

“CHRISTMAS EVE TRAGEDY”

Thursday, January 7, 2010

On Christmas Eve 2009, four immigrant construction workers were killed and another crippled when the swing stage they were working on broke in two and they plunged 13 storeys. This is the worst construction accident in Toronto since Hogg's Hollow tunnel disaster fifty years ago.

The workers from eastern Europe - Alexander Bondorov, Aleksey Blumberg, Fayzull Fazilov, Vladimir Korostin, and survivor Dilshod Mamurov – were deemed to be “subcontractors” by their employer Metron Construction. No independent lifelines for tie-off were in place as required by law. In fact, there had been a Ministry of Labour stop work order on the site for weeks due to the unsafe swing stage setup. It is clearly an example of new immigrants, many without status, being put in harm's way by a non-union company that was cutting corners and breaking safety rules.

But this tragic event exposes the tip of a much larger problem. Precarious work has become far too common as the only option for many in our communities. The misclassification of workers allows employers to cheat on WSIB, EI, CPP and employer health contributions. It sets up a system that often results in wholesale evasion of federal and provincial income tax. Within an environment where all of those rules are being bent, it is easy to see how the rules applying to training, safety procedures, and a worker's right to refuse unsafe work are also violated.

The “underground economy” is not limited to construction. The Justice for Janitors campaign is constantly running up against companies calling every cleaner an independent contractor. There have been numerous efforts to have the Ministry of Labour, WSIB, and Revenue Canada co-ordinate their efforts to crack down on this insidious employer practice.

The reality is that in construction, the nature of the work means that accidents can happen even with the fully trained professionals. Companies that put untrained people working on extreme heights without proper supervision are inviting disaster. Workers without status can hardly refuse dangerous assignments, let alone ask questions about hazardous materials they may be told to handle.

The labour movement will be pursuing all aspects of this tragedy to try to ensure that the conditions that led to it are fully exposed. The Building Trades unions will be raising funds for the families. OFL President Sid Ryan has called on the Attorney-General to pursue criminal charges against the company owner if proof of negligence is determined.

A coroner's inquest may determine the immediate causes of the four deaths. But like Hogg's Hollow fifty years ago, this event demands more. It should force a rigorous review of work practices in the growing precarious economy, and steps taken to ensure there isn't a repeat of this tragedy in the future.

The Executive Board recommends that Labour Council:

1. call for a public inquiry that would examine all aspects of the relationship between the underground economy and unsafe work that workers are exposed to.
2. work with the Building Trades to ensure the surviving families receive as much support as possible to get them through this difficult ordeal.
3. hold the 2010 Day of Mourning at 2757 Kipling Avenue or an appropriate nearby location.