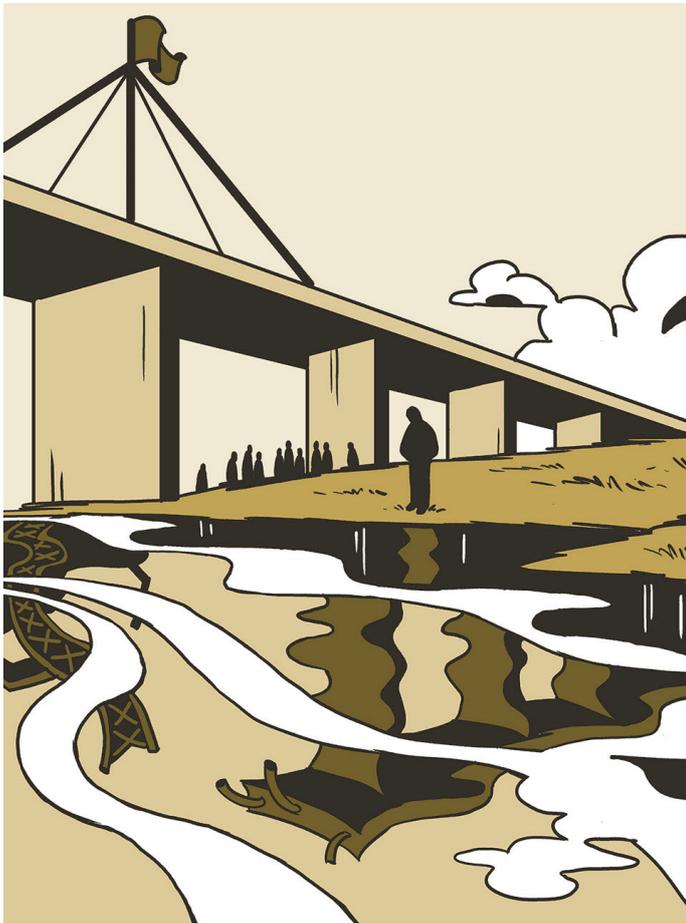


WORKERS SOLIDARITY

BULLETIN · ISSUE 26

50 years ago a section of the West Gate Bridge collapsed in Australia's worst industrial incident. In this edition we pay tribute to the 35 workers killed in the collapse, the 18 who were seriously injured and all of the family members and workers who were deeply affected by this disaster. Remembering also means that we remember how this preventable catastrophe happened and the callous and inadequate response from the bosses and government.



Ben Juers | @Benjuers

WORKERS IN STRUGGLE

MUA vs Patrick's at Botany Sydney

The MUA EA negotiations with Patrick's at Botany Sydney were characterized as 'extortion' by the Prime Minister who said the MUA was holding the country to ransom and that he was not taking the army off the table to clear the 40 ships left stranded with vital medical supplies, held up by the dispute. We've seen this tactic before - think striking miners in 1949 and pilots in 1989.

There wasn't 40 ships or medical supplies held up. Patrick's is trying to remove around 50 pages of conditions from the existing agreement and casualise the workforce. The Prime Minister supported Patrick's move at the Fair Work Commission and used the tired old line that the Australian economy was being threatened by industrial action and the MUA.

Meanwhile the MUA has reached in principle agreement with both DP World and Hutchison in their EA negotiations.

In Victoria, Oz Port workers are moving towards protected action over conditions. The company is responsible for general duties at the ports and workers have never taken this type of action before.

CFMMEU vs Transurban & Victorian State Government

According to WorkSafe reports, three workers on the West Gate Tunnel project were hospitalised after seriously injuring their hands between May and July, including two subcontractors, in the space of two weeks. A CFMMEU organiser Joe Myles said tight deadlines had been driving up injuries on the West Gate Tunnel project. "The job is so far behind; everything is a rush," he said.

“They are cutting corners to catch up.” When companies cut corners, workers get injured.

Today (15 October 2020) is the 50 year anniversary of the West Gate Bridge collapse that killed 35 workers, and another worker when construction resumed.

