

Funeral held for S. Milwaukee Caterpillar welder Steven Wade

Jessica Goldstein
21 May 2018

On Saturday, May 19, family, friends and co-workers paid tribute to 60-year-old Steven Wade, a veteran welder at Caterpillar's South Milwaukee plant who died last week after suffering injuries on May 10. A diverse group of around 60 people came to support the family and commemorate Wade's life at an intimate ceremony held at Heritage Funeral Home in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to family members and co-workers at the service and expressed support and condolences on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party. Bonnie Wade, Steven's widow, and Jessie Wade, his daughter, had both read the WSWS article on Steven's death, which has been circulated among CAT workers.

Wade was hit by a falling metal plate, weighing approximately 1,600 pounds, while he was welding machinery. Co-workers told the WSWS Wade had apparently seen the gigantic plates falling and tried to move out of the way, but he was hit on the shoulder and crushed.

Wade was remembered as a lively conversationalist, a dedicated father, grandfather and husband, and an animal lover. He enjoyed boating, fishing and camping during his life and was described as someone who put others before himself. Medals commemorating his achievements as a welder adorned the casket.

A note from a friend on the funeral home website reads, "I have seen Steve in lean times and times of comfort. The one thing that he showed more than anything else, was his love of family. And making sure that they were free of worry. We will all be better for knowing Steve, and he will truly be missed."

Steven Wade's son, Justin, delivered the eulogy at the service. He said, "My dad worked extremely hard to always put food on the table and keep a roof over our

heads. He loved us so much and made sure to tell us so every day. He taught us to always work hard, to show our love for our families, and to always speak our minds and stand up for what we believe in.

"There were times when we didn't see our parents a whole lot because they were both working. It's what they had to do to give us the best life that they could, but we as kids thought it was normal because that's how most families were around where we grew up.

"He taught my kids how to tell time. We lived close to Caterpillar, so they would always know when it was 3:05, or 3:15, because that's when they would wait for Papa to leave and watch him wave through the window as he drove by."

"Steve was a great guy. It is tragic how he died," a co-worker told the WSWS after the ceremony. He noted the similarities between Wade's death and that of Jeff Smith, a 30-year-old worker who was killed at the S. Milwaukee plant on September 8, 2011.

"Jeff died right after the plant was bought from Bucyrus. He was working on hooking up a chain to a crawler that snapped and fell on him and he was completely crushed underneath it. When Jeff was working there, he was concerned about safety conditions and he brought them up all the time.

"I ended up having to work on that machine, not right after it happened, but one or two years later. The company had put it outside for a while, I think because they knew how many people would have been angry if it had been brought back into the plant. I heard they eventually ended up scrapping the metal from the crawler for sale."

Questions remain about the events surrounding Wade's death. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has opened an investigation into the incident. It is unclear whether an independent

investigation will be opened by the United Steelworkers (USW) as was the case after Smith's death in 2011. As the continued deadly conditions prove, the USW's investigation did not lead to safer working conditions but only served to quell workers' anger that followed.

The USW has been complicit in the downsizing that has undermined safety conditions. The South Milwaukee plant was officially taken over by CAT as part of its \$8.8 billion acquisition of Bucyrus in 2011, and the company has continued to take major cost-cutting measures since then. From a workforce of about 2,000 workers in the 1970s, only 200 to 250 remain at South Milwaukee today. In 2016, CAT announced it would begin moving about 600 employees, including manufacturing, from its mining equipment division in South Milwaukee to a new headquarters in Tucson, Arizona over the next five to seven years. The bulk of those jobs are expected to be moved in 2018.

Far from opposing these attacks, the USW has functioned as management's tool. The union forced through a six-year concessions contract in 2013, which included a wage freeze for current workers and starting wages for new workers as low as \$13.64 per hour. Shortly after the contract was pushed through, CAT announced the layoff of 260 South Milwaukee workers.

Neither the international nor the local union has issued any statement about Wade's death on their websites, while CAT issued a perfunctory statement. No union representatives offered statements of support for the family from the podium at the funeral, let alone any condemnation of the company's policies.

Cutting back staff and hiring underpaid and undertrained workers is a major cause of industrial deaths across the United States. At the South Milwaukee plant, much of the labor previously performed by laid off workers is now done by subcontractors. With the aid of the USW, CAT has introduced second and third tiers of workers in order to maximize its profit margins, following the pattern of the UAW at Ford, Fiat Chrysler and GM. The restructuring of the auto industry by the Obama administration has led to similar cost cutting and a perilous wave of workplace injuries and fatalities.

A January 12 report issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that the rate of workplace deaths for workers aged 55 and older climbed to an all-time high

in 2016, 7.2 deaths per 100,000 workers. From 1992 through 2016, older workers, especially in the 65 and older group, have experienced the highest rates of death in the workplace overall.

Whitney Arizzola, the wife of Jon Arizzola, who was killed at US Steel Gary Works in 2016, sent a powerful statement of support to the Wade family. She told the WSWs, "Please let the family know that I grieve for them and with them. I am still struggling through this hellish aftermath myself. The best advice I could give, as much as it hurts right now, learn everything. How the plant runs, the types of equipment, brands of machines, parts, even safety equipment, and who installed them and when. You can find responsibility agreements online, and those will be your lifelines in finding justice.

"Find an attorney, find a welder, and if you need help with finding someone that knows OSHA inside and out, I can help. As much as I want to say you can trust the union and people in it, the company probably owns those people. Hold your loved ones, cry, scream, and let anyone else willing to hold the day to day things. Always remember that being strong isn't holding it in, it's letting yourself deal how you need to."

Rank-and-file workers at the South Milwaukee CAT plant should elect a factory committee to organize a genuine investigation into the death of Wade and fight the union-management conspiracy to pump out as much profit from workers, regardless of the cost in lives and limbs.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact