

olympic dream or workers' nightmare?

**an inside report on health & safety conditions
at the london 2012 olympics site**



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IWW Construction Workers Industrial Union**

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Note from the Main Authors:

This report has been compiled and written by IWW members with information fed to us by anonymous IWW and non-IWW whistle-blowers working on the Stratford City Development section of the 2012 Olympics construction site. In order to protect our own identities, we have also chosen to be anonymous. We cannot confirm the state of Olympic worksites elsewhere, but we suspect that the workers encounter similar conditions as those outlined in this report. All information within the main body of the report has been gathered from real-life experiences and observations by workers themselves. Bearing in mind that conditions can change over time, we must note that this report is representative of the period between December 2008 and April 2009.

IWW members X366000 and X355622, June 2009, London.

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summary:

This report documents and critically analyses the working conditions of construction workers on the Stratford City development site of the 2012 Olympic Games. We base our findings entirely on the accounts of anonymous IWW and non-IWW construction workers employed there.

The report documents widespread mismanagement and a lack of resources devoted to ensuring that health and safety standards are maintained. Police intimidation of workers and harassment union activists is also documented.

We argue that the underlying problems experienced by the workers are based in the domination of the worksite by management and the lack of rank-and-file control of the recognised union. We propose that workers organise collectively to defend and promote their economic interests as workers, against the interests of the employers which are fundamentally irreconcilable with them. Additionally, our evidence demonstrated that practices of 'partnership' are not sufficient to ensure that workers' health and safety is upheld.

The content of this report is entirely the work of the authors, and does not claim to fully represent the opinions of the entire IWW union.

introduction:

boom, bust and the olympic dream

In October 2008, Sebastian Coe, the London 2012 Chairman, outlined five key priorities for the Olympic site based in East London. First was a commitment to “put athletes first,” followed by “giv[ing] everyone a chance to be part of 2012”. Additionally, Coe prioritised “listening to the experts” and establishing “a legacy we can all be proud of”.

The final priority was simply “construction”. The Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) invested £9.3 billion to build an Olympic village that would not only provide excellent sporting venues, but would also live on as a focus for the communities around the Olympic site.

However, as construction continues, increasing evidence has been mounting surrounding the so-called “regeneration” of the area, which in reality has involved forced evictions, massive increases in living costs and bulldozing of entire working class neighbourhoods deemed ‘insufficiently marketable’.

The attacks on East London’s working class communities, however, are not the topic of this report, and have been discussed extensively elsewhere. This research reports on the working conditions on the Olympic building site and how construction workers can change the way they work, as well as the conditions they work under.

The health of the construction sector over the past few years has been somewhat volatile. As an industry dependent on economic ups and downs, construction has experienced a significant boom, followed by a bust the magnitude of which we do not yet fully know. The housing construction sector has been hit especially hard, due to volatile housing markets, along with a similar decline in the building supplies sector. For example, Travis Perkins, Britain’s largest builders’ merchant, saw their profits drop by 44% during 2008 and house-builder Persimmon saw a 2008 pre-tax loss of £780m.

Two clear results of the onset of recession are emerging in the construction sector. Firstly, job cuts have been an inevitable side-effect of the recession. Thousands of jobs, mostly in building construction have already been lost as companies scramble desperately to keep up the enormous profits seen in the last few years. With formal and informal modes of blacklisting rife within the industry, these layoffs are likely to target union militants as the recession deepens. This trend is already evident in the

transport sector.

Secondly, while construction workers are feeling the full force of recession, their former employers are courting the government in order to secure loans to keep their businesses going. Rather than accepting reductions in profits and smaller demand for their services, company heads predominantly continue to pay themselves generous salaries in the hope that the state will come to their aid.

These outcomes are already being seen at the Olympic site. With one major sponsor of the games having already pulled out, construction of the Olympic swimming pool has been halted until at least 2010. The rate of employment at the site has fallen modestly, although not as significantly as has been seen in the private sector. Representatives from unions not officially recognised by the Olympic Delivery Authority have been repeatedly refused entry to the site, and even the recognised union (UCATT) has been receiving increasing surveillance and harassment from employers.

The Olympic construction site is covered by a number of regulations that form the basis of industrial relations on the site. These include:

- London Living Wage (£7.05 initially) as the minimum rate of pay for all workers on site
- A safe working environment
- Effective industrial relations
- Fair terms and conditions for all workers on the site, and as a factor in the procurement process
- Access to learning and training opportunities
- Widely available information on workplace rights and union membership

While we note that conditions on the Olympic site are somewhat better than some other building sites, some principles, such as the London Living Wage, have already been broken by subcontractors, and others are so vague as to be virtually meaningless.