TWU vs Qantas

The TWU has accused Qantas of having complete disregard for its workers and using the COVID-19 pandemic as a cover to implement its aim to expand the casualisation of work. In June, 6,000 jobs were made redundant. Last month, another 2,500 will be outsourced from baggage handlers and cabin crew to engineers, with the number of jobs to be outsourced expected to grow. The union had previously raised concerns about the safety record and conditions of workers at Swissport, the company which is the front runner to be contracted by the airline. Some of the existing workers could be re-employed. Most will not be taken back, and even if they are, only by agreeing to forego exiting employment conditions.

Qantas is betting on being given the green light by Fair Work Australia, using the pandemic as a good enough justification.

This makes what is going on in Qantas a test case, and other employers are looking on to see the result. The last time this was tried on a major scale was during the 1998 Patrick Stevedores waterfront battle to get rid of the unionised workforce.

The case is likely to go to court soon. Beyond this, it could become a rallying cry towards another waterfront like showdown.

Tax the rich, not the poor

Tax figures from the ATO 2018-19 show up to 22 large energy exploration companies in Australia paid no tax despite billions of dollars of income. The list is topped by Exxonmobil Australia Pty Lt., Woodside Petroleum Ltd, Australia Pacific, Chevron Australia, Shell Energy Holdings Australia, and Santos. Over 700 multinationals operating in Australia pay no tax in Australia.

These revelations are a backdrop to the Federal Government’s decision to give tax cuts to high end earners as a method of kick starting the economy out of the COVID-19 pandemic despite strong evidence tax cuts of this sort reduce government coffers with no discernible increase in jobs.

The tax concessions for the rich will cost Australia’s budget 6 times more than the extending JobSeeker.

Meat workers in the US

According to a tracker maintained by the Food & Environment Reporting Network, more than 44,000 meatpackers have tested positive for COVID-19 and more than 200 have died from it.

Now, a new exposé by the New York Times shows how many meatpacking families have struggled to get compensated for their loved one’s death on the job:

“Workers’ compensation has traditionally been used to address on-the-job injuries – not fatalities tied to a pandemic that has disrupted millions of lives and killed more than 200,000 people in the United States. Tracing the exact origins of individual infections can be difficult, which appears to have given JBS (the meatpacking company) an avenue to deny compensation claims on the grounds that the illnesses were not necessarily work related. Kim Cordova, the president of the local chapter of the United Food and Commercial Workers, a union that represents many JBS employees said, “it is my understanding that JBS was stating that the workers didn’t contract COVID-19 at the plant.”

BACKBONE OF OUR MOVEMENT



**Iqra Ahad
NTEU Delegate**

How long have you been a union member?

6 years.

Why did you join the union?

When I joined the union it was for support, advice and representation but I continue to be a union member to have the power to negotiate for more favourable working conditions and other benefits collectively.

What’s your best memory/story about being in the union movement?

Well, disputes are usually not a good memory but when as a union delegate you win a dispute and the ease and relief that win brings to union members who are also your colleagues is always a cherishable moment.

What’s the most important issue facing the union movement today?

The decline in Union membership would be the most important issue. The unions are not doing a good job at proving, or perhaps, even stating that their primary objective is to improve the wellbeing of its members.

Why should people join their union?

To help improve working conditions and job security for all working classes.

This is a query which came into the VTHC’s ‘Ask Renata’ this week:

“I work as a food packer at a food packing company based in Melbourne. Our work place has never had a cleaner, and we never have clean toilets. Someone complained to our boss that the toilet was not clean. So today he called everyone to a meeting and said he wants everyone to take turns to clean the toilets. Can you advise me: Can I say NO to him?? and where do I stand on this issue???”

PS. Our workplace has no Union.”

We answered the question in a way that was hopefully of some use to the worker:

OHS MATTERS

No – this situation is not acceptable. Every workplace needs to be cleaned, and there needs to be regular and proper cleaning of the toilets.

While it may be ok for the employer to ask employees to keep the general areas clean and do general ‘housekeeping’, toilets are a separate issue. There is nothing to prevent an employer designating one of the employees to be a cleaner (this is not an ‘illegal’ thing to do), but it’s not ‘standard procedure’. Workers who work as cleaners need training in order to clean properly, use the chemicals properly and so on. So, if the employer is asking the workers generally to clean the toilets, etc, then this is inadequate.

Under the OHS Act the employer must provide and maintain, so far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risks to health. This includes providing and maintaining ‘amenities’ – eg toilets, washbasins, and so on. The employer must also provide information, instruction, supervision and training to employees.

There is also a Compliance Code that sets out what the employer must provide in terms of toilets.

Note that it says that the employer must maintain the amenities – keep them clean and hygienic.

I note that you’ve said that you are not in a union and that there is no union at your workplace – but you have a legal right to join a union and I strongly recommend that you do so as knowing your rights is only

half the battle – you’ve got to have the power to enforce your rights under the law, and health and safety. I doubt that you have an elected health and safety rep at your workplace... so at the moment what I recommend that you do is contact WorkSafe Victoria with a complaint and ask for an inspector to attend – ask that this be anonymous. You can get the contact details at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

You need to find out what union you would belong to and join asap.

But will the worker take any action? He probably won’t contact WorkSafe, and even if he does, there is some doubt our regulator will do very much or make much of a difference, unfortunately. He may not stand up to his boss – if he’s the only one. Hopefully he will join his union, and encourage others to join the union – and the union will go in and organise what is clearly a terrible place.

What this shows is that many workers are working in disgusting conditions, with employers who could not care less. It shows how powerless many workers are and why it’s so important to not only know your rights, but to be in a union AND to be an active member in an active union.

West Gate Bridge Tragedy 50 Years On

ANALYSIS

At 11.50am on October 15 1970, a span of the West Gate Bridge, then under construction, collapsed. 2000 tonnes of steel fell 45 metres – 35 workers were killed, 17 were injured. Some ‘rode’ the bridge down and, miraculously, survived. All those who survived were traumatised, as were many people living in the working-class suburbs surrounding it.

Why Did the Bridge Collapse?

Without getting into too much detail, the West Gate Bridge is a steel box girder cable-stayed bridge.

When the two half girders on the west side, span 10–11, were brought into close proximity, it was established that there was a vertical difference of about 4.5 inches (114mm). It was proposed by John Holland & Co that time might be saved by using kentledge (ballast) to push down the north half span level to its south counterpart. So, ten cube-shaped 8-ton concrete blocks, on site from a previous operation, would be used.

The use of the ten concrete blocks, which were more than what was approved by Jack Hindshaw, the Freeman Fox and Partners (FFP) designer and engineer, caused a buckle to develop. This occurred in mid-May, and in early September, Hindshaw noted in his diary, ‘Obvious overstress due to concrete kentledge’. The actions to correct the buckle set in motion a train of events that led to the collapse.

On Wednesday 14 October, D Ward, Section Engineer, FFP, West Side, gave formal written instructions for work to be done (to straighten the buckle on span 10–11 ‘without further delay’). Work started at about 8.30 am on 15 October. After about sixteen bolts had been loosened, there was significant slipping of the two plates jamming the bolts in their holes.



A senior FFP inspector suggested the bolts be tightened with an air gun – until they broke. The shock reaction of the bolts failing in tension dislodged the broken pieces clearing the holes. Eventually about 30 bolts were removed from one ‘box’ and seven from another. This flattened the bulge by over 2 inches but led to other changes. Ward called Hindshaw to come take a look, who in turn contacted Gerit Hardenberg, Senior Representative of Werkspoor-Utrecht, Wescon and WSC (the original contractors). The last thing Hardenberg heard Hindshaw say was, “Shall I get the bods off?”

Almost immediately after that telephone conversation at 11.50 am, span 10–11 collapsed. From the West Gate Bridge Memorial site is the description of what happened at that point:

“Almost as soon as he put the phone down, Gerit Hardenberg heard the low rumbling sound coming across the river. It grew, like the side of a mountain falling on top of him, and then faded into silence.

What Gerit Hardenberg could not hear was the eerie pinging noise that came from the flakes of rust peeling off weathered steel or the jarring screech of metal moving slowly across metal.

What he could not see was the men holding their hands to their ears to block out the noise or the look of terror in their faces as they saw things that should have been firm and solid begin to move and parts of the metal’s colour change to a strange kind of blue.”

Could the tragedy have been avoided?

On June 2, 1970, the Milford Haven Bridge, another box girder bridge being constructed in Wales, collapsed killing four workers. Another similar bridge had collapsed in Germany – but no-one was killed. News of these events reached Australia, and 450 workers on the West Gate held a stop work meeting and refused to go to work – they wanted a meeting with the companies involved, with their union officials. FFP’s resident engineer, Jack Hindshaw, told the men that he was the best bridge builder in the world and that he’d designed the bridge. He assured them the bridge was safe and that it would not collapse. What he did not tell them was that he had designed the two bridges which had collapsed.

“He assured them the bridge was safe and that it would not collapse. What he did not tell them was that he had designed the two bridges which had collapsed.”

The men debated whether they should return to work. Tommy Watson, who later became President of the CFMEU, was 23 years old at the time, and working on the bridge. In his descriptions of the days leading up to the collapse and what happened afterwards, says that at the time, given the lack of information and resources they had, they did the best they could. He says he voted to go back to work – not because of what Hindshaw said, but because he was there with them every day, ‘at the coal face’. Watson says, “If he’s here all day every day, and he thinks it’s safe, then it’s good enough for me.”

Eight days later, on Thursday October 15, the bridge collapsed. 35 men were killed, including Hindshaw.

The Collapse

Most of the following is based on various talks given by Tommy Watson.

When the bridge collapsed police, fire fighters and ambulance attended – but could do very little in terms of rescue and recovery. They were not trained; they could not operate cranes, forklifts or operate the oxyacetelene to get people out from the piles of concrete and steel.

It was left to the construction workers themselves – they worked all day digging out the dead and rescuing those who survived. Many were unaware of their families, waiting on the other side of the barriers, not knowing whether their husbands, sons and brothers were alive or dead. The office, with the clock in records, had been at the top of the bridge, so there was no information on who was there and who wasn’t. The men should have been protected from the shocking and terrible sights they saw – but they weren’t. They worked rescuing and retrieving body parts the rest of the day, then Friday, Saturday and Sunday, with just an afternoon off.

On Monday they were given the day off with pay. When they returned on the Tuesday morning they found the gates locked. 500 workers were herded into a car park and thanked – told what a great job they’d done over the past three days. And then they were sacked. They got one week’s pay and were told they’d have their jobs to come back to when the build restarted, to expect telegrams.

On Thursday and Friday, the funerals began, nine on one day, five the next. The entire community was traumatised.

The workers got no counselling, no support, no contact from the company. The widows were not visited or contacted. They got no financial support from anyone – although later there would be some, little, compensation paid for the deaths and to those who were injured. The only support they got was from the unions.

The aftermath

Victoria’s government of time – a Liberal/Country Party government led by Henry Bolte since 1955 – held a Royal Commission into the collapse. It began its inquiry on October 28, less than two weeks after the tragedy. The Commission completed collecting the evidence from 52 witnesses in May 1971. It sat for 73 days. But the unions did not get a look in – the VTHC, representing the seven unions who had members on the site, made an application and were granted leave to appear before the Commission. However, the lawyers requested an extension of the terms of reference to specifically include matters involving the safety of the men. The Commission considered the application but decided the terms of reference were wide enough. It is unclear why, but after the preliminary hearing no representative from the VTHC appeared.

The Commissioners took just over a month to complete their 300-page report, and it was released in the Victorian Parliament on 3 August 1971.

The report blamed:

- the design,
- the construction method and
- the foolhardy attempts to rectify a construction failure

In summary, the Royal Commission found that the tragedy of the 35 deaths was utterly unnecessary and inexcusable. There was no sudden onslaught of natural forces, no unexpected failure of new or untested material. Today Tommy Watson says it was a whitewash and achieved the outcome the Bolte government wanted: to make sure it could not be blamed or sued.

When the workers got the telegram to go back to the job, about 18 months later, about half of them did. Tommy Watson, when asked why he went back, said that he lived right there – if he didn’t go back to finish it, he does not think he would have been able to go on it, or under it – he had to finish it for the mates he lost that day.

When they started back, the company refused to re-hire the Ironworkers’ shop steward. The workers went out on strike for 9 weeks to get him back on the job. Things between the workers and the company did not go smoothly.

Then, about six months later, a piece of steel fell and killed another man. In all, 36 men were killed in the building of the bridge.

