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Releases

Construction worker’s death sparks questions about government, WCB commitment to worker safety

Vancouver - The tragic death of a Victoria construction worker on the weekend raises questions about whether the provincial government is doing enough to enforce rules to keep workers safe on the job and to hold employers to account when workers are killed or injured at work, says the BC Federation of Labour.

Victoria construction worker Rolan Huetzelmann died January 15 from injuries sustained in a third-story fall at his work site. Huetzelmann was working without a safety harness, when, according to published reports, a wind gust whipped up a plywood sheet that knocked him off two-by-four scaffolding where he was working. He fell more than 10 metres to the ground.

“Why Huetzelmann wasn’t using a safety harness while working three stories off the ground in high winds will be a central question for the Workers’ Compensation Board to delve into,” says BCFED President Irene Lanzinger.

Lanzinger says the Federation shares the concerns expressed by Huetzelmann’s family about working in the extreme weather conditions forecast for the day of the accident.

“Surely as part of a rigorous and proactive approach to worker safety,” Lanzinger says, “the provincial government through the WCB could issue weather advisory warnings to employers to direct them to implement appropriate safety procedures, including in some circumstances halting work on a project.

“The WCB has the resources to do this, and the communications and weather forecasting technology exists for a proactive approach to happen. Why it doesn’t should be a question for Labour Minister Shirley Bond to consider.”

While the accident is still subject to a WCB investigation, Lanzinger says the labour movement will be watching closely to see what penalties are levelled at the employer for safety violations that caused the death. “We believe that if an employer’s negligence causes the death of a worker, then the employer should face jail time,” Lanzinger says.

But Lanzinger says the provincial government is allowing employers to kill workers with impunity. Last November, an employer whose negligence killed a 22-year-old worker on her second day on the job was let off with a fine and not jail time.