

# Injured Boeing contract worker dies in Washington state

Angelo Bosworth and Hector Cordon  
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A worker for Boeing contractor Jamco America succumbed to his injuries sustained on November 13, while working on a seat belt airbag inside a 777 jet at Boeing's Paine Field flight line in Everett, Washington. Fifty-year-old Ken Otto was severely injured when the airbag inflator he was installing accidentally discharged in his face. He was helicoptered to Seattle's Harborview Medical Center where he died on Sunday.

A second technician, a contractor from Vartan Aviation Group, was also injured but he was released from the hospital a few days after the accident. Boeing, Jamco America and Vartan Aviation Group released little or no information about the nature of the accident and did not comment on the medical condition of the injured workers until Otto's death.

Boeing hastened to assure passengers and the markets that the airbag deployment happened before the unit was fully assembled and that the device posed no threat to passengers. The giant aircraft manufacturer released a statement assuring that the injuries "were not related to air bag deployment, as would occur during passenger flight, but rather were related to the discharge of the inflator while the system was partially disassembled."

Airbags are being installed in these jets because of a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulation that went into effect in October 2009 concerning certain seat configurations. These are chiefly business-class seats that do not have a seat in front but are angled to face an aisle, or seats that face a bulkhead wall or some other hard surface, according to the *Seattle Times*.

The regulation requires passengers to be able to withstand forces up to 16 times Earth's gravity. The cheapest option for complying with this had been the installation of air bags. Boeing reportedly had looked into alternative safety fixes such as increasing the

distance between seats and installing three-point shoulder harnesses but both were rejected because they would have allegedly increased fuel costs and reduced revenue.

The response of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which represents the 32,000 machinists employed by Boeing, will no doubt be to cover for the company and its own role in creating unsafe working conditions and sanctioning the expanded use of contract workers with few if any protections. According to the *Herald Business Journal*, the IAM "is helping Boeing with its own investigation, though the union does not represent the contractors who were injured."

An IAM/Boeing Joint Programs Site Committee overseeing health and safety operates at the sprawling Everett plant and other Boeing facilities. These corporatist bodies are above all concerned with boosting the productivity and profitability of the aircraft manufacturer—whose third quarter profits jumped 13 percent to \$2.4 billion—inevitably undermining the safety of plant workers.

In February 2012, Boeing employee Josh Divers lost the lower part of both his legs after he was run over by a taxiing 787 jetliner. Washington State Department of Labor and Industries fined the company \$3,600 for a "serious" violation. In March 2013, Stan Sprague's lungs were crushed while working on a 747. In the same month, 38-year-old David Priester of the South Carolina 787 complex died of a fall from a platform. He had worked for Boeing less than a year.

In the subsequent investigation of Priester's death, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) concluded that Boeing had not committed any violations, even though fellow workers gave testimony about a faulty platform that left a nearly

two-foot gap from the plane through which Priester fell. In December 2012, another Boeing worker fell to his death from a scaffold while painting a plane.

Over the past five years, Washington State Department of Labor and Industries found that Boeing had violated safety procedures in eight work place accidents it investigated. The department also found violations during two investigations into Jamco.

The increasing accidents go hand in hand with Boeing's relentless drive to escalate productivity with a smaller workforce. The IAM and the United Auto Workers, which nominally represents the workers in South Carolina, have aided and abetted the company by ramming through contract concessions imposed despite tremendous opposition by rank-and-file workers.

Since 2002, concessions imposed by the business executives who run the IAM have allowed Boeing to slash jobs, outsource work to contractors and sharply increase productivity. Boeing recently announced plans to roll out its flagship plane, the 737, at the rate of 47 per month by 2017 and 52 per month by 2018. It currently builds 38 jets per month up from 31 in 2008.

IAM Lodge 751's web site noted, "In 1990 Boeing delivered 285 planes with over 43,000 IAM members. Last year, Boeing delivered 441 airplanes with less than 25,000 IAM members. While new technology and lean activities may have accounted for some efficiency improvements, a big part of why it took fewer members was increased subcontracting." Boeing anticipates producing 620 airplanes by 2018, the highest rate ever.

The union's alliance with Boeing was demonstrated again in the winter of 2013-2014, when the IAM joined the company and local politicians to blackmail Everett workers into accepting deep concessions under the threat that Boeing would move future production of new composite-winged 777X out of state. The IAM forced a vote—which narrowly passed—after rank-and-file workers initially rejected the union's proposal for an eight-year contract extension that surrendered company-paid pensions, increased health care costs and outlawed strikes through 2024.

Boeing has little reason to worry about serious investigations let alone criminal or financial penalties for its negligence given that the giant corporation essentially has the state's Democratic and Republican politicians in its pockets. In November 2013, Washington's state legislature and Democratic

governor handed Boeing the largest corporate tax break in history—\$8.7 billion until 2040.

The investigations conducted by Washington State Department of Labor & Industries and OSHA are scripted formalities, and do not provide any meaningful deterrent to unsafe practices condoned by the company. The Obama administration cut OSHA's budget again in 2014 by \$11 million to \$553 million, after a cut in 2013 of \$18 million. Due to sequestration, in 2013, the budget was further reduced to \$535 million.

Considering that in 2013, 4,405 workers were reportedly killed on the job in the United States, the OSHA budget allocated approximately \$121,000 for each worker killed. In addition, several hundreds of thousands of workers are injured, many severely, while others suffer from diseases caused by toxic chemicals. This is yet one more example of the American ruling elite's real attitude towards worker safety.



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