

Workers killed on the job near Rochester, New York

Steve Filips
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John J. Higgins, 50, who worked for Crop Production Services (CPS), was killed while taking part in the unloading of fertilizer from a railroad car this past Wednesday in Lakeville, New York, just south of Rochester.

CPS is a subsidiary of Canadian multinational corporation Agrium Inc., which employs 15,500 workers worldwide and boasted \$16 billion in revenue 2014. The company has been cited and fined multiple times for violations by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

From what is known of the accident, Higgins and two coworkers were offloading fertilizer from a railroad car, when an apparent jam in the chute took place. Higgins climbed to the top of the car to physically clear the chute—which, according to reports, frequently becomes clogged with coagulated fertilizer—at which point he lost his balance, fell in to fertilizer, and was unable to pull himself out.

His fellow workers and bystanders tried to extricate Higgins by hand and shovel. Emergency crews were also quick to respond but unable to remove him. The workers and bystanders that were interviewed by local press expressed shock at the suddenness of the event and grief over the loss of Higgins. He is survived by a son and daughter.

In another fatal workplace incident on December 1, Daniel Mayer, 49, was fatally injured at Mersen Corporation, a French-owned multinational electronic parts supplier with a facility near Rochester.

Mayer was in the vicinity when maintenance was being performed on the factory's 200 ton press. A block, made of unknown material, was being used as a safety brace to hold the presses mechanism open. Without warning the press was engaged, subsequently crushing the block, which exploded and showered

Mayer with shrapnel.

Mayer's friends are helping to raise money for his family through a Facebook auction for a guitar signed by popular area musicians Chris Daughtry and Elvio Fernandes. Mayer was remembered as being a talented singer, and a good friend, brother, and father.

Report by local media covering the two deaths didn't indicate whether inspectors were on the scene. Inspectors have made no known statements to the press.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) reported in December that there were 4,836 worker fatalities in 2015, which translates to 13 work-related deaths per day, slightly more than the 4,821 killed on the job in 2014. Data for 2016 is not yet available.

The annual number of serious on-the-job injuries suffered by US workers is estimated at approximately 3 million. These figures do not take into account the number of chronic and repetitive-stress injuries and sicknesses incurred without immediate physical harm that may become a lifelong burden to workers. It is estimated by the Department of Labor that 50,000 workers annually succumb to long term occupational illnesses, often the result of exposure to hazardous substances. (See: US coal miners hit by sharp rise in deadliest black lung disease)

Workplace fatalities will be certain to increase under the administration of Donald Trump, which has made gutting what little remains of federal workplace safety and environmental protection one of its central policy thrusts, part of a larger plan to lift all restraints on capitalist profit-making in the name of launching trade war against major US rivals. On Monday Trump signed an executive order mandating that two regulations be cut for every new regulation introduced, and imposing a cap on regulatory spending.

These moves come under conditions where OSHA resources are already stretched dangerously thin—with, currently, a ratio of one OSHA inspector for every 59,000 workers—and in which inconsequential slap-on-the-wrist fines for violations convince corporations that it is more profitable to forgo safety measures.



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