

36-year-old worker killed on multi-billion dollar Australian wind farm project

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A 36-year-old worker was tragically killed last month, crushed by a massive wind turbine blade that came loose from scaffolding during assembly at Golden Plains Wind Farm in Victoria. Jess Patience's death came after numerous safety complaints were reportedly made to management and the government safety regulator.

The incident occurred just before 8 a.m. on Monday, November 11 in Rokewood, a small rural town 133 kilometres west of Melbourne. It was the 38th workplace death in Victoria this year.

Described as a "beloved friend," Patience's loss has deeply impacted his community and colleagues. A GoFundMe page was created to assist the family with funeral costs with a target of \$15,000. Over \$140,000 has been raised.

Patience was working on the project as a subcontractor for Professional Wind Services (PWS). On the day of his death, fellow PWS workers walked off the job in solidarity at Macintyre Wind Farm—a 162-turbine project located in southwest Queensland.

The Golden Plains project is valued at over \$3 billion and is being constructed by the multinational turbine manufacturer and installer Vestas Wind Systems.

It is touted to be Australia's largest wind farm, with more than 215 turbines, to be spread across over 167 square kilometres, with a production capacity of 1,330 megawatts. According to the project website, the wind farm will produce enough electricity to power more than 765,000 homes, or around 9 percent of Victoria's energy needs.

The project has reportedly faced multiple safety issues and significant delays since construction began in 2023.

One such incident occurred in October, when a turbine blade hit the boom of a crane. No one was

injured, but, according to Vestas, the subcontractor responsible has been removed from crane lifting until an investigation is carried out and "corrective actions are implemented."

Further indicating issues with project safety, local residents reported in September finding debris that had fallen from the wind turbines. Serrated edges from the turbine blades became detached during an intense storm and ended up on nearby properties. No one was harmed.

Tragedy struck another Australian Vestas project on November 26, when a 31-year-old worker died after his work vehicle veered off the road around 6 a.m. and struck a tree. The incident occurred near the Wambo Wind Farm in the rural town of Jinghi, Queensland.

As well, several serious incidents involving Vestas-built wind turbines have occurred internationally in the space of several weeks, despite wind turbine failures purportedly being very rare. Those include:

- Canada: On November 8, the nacelle and rotor of a Vestas V150-4.5MW turbine fell to the ground while being installed at the Halkirk 2 wind farm in Alberta.

- United States: A Vestas V120-2.2MW turbine collapsed at a wind farm in the state of Missouri in late October, the third in a six-month period at the site.

- Scotland: In late October, a turbine blade on a Vestas V117-4.2MW model sustained damage at a newly commissioned onshore wind farm.

The wind turbine industry has experienced rises in maintenance and insurance costs in recent years due to an increase in the frequency of turbine failure.

Nevertheless, Vestas Wind Services reported an 18.9 percent revenue increase in the third quarter of 2024 compared to Q3 2023, reaching €5.18 billion (\$A8.55 billion). Net profit also rose significantly, from €28 million (\$A46million) during Q3 2023 to €127 million

(\$A208 million) in Q3 2024.

Danny Nielsen, head of the Australia and New Zealand section of Vestas, defended Vestas' safety practices, stating that the company was meeting weekly with union representatives.

Ronnie Hayden, secretary of the Victorian branch of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), stated that the tragic death of Jess Patience "could have been prevented."

Hayden told reporters that representatives from three separate unions had met with Vestas management to "voice a range of safety concerns." Patience's death occurred against the backdrop of ongoing safety issues that had persisted "since day one" of the project, Hayden said.

Zach Smith, national secretary of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), echoed the comments of the AWU. Smith accused Vestas of obstructing union officials from accessing the site and noted that the CFMEU had filed multiple safety reports with WorkSafe Victoria, the state safety regulator, before Patience's death. The CFMEU also claimed its representatives met with Vestas management multiple times, raising safety issues.

Hayden said union leaders had told Vestas management two weeks before Patience's death it was "only dumb luck" that no fatalities had occurred on the site.

It must be asked, if workers at the wind farm had "only dumb luck" to protect them, why were the union leaders allowing work to proceed at all? Even under Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, workers are legally allowed to down tools if there is an immediate risk to health and safety. But the unions have ensured workers stayed on the job at Golden Plains, despite the dangerous conditions.

The comments by Hayden and Smith echo those made by union officials in the aftermath of one workplace death after another. Time and time again, what is revealed is that longstanding dangers are known about by the unions, which placate workers with illusions in investigations by government safety regulators and send them back to work, ensuring there is no disruption to company profits.

The legal framework under which WorkSafe and its counterparts in other states operate is a sham which does not protect the lives of workers. WorkSafe told the

Australian Broadcasting Corporation "it had conducted 117 site visits to the [Golden Plains] project since March last year and issued 22 compliance notices to a number of duty holders."

WorkSafe has launched an investigation into Patience's death, with police likely to conduct a separate inquiry. Such investigations often drag on for years and invariably amount to nothing more than a whitewash, resulting in a slap on the wrist or minor fines that corporations consider a "cost of doing business."

These safety regulators are pro-business agencies, as was recently underscored in revelations that SafeWork New South Wales had colluded with major construction companies to cover up the exposure of workers to dangerous silica dust. Aided and abetted by the unions, they serve to hide the real root cause of unsafe working conditions and workplace fatalities—the capitalist profit system and the subordination of workers' health and lives to the profit demands of big business.

To fight for safe working conditions in the wind industry and more broadly, workers must form rank-and-file committees at every work site, organisationally and politically independent of the AWU, CFMEU, or any other union. Under the democratic control of workers, not highly paid union bureaucrats, these committees could assess site conditions, formulate demands and enforce safety measures, including through strike action.

Above all, what is posed is the need to fight for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the critical renewable energy sector, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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