The bridge was finally opened on November 15, 1978. It took ten years to build and cost almost \$200 million (originally costed at \$34 million). In declaring the bridge open, the Premier of the time, Dick Hamer, said, “Let there be no doubt that the 35 men who died here on the 15th of October 1970 died for us. They died so that those who remain might step more safely in the future.” In reflecting on those terrible events, Tommy says, “I hope that in 50 years we can say that the West Gate Bridge collapse was the worst construction tragedy Australia has seen – because that will mean that we have prevented another such thing happening.”

He also said that certain things would never happen today:

After the stop work held when the Milford Haven Bridge collapsed, the men would not have returned to work.

Not one job stopped that day in Melbourne. Not one collection happened. Not one family got any money.

Today, no one could stop workers all over Melbourne downing their tools and going to help.

They would not have been sacked just two days after retrieving their mates’ bodies.

Every worker on the bridge contributed a day’s pay to erect a memorial plaque which lists the names of all the men killed on October 15. The company wasn’t keen on it going anywhere because it was a toll bridge – so the workers did it themselves and put the plaque under the bridge on October 15, 1978.

At first people just gathered at the bridge spontaneously. But in 1990 a committee was formed to keep the area neat and organise an event. By 2000 the Committee got a grant

of \$1 million dollars from the Bracks Labor government to do up the area. 35 columns were erected, representing each of the 35 men killed. Each is slightly different, but there are no names. To honour the 36th man killed, a big rock in the shape of a chair was installed when there was strengthening of the bridge in 2010.

The crowd which gathers at the Memorial Park at 11.30am on October 15 every year to remember those men who were killed that day has been growing.

But this year the site will be eerily quiet. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the West Gate Bridge Committee has urged people not to attend. There will be an online event streamed on the VTHC website, with guest speakers David Setka, James Webster and Tommy Watson. David is the grandson of Bob Setka, one of the 18 survivors, and James is the grandson of a worker who was killed. The Committee has announced that the 50th anniversary events planned for this year will take place next year.



Workers Solidarity General Meeting (Online via Zoom)

Third Thursday of every month
Next meeting TBA
workerssolidarity.org.au

Livestream Forum: A Left Wing Critique of Lifestyle Politics

Hosted by Socialist Alternative
Melbourne University
Thursday, 15 October 13:00
Search facebook for more information

Launch of 'Peace Crimes' book (Online event)

Hosted by Australian Anti-Bases Campaign Coalition and Gleebooks.
Kieran Finnane discusses her new book about Pine Gap and the trial of some protesters in 2016.
Friday, 16th October 18:30
More information at gleebooks.com.au

Young Leaders Summit: With Love, With Pride (Online event)

Hosted by United Nations Youth Victoria
Queer youth activist event featuring panels and workshops
Search facebook for more information

COVID, capitalism & ecology: A conversation with Mike Davis & Rob Wallace.

Hosted by the Global Ecosocialist Network
18 Oct at 04:00 UTC+11 - 18 Oct at 05:30 UTC+11 (be sure to double check Australian time)
Search facebook for more information

US Fall 2020 Online Labor Film Series

12 leftist films screening at set times - free entry. Organized and sponsored by the DC LaborFest
dclabor.org/dc-laborfest.html
Regular sessions until 27th October

Starting a Worker Cooperative

Formal short online course hosted by Earthworker Cooperative.
Every Wednesday starting October 7th til December 9th 9:30am - 12:30pm
03 94158700 for more info & enrolment.

Voice. Treaty. Truth. Advocacy Course

Two day Online Course
Organised by the First Nations Workers Alliance and the ACTU
Running regularly from now until November
atui.org.au/voice-treaty-truth-advocacy-course

2021 Australian Progress National Fellowship - Applications now open

Leadership course for advocates, campaigners, activists and changemakers.
19 February - 5 June 2021
fellowship.australianprogress.org.au/national-fellowship

Dangerous Goods Advisory Group - OHS (Online)

Bimonthly general networking & discussion update meeting, open to all, to discuss Dangerous Goods and Chemical Regulation campaigns.
Wednesday 21 October 17.30-19.30
Jeff.Simpson@haztech.com.au

HSR Conference 2020 - Risks to Psychosocial Health

Online conference, Free Event
October 27th 2020
ohsrep.org.au/conference

Virtual Organising Conference

Australian Trade Union Institute
16 - 20 November
voc2020.atui.org.au/

Eureka Rebellion Anniversary (Online event)

Saturday 28th November
More information at spiritofeureka.org