BHP worker was struck and killed by a locomotive at the company’s Boodarie railyard, near Port Hedland.

In October 2022, a contractor died working at the Hamlet underground gold mine in the state’s south. This gold mine is part of the St Ives gold operation owned by a South African company called Gold Fields.

The same month, another worker was killed at the Capricorn Metal’s Karlawinda gold mine in the northern part of the state, in a horrific accident that saw the man run over by a large dump truck.

As of September 14, a total of 110 workers across the country have been killed on the job this year alone, according to Safe Work Australia, a national policy body of the federal government.

This includes 57 workers in the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing industry, 53 in Transport, Postal and Warehousing, and 16 in Construction. By occupation, road and rail drivers are most at risk, followed by farmers and farm management. The highest fatality by mechanism of incident is vehicle incidents, followed by being hit by a moving object.

A report into work-related deaths between 2011 and 2021 by the Western Australian government also found that the most common cause of death at work was being struck by moving objects, which accounted for more than 50 percent of workplace deaths.

Following the Jandakot death, WA WorkSafe

Commissioner Darren Kavanagh stated that any work-related death was a tragedy, expressing his condolences to the worker's family and fellow workers.

In June, asked on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio to explain the state's high workplace fatality rate, Kavanagh blamed "labour shortages," "climate related risks," and "a lot more complexity in terms of our supply chains." These vague and meaningless statements amount to nothing more than an attempt to conceal the agency's failure to ensure safe conditions for workers.

WorkSafe, like its safety regulator counterparts across the country, is a pro-business agency that serves to cover up the underlying cause of unsafe working conditions—the subordination of the health and lives of workers to capitalist profit.

Investigations into workplace fatalities or serious injuries conducted by these agencies are invariably drawn out over many months or years and amount to nothing more than a slap on the wrist or minor fines that corporations consider a "cost of doing business."

State secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (CFMEU) Mick Buchan declared that not enough is being done at the highest levels of management to ensure workplaces are safe from hazards, risks and fatalities.

Buchan declared, "We've seen increases in fines and penalties with WorkSafe, and we've seen criminal convictions earlier this year. These are deterrents, but what is it going to take for businesses to realise that there isn't a limit on what they can spend to improve the conditions for their workers on site?"

Workers could well ask, what are the CFMEU and other unions doing to compel businesses to improve workplace safety? In the year to March 2023, just three strikes resulting in the equivalent of ten or more working days' lost were carried out over health and safety issues across the country.

The reality is that the unions have presided for decades over unsafe working conditions and the death and serious injury of workers. The union apparatus has blocked any organised opposition by workers to the ongoing dangerous conditions they confront, just as it has shut down any fight for real wage growth.

The alarming number of deaths so far this year again shows that workers cannot place their trust and their lives in the hands of these organisations. Workers must

establish their own rank-and-file committees in every workplace that are independent of the unions.

Under the democratic control of workers themselves, these committees can take up a fight against cost-cutting, workload increases, exhausting hours and speed-ups, forced upon workers by businesses and the union apparatus—in the name of "increased productivity," and for safe working conditions for all.



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