

Sharp rise in US contract workers killed on the job

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Last year 734 contract workers were killed on the job in the US, according to figures released earlier this year by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Contract workers make up over 16 percent of all workers killed in on-the-job accidents, and the number of contract workers killed on the job has increased by 35 percent since 2011.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics only began keeping figures on the deaths of contract workers in 2011. But in that short time there has already been a dramatic increase in the number of such workers killed. In 2012, 715 contract workers died in on-the-job accidents, up from 542 in 2011.

In 2011, more contract workers were killed in the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas industries than non-contract workers. The Bureau of Labor statistics classifies a contractor as “a worker employed by one firm but working at the behest of another firm that exercises overall responsibility for the operations at the site where the decedent was killed.”

In a bid to drive down labor costs, companies are using an ever-greater share of contract and temporary workers while placing them in increasingly unsafe working conditions, using the threat of losing their jobs to keep them from speaking up. Temporary workers facing unsafe conditions often have no recourse except to quit since reporting unsafe conditions is likely to lead to getting fired.

The US Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), which is charged with preventing workplace injuries, primarily relies upon major staffing companies themselves in setting policies for safety. These companies calculate that paying minimal fines is less expensive than the cost of implementing proper safety training and procedures.

On February 25, 2013, contract worker Janio Salinas

Valerda, 50, was found buried alive in a 15-foot-high sugar hopper, which had had a safety screen removed only 13 days prior because it was clogging and slowing down production.

CSC sugar LLC, which employed Valerda, has had a history of serious workplace safety violations. The company imports raw sugar, and refines it into a liquid product called Sugaright used by major food industry companies including Snapple, Turkey Hill and Ben and Jerry's.

The OSHA fines imposed on CSC after the death of Valerda amounted to \$25,855, but after the plant installed a safety guard and started using a new procedure to break up sugar clumps, the agency reduced the fine to \$18,098.

In another incident, contract worker Luis Rey Rivera Pavia was killed on August 15, 2013, when he was pulled into a machine for making concrete reinforcing products at a Wire Mesh Sales LLC factory in Jacksonville, Florida.

The OSHA report on the incident noted that “In August 2013, a 32-year-old machine helper entered a large wire mesh manufacturing machine to retrieve a fallen metal bar, and he was struck and killed by a part that feeds the wire into the machine's welding area. The light curtain that would have automatically turned the machine off before he entered the danger zone had been disabled.” OSHA inspectors found that this basic safety measure would have prevented the death of Luis.

There was a total of 22 serious violations at the plant, including: “a factory floor cluttered with broken pallets creating a tripping hazard,” and the disgusting revelation of “a bathroom with a sink that had been clogged for months with maggots swimming in standing water.”

The factory has 56 workers, employed in 12-hour

shifts. There was also an investigation by the Department of Labor pending on whether workers were cheated on their pay by the company.

The company has four other locations in the U.S., Lathrop, California; Oglesby, Illinois; Elkton, Maryland and Conroe, Texas with more than 200 employees nationwide, and recorded \$60 million in revenue in 2012. The Oglesby plant has also had OSHA safety violations.

A report by *ProPublica* noted, “a bill known as the Protecting America's Workers Act, which would raise fines and criminal penalties for OSHA violations, has been proposed in every Congress since 2004 but has never made it out of committee.”



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