

Workers in New Jersey and Michigan die in industrial accidents

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Two fatal job accidents are focusing attention on the issue of workplace fatalities, which are rising as businesses cut costs to weather the recession by hiring temporary workers and sidestepping safety regulations.

In a processing plant in New Jersey, a temporary worker died Wednesday after falling into a vat of boiling chocolate. Vincent Smith II, 29, fell nine feet from a platform where he was pouring raw chocolate into a churner. Although the temperature of the molten chocolate in the vat was 120 degrees Fahrenheit, Smith did not die from the heat.

Within seconds of falling into the vat, Smith sustained a blunt head injury from the machine's large agitator blades. Fellow workers immediately hit the emergency shutoff mechanism to stop the mixers, but not before at least one had struck Smith. He was pulled out of the vat within 10 minutes, but he was already dead.

The facility in which the fatal incident occurred is owned by Cocoa Services, Inc. and managed and operated independently by Lyons and Sons. Smith was mixing chocolate for Hershey's at the time of his death.

On Tuesday, a Detroit construction worker died after falling into a sink hole that had opened up in the road of a residential neighborhood in which he was working. José Águilar was fixing a broken water main in residential eastern Detroit. As Águilar worked, the road collapsed beneath him, causing him to fall up to his shoulders in a sinkhole, as concrete, mud and debris rushed to fill in the space surrounding him.

Although neighbors claim Águilar was breathing and speaking at the beginning of the rescue operation, he was dead by the time he was removed, nearly two hours later.

Águilar had only been employed for two weeks by

Imperial Construction Co., the firm to which the city of Detroit contracted out water pipe repairs.

After declining for a number of years, the number of yearly work-related deaths increased between 2002 and 2006, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. As shown in these two cases, these deaths are due to companies' efforts to deal with the competitive pressures unleashed by the economic crisis by cutting costs, hiring temporary workers and placing them in dangerous working environments with insufficient job safety training.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics also reports that the number of workers falling into the category labeled "Persons at work part time for economic reasons" rose from roughly 5.7 million in June of 2008 to roughly 9.2 million in June of 2009, a 62 percent increase. This means that far greater numbers of workers are being forced to accept temporary work wherever they can find it, including in industries where they have no work history. Inexperienced workers, the category to which Smith reportedly belonged, are at a greater risk to suffer work place injuries, as they are liable not to be adequately trained in proper safety techniques.

The Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) is investigating whether repeated safety code violations by Imperial Construction Co. contributed to Águilar's death.

The *Detroit Free Press* reported that the company received numerous citations from MIOSHA, including a citation only two months ago for "not having a qualified person regularly inspecting excavations or trenches; for not properly sloping or shoring excavation sides more than 5 feet deep; and for not having a proper walkway, ramp or bridge across trenches or ditches."

Águilar's death might have been avoided if Imperial Construction had complied with these mandatory safety

measures.

Águilar's death raises a broader political question that the MIOSHA investigation will not address: why are broken water pipes being fixed by independent contractors rather than the city?

The answer is that, after decades of plant closures and social cuts, Detroit is broke. Imperial Construction Co. got the job because it charges less, sending out inexperienced and underpaid crews without adequate equipment or supervision. Responsibility for the consequences—including José Águilar's death -- lies primarily with the city's political and corporate leadership.

Detroit mayor David Bing has declined to comment publicly.



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