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Council Bills Seek to Make Construction Less Perilous in New York City

By David W. Chen



As members of the City Council met on Thursday to urge swift passage of legislation that would improve safety at construction sites, demonstrators marched nearby to demand action on the issue.

Alarmed by a surge in recent deaths and injuries in construction accidents, members of the New York City Council on Thursday urged swift passage of legislation intended to penalize contractors who break the rules.

At the same time, hundreds of yards away, thousands of union workers, who were flanked by more than a dozen city and state officials, gathered near City Hall to push for stronger safety standards. To honor the 16 workers who have died this year — most of them immigrants who worked on nonunion projects — the marchers bore witness to a symbolic memorial procession featuring 16 wood coffins, as bagpipers played “Amazing Grace.”

The events came two weeks after The New York Times published an investigation into construction fatalities in the last two years, based on thousands of pages of safety

reports and handwritten notes, as well as interviews with the deceased workers' relatives and friends.

The investigation found that the rise in deaths and injuries has far exceeded the rate of new construction over the same period. It also found in the cases in which workers died, basic steps had not been taken to prevent them from falling and supervision was lacking. The investigation also found that because of the urgency to finish these projects as quickly as possible, the workers were forced to take dangerous shortcuts or lacked adequate training.

As a result, most of the deaths were "completely avoidable," federal safety investigators concluded.

In response, the City Council Committee on Housing and Buildings held a hearing on Thursday to fast-track several bills and to ask questions, some of them pointed, of the city's buildings commissioner. Several members of the Council also said that they were busy drafting additional bills that would soon be introduced.

"Saving New Yorkers' lives is the reason that I called this hearing today," said Councilman Jumaane D. Williams, the committee's chairman. "To the families of those that we have lost, and to those who have been injured, let me say loudly and clearly: We hear you, and we are here because of you."

Mr. Williams, a Brooklyn Democrat, then read out loud the names of some of the workers who have died in the last two years, including several whose stories were described in detail in the Times article.

Two of the new bills would double the penalties assessed to contractors for working without a permit and for violating a stop-work order. Another bill would establish a task force of mayoral agencies, to be led by the Department of Buildings, that would convene regularly to assess the safety risks posed to workers, pedestrians and motorists near construction sites.

Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration opposes the bills, said Rick D. Chandler, the city's buildings commissioner. "If we set penalties too high, we also risk driving work underground, without the benefit of department regulation, which may in turn result in more unsafe construction," he told the committee.

Mr. Chandler said that the department was already doing "proactive enhanced disciplinary work" with additional staffing and had established, for the first time, a Risk Management Office that would use data analysis to better identify problems.

He also said the administration would focus more attention on buildings up to nine stories high, "where a disproportionate number of accidents occur." Mr. Chandler added that the administration was considering requiring that construction superintendents be on site on all midsize alteration projects.

At a rally in City Hall Park that lasted more than two hours, Gary LaBarbera, president of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York, and nearly three dozen speakers exhorted workers to say, “Enough is enough,” when it comes to lax standards.

Councilman Rory I. Lancman, a Queens Democrat, who spoke at the rally, has introduced a bill to compel the Buildings Department to report safety violations to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

And Councilman Corey Johnson, a Manhattan Democrat, announced an upcoming bill, co-sponsored with Gale A. Brewer, the Manhattan borough president, that would require all developers who build over 10 stories to have their workers go through an apprenticeship training program, approved by the State Department of Labor. The announcement of the proposal brought raucous cheers, as chants of “Union! Union!” ricocheted throughout the canyons of lower Broadway.

Some speakers criticized Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, for not doing enough on construction safety and for siding too often with real estate developers, as part of his agenda to add housing that is affordable to middle-class New Yorkers.

Others said that, for far too long, officials had ignored the plight of the construction workers who do not have union protections. Often they do not speak English, lack official documents and are especially vulnerable to exploitation, speakers said.

Steve McInnis, president of the New York City District Council of Carpenters, noted that his union had made the coffins on display at the rally. They had actually made 17, not 16, he added.

“One coffin is for the next worker,” he said.

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CHIANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Workers brought symbolic coffins to a rally near City Hall on Thursday to demand better safety measures at construction sites.

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