

America's industrial slaughterhouse

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One of the rarely examined consequences of the restructuring of class relations in the United States in the decade since the global financial crash of 2008 is the increase in workplace fatalities and injuries. The boom in corporate profits and the record stock market rise have been achieved over the broken bones and corpses of workers.

Fatal accidents reported by local news outlets during just two days in September shed light on the terrible toll of unsafe working conditions.

- On September 12, Luis Almonte, a 47-year-old worker, was buried under the debris of a 20-foot-tall brick wall that collapsed in Brooklyn, New York.

- The same day an unnamed heavy equipment operator died from burns he received five days before when his rig burst into flames at Peabody Energy's Bear Run coal mine near Dugger, Indiana.

- On September 13, Marcus Dewayne Billingsley, a 29-year-old construction worker, fell to his death while working on the site of a new luxury apartment in Birmingham, Alabama.

- Also on September 13, Tabor Daniel Hayes, 20, was killed at the East Gate Pallet facility near Holly Springs, Georgia in an industrial accident involving a table saw.

- The same day, the body of a 24-year-old Ford worker, whose name has not yet been released, was found inside a bathroom stall at the Ford Sterling Axle Plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan. The deceased was the father of a two-year-old child. Coworkers told police the young man told them he did not feel well. They suspected he might have collapsed before going to the bathroom.

According to the most current government data available, 5,190 workers were killed on the job in 2016, up 7 percent from the 4,836 killed in 2015. In addition, another 50,000 to 60,000 workers die from occupational diseases, including Black Lung, silicosis and various cancers caused by exposure to workplace toxins. At least 150 workers die each day in the United States from preventable, hazardous workplace conditions.

In addition, 2.9 million nonfatal workplace injuries and

illnesses were reported by employers in 2016. This number, no doubt, is a gross underestimation, since many workers fear retribution from management if they report injuries and many companies fail to report injuries and illnesses.

With the decline in real wages over the last 10 years, workers have been forced to labor at multiple jobs and work longer hours. They face relentless demands for increased workloads and higher productivity. From handheld computers carried by UPS and other package delivery drivers, to wristbands being tested on Amazon workers, to software to monitor the keyboard clicks of office personnel, corporations are employing new technology to impose speedup and squeeze more and more production out of workers.

After making profits for the corporations, injured workers have been left to starve or go homeless. In a widely viewed video on the *World Socialist Web Site*, Angela Shelton, a Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas-area Amazon worker, describes how the giant logistics company paid her \$7.14 per week in after-tax compensation after she suffered a disabling wrist injury on the job. Another Amazon worker at the same Haslet, Texas Amazon facility was forced to live in her car after being injured.

Of the 5,190 fatalities in 2016, 970—or one in five—were in the construction industry. Every month, 80 construction workers die in workplace accidents, with the bulk of the deaths caused by falls.

“They treat us like mules; they will break you down and then throw you away,” construction worker Ernesto Rivera told the *Guardian*, describing conditions in Nashville, Tennessee, where 16 workers were killed in 2016-2017.

It is remarkable, given the frequency and severity of such accidents, that they evoke complete disinterest from the mainstream media and both corporate-controlled political parties. Since the 1980s, workplace safety and health standards have been undermined by both the Democrats and Republicans.

The number of inspectors at the federal Occupational

Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has fallen to its lowest level in the agency's history and is now less than half what it was when Ronald Reagan became president in 1980, when the US economy was half its present size. There are currently 1,821 federal and state inspectors responsible for 9 million workplaces and 130 million workers. It would take the federal agency, on average, 158 years to inspect each workplace under its jurisdiction just once.

During the eight years of the Obama administration, workplace fatalities rose steadily, as the administration relied chiefly on the trade union bureaucracy to enforce ever greater productivity increases.

The Trump administration has made deregulation of health, safety and environmental standards a centerpiece of its domestic economic policy. Trump has appointed former corporate executives to head regulatory agencies, including former coal boss David Zatezaloto at the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). Zatezaloto's company, Rhino Resources, was cited by MSHA, the agency he now heads, for a pattern of safety violations that contributed to the death of at least one West Virginia miner.

There is a close connection between the increase in workplace fatalities and injuries and the transformation of the trade unions into direct tools of corporate management and the government. These organizations have systematically suppressed the resistance of workers to the onslaught by corporate America and its two political parties. Over the last decade, the unions have reduced strike activity to the lowest level since the government began recording major work stoppages in 1947.

There was a time when the unions, despite their pro-capitalist leadership, carried out certain functions that benefited the most immediate interests of workers in the factories, mines and mills. Workers could complain to their shop steward about the violation of work rules and the speedup of the assembly line. They could file grievances with their committeeman with the expectation that, eventually, they would be addressed. Local unions even called strikes over health and safety issues.

The unions long ago abandoned all such functions. A case in point is the recent life-altering injury to Fiat Chrysler worker Eric Parsons, who has struck by a die slide at the Kokomo Casting Plant in Indiana on September 4, suffering severe injuries to his pelvis and spine as well as internal bleeding.

The United Auto Workers has not even bothered to issue a statement on the accident, let alone called for an

independent investigation. This is under conditions where the union has ignored an overwhelming strike authorization vote by the Kokomo workers taken two months ago over some 200 unresolved health and safety grievances.

Workers need new organizations to fight against speedup, forced overtime, safety violations, faulty equipment, hazardous chemicals and the daily abuse of the companies, including sexual harassment. The Socialist Equality Party proposes that workers elect rank-and-file factory and workplace committees that will answer to the needs of the workers and not accept the claim that their interests must be subordinated to the profits and prerogatives of the corporations and banks.

These committees will monitor health and safety, mobilize workers against speedup and work overloading, and enforce the eight-hour day. In opposition to the dictatorship on the shop floor exercised by the corporations and their union handmaidens, factory committees will assert the will of rank-and-file workers and advance a program for industrial democracy, including workers' control over production.

The erosion of workplace safety is a global issue. Earlier this month, thousands of workers at an airport construction site in Istanbul, Turkey struck following a van accident that injured 17 of their coworkers. The crash was the latest in a raft of industrial accidents at the worksite, referred to by workers as a "graveyard."

At every step, the right to decent and safe working conditions collides with the profit interests of the global corporations. In spite of the enormous advances in science and technology, workers are forced by capitalist wage slavery into brutal workplace conditions.

The establishment of a rational and humane system of production requires an assault on private ownership of the means of production. It is necessary to expropriate the corporations and transform them into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class. Such a socialist program can be implemented only through the building of a powerful international socialist movement of the working class.



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