

US workplace fatalities rose 7 percent in 2016

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20 December 2017

There were 5,190 fatal workplace injuries recorded in the United States in 2016, up seven percent from the 4,836 workers killed on the job in 2015, according to figures released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics Tuesday.

The 2016 data—the most current made available by the US government—means that annual workplace fatalities have increased three consecutive years since 2013. Last year was also the first year since 2008 in which more than 5,000 fatalities have been recorded by the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) since 2008. The fatal injury rate increased to 3.6 per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers, up from 3.4 in 2015 and the highest rate since 2010.

The number of reported deaths is inching up towards the pre-Great Recession levels of 5,214 (2008) and 5,657 (2007). This suggests that the decline in fatalities in 2009 (4,551) and 2010 (4,693) was chiefly due to a sharp reduction in the number of employed workers and total hours worked after the 2008 economic crash. Total hours worked fell from 272 billion in 2008 to 255 billion in 2009, according to the BLS. The number has now surpassed pre-recession levels, rising to an estimated 277 billion in 2015 and 282 billion in 2016, with the number of workplace fatalities rising along with it.

The rising death toll in the final years of the Obama administration coincided with stagnating wages, the proliferation of low-paid, temporary and part-time jobs, and the shifting of health care and pension costs onto the backs of the working class. In other words, the doubling of the stock market, the record corporate profits and the historic transfer of wealth to the top during Obama's so-called economic recovery was achieved primarily through ramping up working-class exploitation and over the lives and bones of tens of thousands of workers.

This period coincided with the suppression of the

class struggle by the trade unions, which virtually banned all strikes by workers who were determined to recover their lost wages and benefits and improve working conditions. The strikes that were called, including the 2015 oil refinery strike, when workers explicitly demanded an end to grueling work schedules and fatigue, were isolated and defeated by the unions. The period from 2007 to 2016 was the lowest decade on record for work stoppages involving 1,000 workers or more since the BLS began recording such figures in 1947.

In 2016, injuries involving transportation incidents remained the most common fatal event, accounting for 40 percent (2,083) of the fatalities. Deaths caused by exposure to harmful substances or environments, including electrocution, rose 22 percent in 2016.

Fatal work injuries from falls, slips, or trips continued a general upward trend that began in 2011, increasing six percent to 849 in 2016 and 25 percent overall since 2011. Falls increased more than 25 percent in 2016 for roofers, carpenters, tree trimmers and pruners, and heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers.

In a measure of the deep social crisis and the unions' abandonment of the most elemental protections for workers, workplace suicides increased by 62 to 291 in 2016, the most suicides since the CFOI began reporting data in 1992. Overdoses from the nonmedical use of drugs or alcohol while on the job increased from 165 in 2015 to 217 in 2016, a 32-percent increase. Overdose fatalities have increased by at least 25 percent annually since 2012.

Workplace homicides also increased, by 83 cases to 500 in 2016, the highest homicide figure since 2010. Overall violence and other injuries by persons or animals increased 23 percent to become the second-most common fatal event in 2016.

The occupations with the highest rate of fatalities were:

• Farming, fishing and forestry occupations (24.9 fatalities per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers), with deaths among agricultural workers, which include migrant workers, accounting for more than half of the total. The number of fatalities among loggers increased from 67 in 2015 to 91.

• Transportation and material moving (15.5 per 100,000) accounted for more than a quarter of all work-related fatalities. The number of workers killed last year was up 7 percent to 1,388, the highest count since 2007.

• Construction and extraction (12.4 per 100,000) accounted for 970 deaths. This includes first-line supervisors of construction and extraction workers with 134 fatal injuries, and roofers with 101.

Occupations with increases greater than 10 percent in the number of fatal work injuries in 2016 include food preparation and serving-related occupations (64 percent); leisure and hospitality sector (32 percent); installation, maintenance, and repair occupations (20 percent); building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations (14 percent); and sales and related occupations (11 percent).

Foreign-born workers make up about one-fifth of the total fatal work injuries. Thirty-seven percent of these workers were born in Mexico, followed by 19 percent from Asian countries.

Asian workers accounted for 160 fatal injuries, up from 114 in 2015 and the highest percentage increase (40 percent) among any race or ethnic origin. There was a nominal decline in the number of reported deaths of Latino workers, from 903 in 2015 to 879 in 2016.

African-American workers had a large percentage increase (19 percent), with 587 fatal injuries compared to 495 in 2015.

The overwhelming majority of workers suffering fatal injuries (3,481) were white. Men of all races accounted for 4,803 deaths, while 387 women were killed at work in 2016.

Reflecting the trend of workers laboring for longer years due to the lack of any retirement security, workers age 55 years and over had 1,848 fatal injuries, the highest number for this cohort since CFOI began reporting national data in 1992. In 1992, workers age 55 and over accounted for 20 percent of fatalities; in 2016, they accounted for 36 percent. These workers also have a higher fatality rate than other age groups.

The raw data provides only a glimpse of the human suffering that the capitalist system visits upon workers and their families. Since the beginning of the month alone, reported fatal accidents have taken the lives of: Yesenia Espinoza, 31-year-old construction worker and a mother of two, at a Texas oil refinery; Bruce Biron, a 55-year-old employee at the Ethan Allen furniture plant in Beecher Falls, Vermont; construction worker Charles Jones, 57, of Shannon, North Carolina; Ivan Bridgewater, a 41-year-old electrician and father of a two-year-old child, who was killed at Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville; Alfred Cadena, a 61-year-old steelworker at the ArcelorMittal mill in East Chicago, Illinois; William Stubbs, a 51-year-old United Parcel Service worker near Atlanta, Georgia; and 62-year-old Samuel Martinez, a Guatemalan native and a father who was killed at a meatpacking plant in Canton, Ohio.

The new report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics has been ignored by the corporate-controlled media, which is consumed instead by the campaign over alleged sexual misconduct. As of this writing, none of the major news outlets covered the report, with the exception of the *Wall Street Journal*, which focused its article on the rise in drug and alcohol deaths.

The media and politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties sense that any broader awareness of this industrial carnage will only further incense workers who are already angered over Trump's massive tax giveaway to the rich, historically unprecedented levels of social inequality in America and the plans of the ruling class to gut whatever is left of safety and health regulations in order to further boost corporate profits.



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