As the recession deepens, the ODA is becoming increasingly under strain and scrutiny in terms of funding and the speed of construction. Less money will lead to fewer jobs available. Reducing the workforce (which currently stands at around 2,500) means the project is more likely to be delayed and will lead to more negative consequences for the workers such as longer hours and higher work-rate.

This short report deals primarily with the health and safety conditions in the section of the site with an IWW presence. As such it can only tell part of the story. However it does uncover a number of crucial issues and management failings that should not and cannot be ignored by the PR-friendly ODA. This report also considers how workers can respond to these failings, both at the Olympic site and elsewhere.

health and safety:

myth and reality at Stratford City



The Stratford City development site, late 2008

Photo: Westfield

Introducing the site, and Westfield

While the ODA and their trade union partners made modest steps towards a decent collective agreement concerning conditions on the Olympic construction site, employers have become complacent as time has gone on. With construction well into its second year, the excitement surrounding, and scrutiny of, the Olympic site has declined.

In this section, we outline the everyday experiences of bad practice and large health and safety risks occurring at the Stratford City development, predominantly overseen by Westfield. Westfield, responsible for the West London shopping mall of the same name, undertook the more than £2 billion construction project with great enthusiasm in 2008. Yet, the downturn in the economy has led to a massive drop in profits for the giant multinational, which currently stands as the world's largest shopping mall landlord. Success or failure of the Stratford City development will therefore be weighing heavily on the minds of its managers.

As outlined on their website, Westfield claims to uphold the highest possible health and safety standards. This section, then, will be structured according to these principles, and will interrogate the extent to which Westfield and its various subcontractors have lived up to their promises.

It is important to note here that, while Westfield remains responsible for health and safety of the overall project, the widespread subcontracting endemic of the construction industry means that there are many other companies involved in the project. The subcontracting system has been claimed by some as an important element of industry that allows companies to shirk responsibilities and obligations to workers and communities affected. As this report goes on, it becomes clear how subcontracting is a major factor affecting conditions on the site.

Promise 1: “Target effort where it can do the most good in terms of health, safety and the environment (HS&E) by the early identification of risks at the design and planning stages so they can be eliminated or reduced.”

The planning of the jobsite at Stratford City is clearly a complex undertaking due to its size. Yet it is no larger than many of Westfield’s other developments. Thus, Westfield should than be more than able to properly plan the Olympic site. Workers have made a number of references to the poor planning and regular absence of walkways and thoroughfares on the site. Very few paths for workers have been cleared, and where there are paths, many have overhanging cranes and pieces of machinery that could fall or hit the heads of workers passing through.

Additionally, the carrying of large and/or heavy materials for long distances through the large site makes these pathways all the more important, since there are instances where workers are unable to see their feet or debris on the ground and risk tripping as a result.

Clearly, neither Westfield nor its subcontractors have taken responsibility for this crucial element of site planning. As will be shown, workers’ complaints about factors such as the lack of paths have regularly fallen on deaf ears. This simple, and fundamentally important factor of health and safety planning has been ignored. As the cost of implementing such thoroughfares is minimal, the only logical conclusion is that management is simply not interested in the lack of clear pathways as a factor affecting the safety of their workers.

Promise 2: “Ensure accountability for operational performance throughout the management team.”

Linked to problems with planning, companies’ acceptance of responsibility for health and safety management is also poor. The ODA has made great efforts to emphasise their low accident rates, but these rates are based on the number of accidents that are reported. Workers on the site have experienced accidents not being reported by site management, despite workers’ insistence that this be done. In one case, a worker was forced to work for the rest of his shift, after a relatively major accident was not reported by management.

By refusing to report some accidents, management able to maintain credibility with the ODA, while ensuring that their workers are as productive as possible. If no accident is reported, then they often have no legal reason to allow that worker time off to recover.

Unfortunately, due to management control of accident report books, it is hard to concretely confirm the number of unreported accidents. However, workers have noted that minor accidents such as cuts and muscular injuries are regularly not reported.

Promise 3: “Ensure that sufficient resources are provided to eliminate or reduce risks.”

Workers on the site note that there is a widespread lack of resources for ensuring that workers are safe at work. A number of workers have been seen with insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), including some of the most basic pieces of equipment. In some work that requires extra PPE, such as cutting, grinding and digging, workers have been allowed to work without dust masks, high-impact goggles and other essential protective equipment. Furthermore, many workers often must carry weights over the legal limit without the appropriate lifting equipment.

There is also a widespread lack of safety signage around the site. Although there is a good level of signage around the perimeter of the site, where the general public can see it, inside the site there is generally insufficient signage except near the UCATT trade union offices. Related to this problem is the lack of barriers on site to guard against dangers such as deep excavations. Combined with unclear pathway systems, failure to erect barriers in these situations can have potentially fatal consequences.

Although not as extreme or immediate as these safety risks, there is also a lack

of resources provided to ensure adequate care of workers' health on the site. Workers have reported a lack of hot water at the site lasting for several weeks at a time, as well as insufficient towels and soap. In some cases, even cold water facilities are precarious in their availability. On some areas of the site, dry rooms are located too far from where workers are working, leading to many working all day in wet clothes after rainfall. This, of course, poses a widespread health risk among workers, particularly enhancing the prevalence of common colds, but also an increased risk of more unpleasant illnesses related to unsanitary or insufficient toilet and washing facilities.

It is clear to see that resulting from the widespread lack of resources and facilities provided, firms involved in running the site are systematically overlooking major elements of the health and safety of their workers. While the direct responsibility lies with the subcontractors, Westfield and the ODA are also responsible for ensuring that such resources are made freely and widely available to all workers on the site by putting pressure on subcontractors from above. Clearly they are not doing this or, at best, not doing this as effectively as they should.

Promise 4: "Ensure lessons are learnt and continual improvement is implemented [and] listen to all views expressed on HS&E issues."

With widespread failure to report injuries and accidents and a disregard for some of the most basic PPE at the Stratford City site, it is clear that management is not interested in the process of continually improving H&S standards. Although some improvements have been made, subcontractors in particular regularly continue to avoid their responsibilities.

Promise 5: "Fully support all employees in the execution of their responsibilities and provide training to improve their competency in HS&E."

Despite some modest training opportunities at the site, the problems outlined above continue to plague workers, putting them at serious risk. Rather than stemming from good management by Westfield and its subcontractors, the reason more deaths and injuries have not taken place to date is down to the skills and intelligence of their workers. Clearly, then, without the full implementation of the first three promises made by Westfield, this and the previous one cannot be fulfilled. As we have shown, the principles of H&S that Westfield claim to abide by are regularly and systematically ignored. In the final section, we consider how workers can respond to challenging conditions at Stratford City, and throughout the construction industry.

organisation:

the limits of partnership

These findings raise a number of issues concerning the everyday management practices at the Olympic construction site at Stratford City. These issues bring us to question whether companies can develop better strategies for treating their workers properly, and what mechanisms can be put into place to ensure responsibility is taken by someone/some organization for the poor health and safety standards experienced by workers. Additionally, it is important for workers that we also ask: what can construction workers do to ensure that no construction site is allowed to operate with such substandard health and safety practices?

A common answer to these problems is unionisation—organisation of the workers into a collective body to push for better conditions. Simple, isn't it? However, the experiences of workers at the Stratford City site show how true organisation can be undermined by employer harassment and the strategic use of authority figures such as the police.

The recognised union on the site, UCATT, has an office that workers can visit in order to raise grievances and ask for advice. While it is staffed, and union safety officers are able to inspect the site, workers report that there is very little collective union activity taking place. Aside from this office and posters in the canteen, the union presence tends to be passive, and the union often acts as a 'go-between' to maintain co-operation between workers and bosses.

Of course union reps are doing their best in difficult circumstances, but the problem lies in how the union is organised. Without job control by the workers themselves, problems continue. Representatives from other unions such as Unite and the IWW are harassed and followed when attempting to come on site and speak with workers there. Furthermore, there are regular visits from the police who harass workers and intimidate them with police dogs. This takes place with full collusion from management.

Management continue to systematically ignore health and safety problems while harassing outside unionists, and police parade themselves and their attack dogs around the site as a display of strength and a warning to workers that they should not fight back. Combined with the partnership strategy employed by UCATT, this ensures that inactivity among the workers continues.

conclusions:

building worker-led collective organisation



Workers at the Stratford City development site have been subject to widespread and systematic health and safety failures. It is a testament to their skill and awareness that fewer serious injuries have taken place. However, the ultimate responsibility to correct these failures lies with Westfield and the various subcontracting firms to whom they outsource their work.

Their continuing failure to do so, combined with ongoing harassment attempts to make union representatives submissive, has further entrenched the inactivity of the workforce in regards to taking up these concerns. In concluding this report, we attempt to give solutions to these problems that, from a workers' perspective, can enable workers to secure safer workplaces and build power and respect for construction workers everywhere.

