

Horrific death at Ohio meatpacking plant

Industrial carnage continues in US workplaces

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On Saturday evening, 62-year-old Samuel Martinez was pulled into a waste grinding machine and killed at a meatpacking plant in Canton, Ohio, 60 miles south of Cleveland. The Guatemalan native, who was pronounced dead at the scene, is the latest known victim of the industrial carnage that claims nearly 5,000 lives each year in the United States.

A coroner's investigator said Martinez stepped into a chute and his leg was caught in a waste augur at the Fresh Mark meat processing plant. The company issued a perfunctory statement declaring that it is cooperating with local authorities to determine the cause of the death and that it is committed to the well-being of its employees.

In fact, the company, which produces bacon, ham, hot dogs and deli meats under the Sugardale Foods, Sugardale Foods Service and Superior's Brand Meats trademarks, has a record of hazardous conditions and safety violations. In 2011, 20-year-old Marcos Perez-Velasquez, also a Guatemalan native, was electrocuted while he was attempting to plug a 220-volt fan into a 480-volt plug while standing in water.

A quick search of the Internet found an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) report on a 2009 incident in which a worker lost two fingers when he tried to unjam a pepperoni machine. OSHA issued a "serious violation" fine of only \$2,125.

The workers at the Canton plant, which employs 750 people, are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, which has a decades-long record of collaborating with management in the slashing of wages and benefits and enforcement of speedup, contributing to repetitive motion injuries, amputations and deaths.

While anti-immigrant chauvinists blame Latin and Asian workers for driving down wages and conditions, the large influx of immigrants into the meatpacking industry followed the betrayal of a series of bitter strikes in the 1980s, including at Iowa Beef Processors, Cudahy, Hormel and Oscar Mayer, which transformed the factories into cheap-

labor sweatshops like Fresh Mark.

Conditions at the Canton plant can be ascertained from recent employee reviews posted on the Internet. One worker wrote: "Terrible company to work for... Bad management. Production driven and fast pace work environment. Only supervisors get bonus. Company doesn't care about their production workers... No medical benefits for dependents. No dental insurance, work there for 8 years. Hostile work environment, union non-existent in favor of company... Takes 5 years to get top rate of \$13.65. You start at \$ 9.00. Watch your pay stubs hours and rate... company will cheat you out of your money. Would not recommend."

Another wrote: "Management is horrible. The union is for the company and not for the employees. They would work us 10+ hours a day 7 days a week for months on end. They show no appreciation to their employees at all!"

"I worked for the company for 10 years in Canton, Ohio," another worker said. "The company management is full of liars and trouble-makers. There is harassment that goes on regularly by management and other hourly employees. The company has a high turnover and the management can't understand why. I would not recommend working for this company in any capacity. You might live to regret it."

The daily toll of fatalities and injuries in America's workplaces is largely ignored by the corporate-controlled media, which is focused on the concerns of the corporate elite and the most affluent sections of the upper-middle class. While providing daily coverage of the campaign against alleged sexual misconduct being spearheaded by the Democratic Party, the media shows little interest in industrial fatalities and injuries. These are seen as collateral damage in corporate America's war for profits and the dizzying upward surge of stock prices on Wall Street.

With only the rarest of exceptions, no companies, owners or top executives are held accountable for the preventable deaths of workers forced to labor under hazardous conditions.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) will release its Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries for 2016 on Tuesday. Its most recent report found a total of 4,836 fatal workplace injuries in 2015, up from 4,821 in 2014 and the highest number since 2008.

The BLS has already reported that there were nearly 3.7 million nonfatal work-related injuries and illnesses in 2016. These, however, are notoriously underreported. The true yearly toll of injuries and illnesses, according to the AFL-CIO, is 7.4 million to 11.1 million.

Due to changes introduced by the Trump administration, OSHA no longer keeps a running list of industrial fatalities on its web site, nor does it publicize the names of the victims. Only in the relatively rare cases when OSHA issues a citation will it list the fatalities, meaning scores if not hundreds of deaths are going unreported.

Since the beginning of the month, local media outlets have reported scores of fatal workplace injuries, including the following:

- William Stubbs, 51, was killed at the Pleasantdale Road facility of United Parcel Service (UPS) on Friday, December 16, near the company's headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. The 17-year veteran worker was crushed by a truck at a loading dock.

- Bruce Biron, 55, a 25-year employee at the Ethan Allen furniture plant in Beecher Falls, Vermont, died December 13 while "performing maintenance on machinery within a silo," according to state police.

- Charles Jones, 57, of Shannon, North Carolina was killed December 12 when the wheels of a dump truck rolled over him. The accident is being investigated by the North Carolina Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Division.

- Alfred Cadena, 61, was crushed and killed in the early morning hours of December 11 at the ArcelorMittal steel mill in East Chicago, Illinois.

- On December 9, Ivan Bridgewater III, a 41-year-old electrician, died as a result of "blunt force trauma" at Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville. The nature of the trauma and its cause have not yet been revealed.

- On December 1, 31-year-old contract worker Yesenia Espinoza was struck by a falling 14-inch pipe and killed while working on a construction project at the ExxonMobil refinery in Beaumont, Texas, 84 miles northeast of Houston.

In a newly published book, *Dying to Work: Death and Injury in the American Workplace*, author Jonathan D. Karmel writes: "The odds of dying in a plane crash are 1 in 11 million. The odds of being killed in a terrorist attack in the United States are 1 in 20 million. Yet, since 2001, the US government has spent more than \$1 trillion in antiterrorism measures, excluding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For

these improbable events, we spend considerable more time, treasure, and worry than we do about the very real and personal risk to, for example, a hotel housekeeper. For workers in America, the workplace is a dangerous House of Horrors. Some would say it is a jungle." Here Karmel alludes to Upton Sinclair's famous 1906 exposure of the meatpacking industry.

In addition to the 4,836 workers the BLS reports were killed on the job in 2015—an average of 13 workers every day—another 50,000 to 60,000 die every year from work-related illnesses such as Black Lung disease, silicosis and asbestosis. This computes to an average of 137 per day. All told, some 150 workers die each day because of hazardous conditions.

These conditions will only worsen as the Trump administration, staffed by billionaires and corporate proponents of deregulation, eliminates what few health and safety protections for workers still in place. According to the *Charleston Gazette*, the administration is preparing to overturn a three-year-old rule meant to reduce exposure to coal dust, which causes Black Lung disease among miners. A new regulatory agenda published by the White House said the Labor Department's Mine Safety and Health Administration would seek ways the coal dust rule "could be improved or made more effective or less burdensome."

The rule was put in place in the last years of President Obama, after the Democratic administration delayed implementing it for many years. The rule was prompted by studies showing a growing incidence of the most deadly form of Black Lung, including among younger miners.



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