

Caterpillar worker dies after being crushed at South Milwaukee plant

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A worker injured last week at Caterpillar's South Milwaukee, Wisconsin plant died on Monday. Sixty-year-old Steven Wade was reportedly struck by a heavy metal plate, weighing perhaps more than 1,000 pounds, while welding at about 2 p.m. on May 10.

Wade is survived by his wife Bonnie and children Jessie, La Rosa and Justin. A visitation and funeral service will be held Saturday.

The South Milwaukee plant makes mining machinery and equipment. Caterpillar acquired the facility from Bucyrus International in 2010 and since that time has cut hundreds of jobs at the facility, leaving only a few hundred still working.

As usual, the death of Wade was little noted by local or national media. A call by the *World Socialist Web Site* to United Steelworkers Local 1343 at the South Milwaukee plant was not returned. There was no report of the tragedy on the United Steelworkers website, usw.org.

Caterpillar issued a perfunctory statement saying it was "deeply saddened" by the death of Wade and insisting it was "firmly committed to protecting the health and safety of its employees."

The fatality comes as Caterpillar is in the midst of a global cost-cutting program, including the consolidation of its South Milwaukee operation by the end of the year. The company has cut jobs and driven down conditions and, with the assistance of the unions, pitted workers in different countries and work locations in a competitive struggle against each other.

CAT is planning to close a work tools plant in Texas and a demonstration center in Panama. It is also threatening the closure of its engine plant in La Grange, Illinois, with the loss of about 600 jobs. With these layoffs, Caterpillar will have cut 15,000 jobs since it announced its cost reduction plan in 2015, closing or

consolidating about 30 facilities worldwide.

A retired worker from the South Milwaukee Caterpillar plant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had recently been in contact with workers at the facility about the death of Wade. "Supposedly he was cutting some plates and they came loose and crashed on top of him." He added, "The same day it happened they told the second shift workers not to come in. It is a dangerous place."

Since he started working back in the late 1970s, the retired worker said, Wade was the fourth worker he was aware of who had died at the plant. "Shortly after Caterpillar bought the place from Bucyrus they had an accident. A giant crawler frame fell over on a worker," he said, referring to the 2011 death of Jeffrey Smith, 30, who was killed while attaching a chain under a massive piece of heavy machinery.

"A couple of times I brought safety things up," the worker continued. "A guy came over to me and said, 'it costs too much money.' There are a lot of potential hazards," he added. "For example, if you move equipment or parts with a magnet, things can separate and fall."

Caterpillar carried out a whitewash investigation after the horrific death of Smith that did not pinpoint the cause or responsibility. For its part the United Steelworkers filed a toothless protest to the National Labor Relations Board over Caterpillar's refusal to allow an independent safety investigator onto the site. President Obama's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), meanwhile, fined the company a mere \$7,000.

Since taking over the South Milwaukee plant Caterpillar has carried out a methodical destruction of jobs. The retired worker said, "There used to be a couple thousand workers when I started. We used to

make all kinds of mining equipment like drills and shovels. Since then they have been subcontracting out a lot of the work. Everyone who can is trying to retire.”

“They are known for putting people on the street,” he continued, referring to the 2012 lockout by Caterpillar of workers at its London, Ontario diesel locomotive manufacturing facility. When the workers rejected its demands for a 55 percent wage cut and the elimination of its pension plan, CAT closed the facility, shifting production to Muncie, Indiana, in the US, where workers made as little as \$12 an hour.

“The executives are making high dollars and the stock market is doing well,” the former worker noted. Indeed, Caterpillar profits are strong, with the company posting a profit of \$754 million in 2017 and even better results predicted for 2018.

Management has enforced a brutal regime at the South Milwaukee plant, with the aid of the United Steelworkers. Days after the union forced through a six-year concessions contract in 2013, the company announced long-term layoffs for 260 workers. The contract froze wages for current workers and established “market-based” wages for new hires of as low as \$13.64 an hour.

Following a similar pattern in 2017, the United Auto Workers (UAW) secured ratification of a rotten agreement at other Caterpillar plants that froze wages for senior workers, increased out-of-pocket health care costs and sanctioned the closure of its Aurora, Illinois facility, with a loss of 800 jobs. The contract covered some 5,000 UAW members at 11 facilities in Illinois and Pennsylvania.

As in the case of other recent deaths and injuries on the job, including the serious injury sustained by a 55-year-old worker earlier this month at Ford’s Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit, no serious investigation into the death of Steven Wade can be expected from Caterpillar, the United Steelworkers or OSHA. The WSWS will do everything it can to bring to light the circumstances of these and other tragedies and mobilize opposition in the working class to the gutting of health and safety conditions.



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