

Australian construction worker killed in unexplained circumstances

Mark Wilson
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On January 22, yet another construction worker died on site in the Queensland state capital of Brisbane in an incident that has been the subject of a corporate media blackout and silence by the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU).

Little information is known so far as to what precisely occurred. Even the name of the worker has not been publicly released.

What has been reported is that a man in his 30s working at a Douglas Construction site in the western Brisbane suburb of Wacol died in, as of yet, unexplained circumstances. A Queensland Police spokesperson described the death as “sudden” but “non-suspicious.” Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, a state government agency, said there was a “current investigation” and inspectors who attended the scene were “making inquiries.”

The day after the tragedy, a video on the CFMEU Facebook page indicated that the building site continued to operate the same day the worker died. In the video, an unidentified worker can be heard protesting the decision to keep them on the job after one of their co-workers died.

“You’ve had a body carried out of our job site in a body bag,” the worker objected. “A family member who will not make it home. Family who have lost a loved one. And you guys have allowed workers to continue work rather than shut the whole site down and show a little respect to the family and the worker and the affected workers on this jobsite.”

The worker also pointed out that “people’s minds might not be in the right place ... their mind is not on the job, and they [could] hurt themselves.”

There has been a near-total blackout on the death of the construction worker with the exception of a single brief article from the *Courier Mail*, the Murdoch

media’s Brisbane tabloid, and the previously mentioned Facebook post.

A Twitter/X post from the CFMEU seemed to imply that heat stress was a possible cause of the death. “The site had no first aid facilities, no wet bulb thermometer, no fans to cool the work area and no defibrillator,” it stated.

The death reportedly occurred early in the morning, with paramedics arriving on the site at around 6am, before peak temperatures were observed. No official information has been confirmed at the time of this writing, but high temperatures have occurred in Brisbane this summer, both day and night.

As one construction worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Working in these extreme heats is dangerous. It hasn’t been taken seriously by any government. It’s unfathomable that there are companies who think it’s acceptable to keep workers working in these conditions, with no respect to human life. They don’t care as long as they are making profits.”

Issues of heat stress, as well as more general safety conditions on worksites, are on the minds of construction workers in Queensland and more broadly. Last November, thousands of construction workers in Brisbane marched and protested against the state Liberal-National government after it announced it would suspend the Best Practice Industry Conditions (BPIC) for major construction projects.

Among the minimum safety requirements outlined in the BPIC was a heat policy which affirmed that workers could not be forced to work in an area where the temperature was above 35° Celsius. The abolition of such a basic safety requirement will inevitably expose construction workers to unsafe and potentially deadly conditions.

The death at Wacol is far from an isolated incident. The construction industry in Australia is the third most fatal sector of the workforce. It has an annual fatality rate of 3.4 deaths per 100,000 workers, only behind “agriculture, forestry and fishing” (9.2 deaths per 100,000 workers) and “transport, postal and warehouse” (7.0 deaths per 100,000 workers).

Data from Safe Work Australia showed that in 2023, 45 construction workers died on the job, accounting for 23 percent of all nationally reported workplace fatalities. The construction industry also accounted for 12 percent of all serious injury claims, only behind “health care and social assistance” at 19.1 percent.

The November protest was in part sparked by the death of 48-year-old building worker Brendon Stevens, who died on a Brisbane construction site from being struck on the head by a falling piece of metal pipe. Stevens was killed while working during heavy rainfall, a risk that could and should have been prevented.

Ten months earlier, in January 2024, numbers of construction workers walked off a state government Cross River Rail job site in Brisbane after a worker died from heat stress. The workers from the site, having had to work in heatwave temperatures, put down their tools in protest at the unsafe conditions and the preventable nature of their co-worker’s death.

These workplace deaths, including the most recent incident at Wacol, cannot be separated from the relentless attacks of the employers and governments on the conditions of construction workers. This was taken to a new level last August, when the federal Labor government anti-democratically placed the CFMEU construction division nationally under the control of a government-installed administrator.

Though carried out under the pretext of combatting unsubstantiated “corruption” allegations against union officials, the real target of this dictatorial takeover is the rank-and-file building workers, an historically militant section of the working class.

The absence of a serious political fight by the CFMEU and other building unions against Labor’s attack points to the necessity of construction workers organising themselves independently to fight for safety, decent wages and working conditions. Far from defending the rights and welfare of the workers, the union apparatuses are tied to the Labor party and have for decades suppressed any movement from below that

would genuinely challenge corporate profits.

For this reason, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is calling for the development of rank-and-file committees, led by workers themselves. Under the democratic control of workers, not highly paid trade union officials, these committees could assess site conditions, formulate demands and enforce safety measures, including through strike action.

These committees must be independent from all political forces that seek to tie workers to the capitalist profit system, including the union bureaucrats and the parties of big business—Labor, the Greens and the Liberal-National Coalition.

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

The SEP is committed to providing every political assistance to workers to form rank-and-file committees. Contact us today to discuss how you can take up this initiative in your workplace.



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