As we have outlined, although they have their best interests at heart, union representatives are failing to win these changes on workers' behalf. We contend that it is precisely because they are trying to do it *on their behalf* that they are failing. A healthy and growing union is one where power resides entirely among the workers and the role of their representatives is to encourage and facilitate that collective power.

The lack of rank-and-file control among construction workers' unions is deeply embedded, and we do not pretend that this it will be easy to change such widespread trends. However, while the IWW is smaller than the other unions in the construction sector, we believe that the IWW has the right idea

to help construction workers win better pay and conditions, because of the union's focus on building workers' power directly on the job site.

Part of the problem is the way in which the trade unions are organised. Rather than being led by the rank-and-file, most unions employ strata of full-time paid organisers who conduct much of the union affairs for the workers, effectively cutting many union workers out of the loop. A union that truly wants to build workers' power is one that is organised with autonomy at the grassroots and directly recallable, mandated representatives.

Another problem is that of partnership. When there is a close relationship between salaried union officials and management, there is a real danger of that relationship dominating how union business is conducted. We argue that the workers themselves should negotiate the conditions of their worksite with training and support from the rest of the union, not only because they will retain a critical distance from management, but also because they are the ones most affected by collective agreements.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, is the relationship between the workers and employers. One of the pitfalls of a partnership approach to unionism is the way in which the different interests of the workers and employers are ignored. While there is a very small association between higher profits and higher wages, in most cases the two are not nearly as linked as business tries to make us think.

Even on sites like Stratford City where wages are usually acceptable, employers cut costs elsewhere – in this case, on health and safety provision – but anywhere and everywhere other than their profit margins. In essence, while workers want good wages, safe workplaces and appropriate breaks, employers will try to enforce low wages, short breaks or poor safety provisions in order to maintain their profits.

If these fundamentally opposing interests are covered up by the pretence of partnership, workers will expect less and act less to protect what they already have. Especially in the construction sector, which in many respects is the front line of the potentially lethal effects of capitalism, there is a moral as well as a political obligation for unions to make these opposing interests visible. Of course, if the workers controlled their unions from the grassroots, this would be all too obvious to see.

A truly worker-controlled union would not attempt to act as a 'partner' with

employers, and would minimise the chances of an unaccountable cadre of professional organisers developing. This would be a big step towards ensuring that workers' interests were protected and promoted.

The experiences of construction workers at Stratford City have shown the dangers of allowing management to almost unconditionally dominate a workplace. It is fundamentally important to the wellbeing of construction workers and the construction industry that this domination does not continue on any worksite. Despite the well-meaning efforts of established trade union officers, these conditions have continued for too long. In response, we propose the following:

Workers' control of unions and worksites: workers should be calling the shots in the union hall and the workplace, across the industry.

Comprehensive health and safety: according to workers' needs, not what employers think they can get away with.

Unity: if one crew on a site is having trouble, it is the concern of all workers on that site that the problem is rectified to their satisfaction. If one site is on strike, it is the concern of all workers on all sites to ensure they win that strike. This is the only way that workers can win their demands.

Direct action: if negotiation does not succeed, then workers should consider taking matters into their own hands with or without support from their union leadership or the law. It has worked before, and it can work again.

Industrial organisation: construction workers need to continue to work across trade and job divisions, and break down national divides. We need to unite against our real enemies—the bosses—not our fellow workers who happen to be citizens of other countries or skilled in different trades.

In proposing these actions, we recognise that they may appear quite optimistic, especially in the current recession. However, as the recession continues, construction workers need to organise more than ever if they are to prevent businesses from using the recession as an excuse to force redundancies and cuts in pay and conditions. It is the duty of all construction workers to themselves, their workmates, families, and future generations of construction workers to ensure that they begin to change the tide in the industry.

further information:

introducing the IWW

The IWW is a small but growing, worker-run, militant union that seeks to organise all workers in all industries in order to wield maximum power against employers. We do not have a massive bureaucracy run by salaried officials; rather our democracy is run from the grassroots. Because of this, we can ensure that we are not affiliated to any political party and will not make deals with bosses behind members' backs.

We look forward to seeing a time when workers have the power to dictate the conditions of production for themselves, without the interference of bosses who take their profits from our hard work. We are an international union with active sections in various countries of North America, Europe and Australasia.

While this report is written independently by IWW members, we encourage readers to read further about the IWW and join us. Please visit:

www.iww.org.uk (UK and Ireland website)

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