

The GM ignition defect settlement and capitalist “justice”

Patrick Martin
19 September 2015

Corporations are people, according to the US Supreme Court’s decisions in *Citizens United* and *Hobby Lobby*. Their right to “free speech” entitles them to buy elections. Their right to “freedom of religion” entitles them to impose their owners’ prejudices against abortion and contraception on their employees.

Corporations are not people, however, when they commit murder, steal billions, pollute the world, or perpetrate other crimes for which human beings would be severely punished. So say the Obama administration, the Democratic and Republican parties, and the corporate-controlled media.

The latest demonstration of this fact came with the announcement by the US Justice Department of its settlement with General Motors over the cover-up of a deadly ignition switch defect. No senior executive of GM will go to jail for the deaths of at least 124 people, mainly young adults, due to defects in the compact and subcompact cars they purchased from the company. The company will set aside \$900 million for compensating survivors, less than one month’s pre-tax profits.

There is clear documentary evidence that GM knew of problems with the switch as early as 2001 but took no action. Instead, it took steps that point to a deliberate cover-up, seeking to avoid a recall and failing to alert customers.

US Attorney Preet Bharara, an Obama appointee, declared Wednesday, “the company’s cooperation and remediation have been fairly extraordinary,” and hailed GM as a model for other companies facing federal investigation for safety and health issues.

The government’s role in covering for the company follows what is now a standard pattern. No senior executive of BP has gone to jail for the devastating explosion that killed 11 workers in 2010, and the

ensuing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, which cost hundreds of thousands their livelihood, killed countless fish, birds and other sea creatures, and poisoned the environment, with ominous consequences in terms of cancer and other illnesses. Kenneth Feinberg, the Obama appointee to run the victim compensation fund, insisted that victims sign releases exempting BP from any and all liability before they could receive a penny.

No senior executive of a bank, hedge fund or other giant financial institution has gone to jail for the systematic swindling and theft that produced the 2008 Wall Street crash and wiped out the jobs and livelihoods of tens of millions of working people. Wall Street lawyer Eric Holder was put in charge of the investigation when Obama named him Attorney General. Holder rejected criminal charges against the biggest banks, citing the impact on the US financial system, establishing a de facto rule that JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs and Citigroup were “too big to prosecute.” Holder left the Justice Department this year to his reward: a seven-figure job at his old Wall Street law firm.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has frequently pointed out that the American ruling class, in the operation of its military-intelligence apparatus, functions as a criminal mafia. It tramples on international law, assuming for itself the “right” to kill, kidnap, invade, imprison, torture and otherwise violate the basic rights of people throughout the world.

The same is true of the conduct of the capitalist elite in their everyday functioning as the masters of the economic system, running the giant banks and corporations that dominate American life. The CEOs of major corporations and banks are above the law, which is applied brutally and without mercy to working people, particularly youth and minorities.

A case in point: A report from the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration released Thursday documents the toll from corporate negligence in American workplaces. Some 4,679 workers lost their lives in 2014, up slightly from 2013, although less than the peak of more than 5,214 deaths in 2008, before the economic slump.

These workers fell victim to “accidents” that are no more genuinely accidental than the deaths of innocent men, women and children blown up by cruise missiles fired by US drones. For the most part, their deaths were predictable, a cost of doing business, less expensive (to the corporations) than making the necessary precautions to prevent them.

This figure, 4,679 workers killed on the job in 2014, invites some comparisons. Every year, American employers kill more workers than died at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Every year, the death toll for American workers on the job is greater than the death toll among American soldiers in eight years of war in Iraq.

Needless to say, there has been no “war on workplace deaths” to match the trillions squandered in the “war on terror,” the catchall justification for invading countries or fomenting civil war. There are no detention camps or orange jumpsuits for corporate bosses who kill their employees or their customers. At most, as in the cases of BP and GM, they might have to pay a fine, amounting to a tiny fraction of corporate profits.

The apologists and defenders of capitalism declare that the deaths caused by faulty auto ignitions or explosions on oil-drilling platforms are an unavoidable feature of modern industrial life. In fact, they are the product of the capitalist system, based on the exploitation of the working class and the subordination of economic life, in the United States and internationally, to the demands of profit and the interests of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

There is an alternative: hold the ruling class accountable, in both individual and corporate capacity. Make the capitalists pay for their crimes, through the expropriation of their wealth, both to compensate the victims, and to make possible the rational and humane reorganization of economic life to serve the needs of the people, not private wealth and privilege. Only the independent political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism can bring the capitalist

criminals, and the profit system, to the bar of justice.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact