

Worker killed at Kansas oil refinery as OSHA conceals data on workplace deaths

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An oil worker was killed on Tuesday in a fire at the reformer unit of the HollyFrontier oil refinery in El Dorado, Kansas. The worker was a member of the United Steelworkers union (USW). Neither the worker's name nor age has been released.

The fire ignited after a furnace blew out and the worker died from injuries suffered from being caught in the fire. It is unclear what caused the blowout. Lynne Hancock, spokesperson for the USW's oil sector, said through an email that "Our union is working with OSHA to investigate this incident and find the root cause(s) so it does not happen again."

The USW's professions of concern are empty and hypocritical. OSHA and the union will cooperate to cover up the circumstances of the death of this worker as they have done many times in the past. The union itself has worked hand-in-hand with the corporations to strip away safety measures for workers by pushing through concessions contracts that have laid off experienced workers and put in place cheap and ineffective "safety training programs." These help provide a legal cover for companies that force workers to labor under life-threatening conditions.

In 2015 oil refinery workers struck to oppose working conditions that put many of the workers at risk of death on a regular basis. One worker at the BP Whiting, Indiana refinery told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at the time that he had been forced to climb up scaffolding to fix a valve because the company would not spend money on ladders. As a result he fell and broke multiple bones. The strike ended in a sellout deal in which the USW imposed no safety regulations at the refinery, merely promising "discussions" with the union about staff levels and overtime.

No record of the death of the worker in Kansas has been posted to OSHA.gov, the federal website of the

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) that oversees health and safety regulations in the workplace. In fact, countless numbers of worker deaths in the US have never been recorded on the federal site, including that of Michael Morrison, an IBEW member who fell to his death at a construction site in Detroit, Michigan in May of this year, and Jonathan Arizzola, a USW member who was electrocuted after touching an uninsulated railing at the US Steel Gary Works Mill in Gary, Indiana in September 2016.

After Arizzola's death, the USW worked to avert a strike at the mill by implementing pre-emptive "safety measures" which amounted to nothing more than the same toothless "discussions" that came out of the BP Whiting contract. Workers at Gary Works were told by the USW that they had to be responsible for each other's safety, despite working long overtime hours on skeleton crews after mass layoffs at the mill, layoffs that the USW did nothing to oppose.

The worker's death in Kansas occurred against the backdrop of a Trump administration campaign to hide information from the public regarding workplace fatalities. Beginning on August 18 of this year, OSHA has removed reports of workers' deaths from its homepage. A report from Politico.com states that "the Occupational Safety and Health Administration had maintained a running list of workers killed on the job—including the date, name and cause of death—near the top of its home page. The list included every worker death reported to OSHA, regardless of whether the company was issued a citation."

According to the same report, fatality reports are now hidden in an internal page on the site. To find fatality reports, one must search under the "Data" tab on the top of the home page and then search under "Fatality

Reports” on the drop-down menu. These reports only date back to January 2017, when previously they could be searched back as far as several years. Furthermore, OSHA is now only recording deaths for which it has issued a citation, meaning that hundreds of workers’ deaths are likely going unreported.

What is to be made of this effort by the US government to wash away the crimes of the ruling class? The move by OSHA has been taken in order to pre-empt massive opposition from the working class by restricting access to important public safety information while the Trump Administration prepares to strip away health and safety regulations, which will result in a growing number of workers dying on the job.

US workplaces have been getting deadlier and deadlier as the stock markets soar and the wealth of society is concentrated into the hands of a shrinking number of oligarchs. In Indiana alone, 115 workers were reported to have died in 2015, a modest drop from 190 two decades prior, and a proportional increase given the amount of layoffs and plant closures in the region in the past 20 years. With the steel industry pressuring Trump to make good on his nationalist “America First” agenda, workers in the steel industry can expect their working conditions to fall toward the levels of countries like China and India, where workers have very few, if any, protections.

Workers in mining have experienced similar deadly trends. In a reactionary move, the Trump administration has appointed David Zatezalo, former chairman of Kentucky-based coal company Rhino Resources, to be an assistant secretary of labor overseeing the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). While Zatezalo was head of Rhino Resources, the company was fined after a series of safety problems, which MSHA deemed 'a pattern violation.' Not long after that a Rhino miner died in a wall collapse. After that tragedy the company was fined \$44,500.

Zatezalo's appointment comes on the heels of the tenure of Joseph Main, Obama’s MSHA appointee, who has a long history in the bureaucracy of the United Mine Workers of America union (UMWA), which has worked for decades with the coal companies to lay off thousands of workers and close mines, leaving entire regions of Appalachia and the Midwest barren and destitute while energy stock prices soared on Wall Street.

Main oversaw the stripping of labor and safety regulations in the coal industry that have led to a rash of coal miner deaths in the past year. In 2017 alone, 12 coal workers have reportedly died, as many as in the entire year of 2015, when 25,000 more workers were employed in the US coal industry. Hundreds more face early deaths from work-related illnesses as the corporations and the UMWA move to eliminate health care benefits for mine workers and their families.

OSHA’s move to systematically erase data on workers’ deaths signals a shift further to the right in the American ruling class, which sees workers’ lives as nothing but obstacles in the way of its drive for larger profit shares. President Trump’s America First agenda, with the full backing of Wall Street and the widest layers of the Democratic Party, is aimed at freeing US corporations from the minimal health and safety regulations in place that are a fetter on their drive for greater and greater control of the world’s wealth.



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