

# They won't have died in vain

## Keynote address at the West Gate Bridge memorial service, 15 October 2004

*Thirty-five workers lost their lives when a span of Melbourne's West Gate Bridge collapsed during construction at 11.50 am on 15 October 1970.*

*It was Australia's worst workplace catastrophe.*

*On 15 October every year, former West Gate construction workers, the widows and families of the victims and many others with an abiding commitment to construction safety gather at the site of the collapse to remember, to pay respect, and to renew their efforts to improve the health and safety standards of construction.*

*The annual commemoration is organised by the West Gate Bridge Memorial Committee.*

*This year, the keynote address was delivered by John Cummins, the Victorian Branch President of the Construction, Forestry, Mining & Energy Union's Construction & General Division.*

*John is a former West Gate construction worker and is a member of the West Gate Bridge Memorial Committee.*

*This is the text of his speech.*



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Today marks the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Australia's worst peace time industrial accident.

It is my pleasure to formally welcome you to this annual memorial service to those 35 construction workers who lost their lives in the bridge's 1970 span collapse.

In many ways this is a sad occasion -- remembering the lives cut short in the collapse -- the heartache and tragedy caused to the families and loved ones.

But it is also our custom to pause and make this a celebration of the lives of the individuals, characters and personalities; the family men, the lovers, the dads, the sons and the brothers, the larrikins, the trade unionists, the special individuals each and every one of them were.

We have also made a habit of dedicating this occasion to the need for us to be forever vigilant about maintaining safe workplaces.

We think there is a correlation between safe workplaces and organised workplaces. We think that this is one of the unmistakable lessons that have come out of the construction of the West Gate.

Leaving job safety to others, or taking it for granted, are recipes for injuries and worse. And this is not going to be tolerated by any of us.

With the passage of time, whilst there are now too many West Gate construction workers no longer with us, we have seen the comings and goings of Governments of all sorts of political persuasions. And notwithstanding some of their best or worst efforts, we still proudly stand by the legacy bequeathed to us by the lessons of the West Gate tragedy.

John Howard's (Federal) Government has been returned, and we understand he has a self-given mission to target the union movement and industrial relations – construction unions especially, and our members' wages and conditions.

We take the opportunity presented by today's occasion to pledge that the memory of our 35 workmates guarantees that we will give John Howard no quarter. They won't have died in vain.

Safety standards and union organisation on our jobs are non-negotiable.

This year's commemoration, of course, is also a special occasion in that it now takes place in the newly developed and soon to be formally opened Memorial Park.

Until now, this sacred ground has only been marked by the memorial plaque that was erected and paid for by West Gate workers. It is now complemented by this wonderful park.

A concept a mere year ago, it is now a powerful reality. You will agree, you can't help but be struck by it.

I would like to formally acknowledge the support of the Bracks (State) Government, the efforts of Bob Bennetto and Holland's, and the commitment of Serdar Baycan and the West Gate Memorial Park Association.

Without their efforts, continuing reflections to the memories of the West Gate collapse victims would have occurred in increasingly unsatisfactory surroundings and circumstances.

I am sure you'll all agree – they deserved better.

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*You can learn more about the West Gate Bridge tragedy by visiting:*

- *The West Gate Bridge Memorial Committee's website:*  
[www.westgatebridge.org](http://www.westgatebridge.org)
- *The Public Records Office of Victoria's website:*  
[www.prov.vic.gov.au/exhibs/westgate/welcome.htm](http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/exhibs/westgate/welcome.htm)