

American Airlines contract worker killed at Detroit Metro Airport

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10 September 2014

An American Airlines contract worker died from multiple injuries Friday near a belt loader at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. The worker, 24-year-old VonDre Gordon of Romulus, was working on the ramp in the area of the belt loader adjacent to a jet. The death has been ruled an accident by a medical examiner but a definitive cause has not been determined.

An airport spokesman said Gordon was getting ready to load items onto a plane bound for Dallas. The accident took place at approximately 5 AM, well before dawn.

Gordon worked for Prospect Airport Services, a contractor that handles ground service operations for several airlines at Detroit Metro Airport including American and Delta. The jobs pay poverty level wages, between \$8-\$9 per hour, according to the hiring website glassdoor.com.

The tragic death of Gordon is the second fatal industrial accident in the Detroit area in less than a week. On September 2 a Canton Township resident was electrocuted while operating the hydraulic controls on his truck. The boom on his rig struck an overhead power line while he was dropping off an empty trash container at auto parts maker Tower Automotive. The driver was an employee of Technical Logistics, a waste-disposal company operating in southeast Michigan.

Prospect is based in Des Plaines, Illinois and employs some 6,500 workers and operates at 26 airports in 25 cities. The use of contract companies like Prospect is increasingly common at airports as airlines seek to slash costs. Prospect is a notorious low wage employer. A 2011 report in the *Huffington Post* noted that Prospect often pays airport employees who work with the public as little as \$6.50 an hour, a rate well below the minimum wage, on the expectation that they will collect tips. Employees are supposed to fill out tip

sheets, detailing how much they collected. The employer is then supposed to make up the difference between the amount of tips collected and the minimum wage. However, workers for Prospect said they stopped reporting their tips because they were fearful of losing their jobs.

Airline workers have borne the brunt of a decades long offensive by the air carriers against jobs, wages, benefits and pensions. American Airlines filed for bankruptcy in November 2011. The bankruptcy was part of a drive aimed at ripping up union contracts, imposing massive cost savings, including slashing labor costs by 20 percent, and terminating its pension plans.

A comment posted on the airline blog www.airlineforums.com noted the extreme dangers associated with ramp work. “I gotta think an airport ramp is one of the most dangerous places to work. For passengers, commercial aviation is an extremely safe activity and the safest way to travel, but for the people working outside the airplanes on the ground, there are many ways to be injured or killed every day.”

A former Prospect ramp agent posted the following on indeed.com, “A lot of the equipment lacked functioning brakes and emergency brakes. Management and safety precautions were slim to none ...”

An aircraft cleaner wrote, “The only reason I'm here is because I need this or else I would happily run away from here!!! The pay sucks and it's very stressful. They expect a lot out of you in what seems like a short period of time... This is really a lot of work for \$8.50 I wouldn't recommend this job to anybody!!!!”

Last month airline contractor Menzies Aviation was hit with a \$77,250 fine by the California Occupational Health and Safety Administration related to the death of a ramp worker at Los Angeles International Airport. Cesar Valenzuela died when he was thrown from a

vehicle that was not equipped with a functioning seat belt. The company initially attempted to cover up its responsibility by claiming Valenzuela suffered a heart attack.

According to Cal/OSHA the company did not require, and in fact discouraged, the drivers of tow vehicles to wear a seatbelt in certain areas of the airport. The report noted that “numerous employees were observed operating tow tractors without using seatbelts or other restraints.”

The death of Valenzuela was the fourth death of a Menzies worker at a California airport since 2006. In 2013 Menzies was fined nearly \$95,000 by Cal/OSHA for unsafe practices, including those that could cause serious injury or death.



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