

Each day 150 workers die in the US due to hazardous work conditions

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The AFL-CIO last week released its annual report on workplace fatalities and injuries. “Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect, 2017” is based on 2015 injury and fatality data compiled by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and Fiscal Year 2016 enforcement data from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

In 2015, the study found:

- 4,836 workers were killed on the job in the United States or 3.4 per 100,00 workers.
- 50,000 to 60,000 workers died from occupational diseases.
- There were 3.7 million reported work-related injuries or illnesses, a figure that the AFL-CIO acknowledges is underreported. The true toll is estimated to be between 7.4-11.1 million.
- Overall, 150 workers die each day due to hazardous working conditions.

Statistics for individual groups of workers are even more horrifying. Deaths of Latino workers, for example, increased significantly, from 804 in 2014 to 903 in 2015. Immigrant workers accounted for 67 percent of that figure. In total, 943 immigrant workers or over 20 percent of the total—were killed on the job in 2015.

Older workers face especially hazardous conditions. Workers 55 and older accounted for 35 percent of all fatalities, a total of 1,681 deaths. For workers 65 and older, the fatality rate is 9.4 per 100,000, a figure 2.5 times higher than the average.

The highest rate of worker fatalities was in agriculture, fishing and forestry, with 570 deaths in 2015, at a rate of 22.8 per 100,000. The death rate for transportation and warehouse workers placed second, at 13.8 per 100,000, for a total of 765 fatalities. Deaths in the construction industry continued to increase in 2015, for the second year in a row, with 937 construction

workers being killed on the job.

In the mining industry 118 workers died in 2015. The fatality rate in the mining sector was three times the national average or 11.4 per 100,000 workers. This includes workers in the gas and oil industry, who account for 74 percent of the total fatalities in that sector. While the report notes that this represents a decline from previous years, it fails to mention the salient fact that this is largely due to a massive reduction in the coal mining workforce.

Violence in the workplace claimed the lives of 703 workers in 2015. An additional 26,420 workplace injuries were reported due to violence.

The US states with the highest rates of on-the-job fatalities were North Dakota and Wyoming, with 12.5 and 12 per 100,000 respectively. This is near twice the number of the next highest state, Montana, which saw 7.5 fatalities per 100,000 workers.

The report details the paucity of resources available for the enforcement of workplace safety rules. For the eight million workplaces covered under the Occupational Safety and Hazards Act (OSHA), there are a mere 1,838 inspectors, or one for every 76,402 workers. In practical terms, this means that federal OSHA inspectors have enough personnel to inspect each workplace once every 159 years, while state inspectors can visit each workplace once every 99 years. The annual OSHA budget equals \$3.65 for each worker in the US.

Despite its authors’ best intentions, the report is an indictment of American capitalism, both corporate-controlled political parties and the role of unions themselves.

In a whitewash of President Obama, the AFL-CIO report claims, “The Obama administration produced a number of significant safety and health rules and left a

solid legacy of worker protections in place. While the first term saw many regulatory delays, the second term was much more productive.” Among the supposed reforms enacted by Obama is the Mine Safety and Health Administration’s “2014 coal dust rule [that] reduces dust exposures and protects miners from black lung.”

In fact, by reducing the allowable exposure to coal dust by only 25 percent, the Obama administration not only intervened to deliberately loosen the 1.0-milligram limit proposed by MSHA; it also rejected longstanding recommendations by health officials, backed by numerous studies, arguing that the limits should be cut in half to 1.0 milligram.

Under the Obama administration, the deadliest form of black lung, the common name for coal workers pneumoconiosis, has increased sharply although this deadly and incurable occupational lung disease is known to be entirely preventable through proper dust control.

The overall occupational fatality statistics also contradict the AFL-CIO’s assertion about Obama. With the exception, of 2013, the number of fatalities steadily rose under the Obama administration from a low of 4,551 in 2009 to 4,836 in 2015.

The Obama administration was also aware that the last-minute measures it took before leaving office could easily be underdone by an incoming administration.

Insofar as the AFL-CIO looked to the Obama administration, it was because the Democratic president utilized the services of the unions to implement its pro-corporate policies. One of Obama’s first acts was to appoint former United Mine Workers of America safety director, Joe Main, to head up OSHA’s mine safety division. Under Main, who was schooled in the UMW’s corporatist outlook of labor-management collusion, 29 miners were killed in the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine disaster and coal companies rarely saw anything but wrist-slap fines.

At the same time, the Obama administration relied on the unions to suppress opposition to stagnant wages, increased exploitation, longer and more grueling work hours and the explosion of so-called “independent contractors” who lack any job security and are denied workers compensation and unemployment benefits.

In 2015, for example, the United Steelworkers betrayed the strike by oil refinery workers whose

demands included a reduction in work hours to combat worker fatigue in the perilous industry.

President Trump, who has stacked his cabinet and administration with billionaires and business figures hostile to the slightest obstacle to corporate profit-making, had promised to destroy supposed “job killing” regulations, including occupational safety. In his first week in office, Trump signed a presidential memorandum ordering all federal agencies to freeze the regulatory process and delay the implementation of new rules not yet in effect. Days later, he issued an absurd executive order ordering that for every new regulation adopted two previous ones must be repealed.

The administration has abolished rules requiring employers to keep accurate records of injuries and illnesses incurred on the job, as well as requiring companies to report past health and safety violations when bidding for federal contracts. Trump’s proposals would reduce the budget of the Department of Labor by 21 percent, slash the funds made available for job safety research by \$100 million dollars, and eliminate the chemical safety board altogether.

The Trump administration has also delayed the implementation of new OSHA rules dealing with the handling of beryllium and silica. The AFL-CIO report states that delay of the Silica rule will lead to 160 worker deaths.

Whatever its criticisms of the current administration, the AFL-CIO has wholly embraced Trump’s program of economic nationalism and trade war. AFL-CIO chief Richard Trumka, a frequent visitor to the White House, has been appointed to Trump’s Manufacturing Jobs Initiative panel, where he sits alongside the heads of the Big Three auto companies, the CEOs of US Steel, and other corporate leaders. The purpose of the panel is to increase the profitability of US manufacturers at the expense of their international rivals and the working class at home.



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