

US Labor Department Study: 4,405 workers killed on the job in 2013

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In the past year, 4,405 workers have been killed on the job in the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Preliminary Fatal Injury Report for fiscal year 2013, published in September. Three out of every 100,000 workers died from fatal injuries on the job last year, totaling 12 per day.

The fatality report illustrates the life-threatening dangers faced by workers every day on the job in the US. Even in the 21st century, in one of the most technologically advanced nations, earning a livelihood still entails a daily risk to life and limb for tens of millions of workers.

These on-the-job deaths are not unavoidable accidents, but are caused by the drive for profit, and despite these staggering figures, both the Democratic and Republican parties are overseeing further cuts to worker safety programs.

Included among the most dangerous industries are construction, with 806 worker deaths this year, trucking, transportation, and warehousing, with 707 worker deaths, and agriculture and forestry, with 480 worker deaths.

Transportation incidents in all industries, such as traffic accidents and loading/unloading injuries, accounted for the largest cause of worker deaths, at 1,740 fatalities. Violence and other injuries by a person or animal caused 753 fatalities. Falls, slips, and trips accounted for 699 fatalities.

While there has been a three-year contraction in the number of fatalities reported (4,693 in fiscal year 2011, 4,628 in fiscal year 2012, 4,405 in fiscal year 2013), this is not because workplaces are getting safer. The contraction in worker fatalities over the past three years corresponds to an overall contraction in mean employment participation, from 64.3 percent in fiscal year 2011 to 62.9 percent in fiscal year 2013. The

report for this year is preliminary and will likely be adjusted upwards as state fatal injury reports are further reviewed, and as injured and sick workers die from injuries and illnesses sustained before October 1.

In addition to these staggering numbers, three million workers suffered a lost-work-time injury, amounting to 3.4 out of every 100 full-time equivalent workers. The median number of days lost for these injuries is nine.

Despite the occasional hollow phrase against worker deaths, the entire political establishment is in favor of stripping protections for workers. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez has said “no one should have to sacrifice their life for their livelihood, because a nation built on the dignity of work must provide safe working conditions for its people.” In reality, Secretary Perez and the Obama administration have overseen tens of millions of dollars in “efficiency” cuts to OSHA.

The OSHA budget for fiscal year 2013 was \$565 million. This is down \$18 million from the fiscal year 2012 budget of \$583 million, and \$8 million down from the fiscal year 2011 budget of \$573 million. The budget for the current fiscal year is \$570 million, which is only a scant increase from last year and still a large overall cut from 2011, even without accounting for inflation.

The meager amount allotted to worker safety programs is part of a larger program of social counterrevolution, whereby the gains made by the working class through over a century of social struggle are being pared away.

Cuts to worker safety programs such as OSHA coincide with massive cuts to food stamps, public education, scientific research, and infrastructure maintenance. The budgets of all basic social programs have contracted far more rapidly since the beginning of the bipartisan budget sequester two years ago.

Both big business parties explain away the dangerous conditions workers face on the job as part of the basic facts of life, but deaths by transportation accident, violence, falling, electrocution, and crushing are in fact preventable tragedies. Instead of increasing funding for OSHA or passing legislation strengthening workers' protections, both the Democrats and Republicans are calling for "efficiency" and "fiscal restraint," which are code words for even further cuts and austerity.

The trade unions are playing a notable role in supporting the cuts to OSHA and blocking any worker protection legislation. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers (AFSCME) spent \$6.35 million this past election supporting candidates of the Democratic Party—the party responsible for recent OSHA cuts. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spent \$4.99 million, and the AFL-CIO spent \$1.9 million. All of this money comes from dues money, either directly or through investment dividends.

While funds are denied for worker safety, the government finds plenty of money for war and destruction, as billions of dollars are being spent on the renewed war in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. In the first two months of airstrikes on targets in Iraq and Syria this autumn, the Pentagon spent an estimated \$1.1 billion.

Taken together, OSHA's past two annual budgets amount to \$1.14 billion. The Pentagon estimates its current daily expenditure in Iraq and Syria at \$10 million, and that number will surely rise with the new deployment of 1,500 more "advisers." If a full-scale land invasion takes place, the Pentagon estimates the daily expenditure at \$60 million a day.

It is clear that in the minds of Obama, both parties of big business, and the trade unions, that while there must be unlimited money for imperialist war, there can be no spending on basic social programs or worker safety. The tragic deaths of hundreds of workers each year are a product of this fact of life under capitalism.



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