

5,147 workers died at work in the United States in 2017

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The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released its Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries for 2017 on December 18. The Census has provided statistics on the total known number of workplace deaths in the US each year since 1992 and takes its data from the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports.

In 2017, 5,147 fatal occupational injuries were reported in the US, down slightly from 5,190 in 2016. The fatal injury rate in 2017 was 3.5 per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers, down from 3.6 in 2016. The 2017 data shows that in the United States, an average of over 14 workers died at work each day.

Fatal falls in 2017 were at their highest rate in 26 years of reporting, causing a total of 887 deaths and accounting for 17 percent of all deaths reported.

Fishers and related fishing workers and logging workers had the highest published rates of workplace fatalities in 2017.

Grounds maintenance workers suffered 244 fatalities in 2017, a very small decrease from 247 in 2016 and still the second-highest total since 2003. Thirty-six deaths were caused by falls from trees, and being struck by a falling tree or branch caused another 35.

Transportation incidents remained the most frequent cause of death, with 2,077 deaths recorded, 40 percent of the total. The occupational groups with the highest number of fatalities were the transportation and material moving and construction and extraction sector, accounting for a total of 47 percent of worker deaths in 2017. These groups had the highest number of deaths in 2016 as well.

Among transportation workers in the occupational subgroup of driver/sales workers and truck drivers, heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers suffered the largest number of workplace fatalities, 840, in 2017.

According to the BLS, this is the highest death toll for heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers since data collection began for the occupational series in 2003.

Unintentional overdoses from nonmedical use of alcohol or other drugs rose by 25 percent from 217 in 2016 to 272 in 2017. This is the fifth consecutive year that unintentional overdose workplace fatalities rose by 25 per cent. This shocking number points to the widespread social misery and decades of depressed living conditions faced by working people.

Fifteen percent of workers killed on the job were aged 65 and older—an all-time high for the series. When reporting began in 1992, eight per cent of workers killed on the job were in this age group. Workers 65 and older also had the highest fatality rate of all age groups in 2017, at 10.3 per 100,000 in 2017, up from 9.6 in 2016.

Workplace deaths among workers in private manufacturing and wholesale trade were the lowest since reporting on fatal occupational injuries began in 1992. This could be the result of large numbers of layoffs and plant and warehouse closures that have taken place over the past quarter century.

Workers killed in the private mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction industry increased by 26 per cent year over year, from a series low of 89 in 2016 to 112 in 2017.

The service sector as a whole saw workplace deaths remain virtually unchanged, 2,702 in 2016 compared to 2,707 in 2017. Retail trade accounted for 287 deaths in 2017 and transportation and warehousing 882 deaths.

The last figure speaks to the grueling conditions of workers in America's logistics industry, including among workers at UPS and Amazon, two of the largest logistics and warehousing corporations in the world.

While the official figures record a marginal decline in

reported workplace deaths from the past year, the number of workplace deaths in 2017 is still significantly higher than those recorded in each of the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. Overall, workplace deaths in the US had been steadily on the rise in the period 2009-2016.

The official statistics are put in a somewhat different perspective by the findings of a report released in 2018 by the US Department of Labor's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) that claims workplace fatality and injuries are underreported. A 2014 OSHA rule strengthened provisions that require employers to report work-related deaths and injuries to OSHA; however, this is a rule, and not a law.

The OIG found that OSHA's data on these incidents were "deficient." Additionally, the OIG found further deficiencies in OSHA's assurance that employers took steps to abate hazards that caused known fatalities and injuries to workers. The OIG took several corrective actions against OSHA as a result of its findings, some to which OSHA agreed, but to others it did not respond.

The investigation was undertaken by the OIG after the results of a March 2016 report by David Michaels, the former assistant secretary of labor for Occupational Safety and Health, showed that during the first year after the revised reporting rule took effect, employers failed to report about 50 percent or more of severe injuries to OSHA.

The OIG found that OSHA's reporting is "hampered by the lack of complete information on the number of work-related fatalities and severe injuries, challenges related to identifying underreporting, inconsistent practices for detecting and preventing underreporting, and citations not consistently used as a deterrent."

In other words, all statistics on workplace deaths reported by OSHA are very likely significantly understated.

The fact that in the United States, one of the most developed capitalist countries in the world, workers die unnecessarily is an indictment of the economic system of capitalism. The lives of workers are being squandered for the sake of the mad drive for profits by Wall Street CEOs, hedge fund managers and investment bankers.

The representatives of the corporate elite, in the Democratic and Republican parties and their allies in the leadership of the trade unions, are also to blame for

the creation of the American industrial slaughterhouse. Successive Democratic and Republican party administrations—most recently those of Obama and Trump—have worked to relax regulations on businesses and strip funding from OSHA and other official workers' health and safety programs in order to satisfy corporate cost-cutting.

Since the 1970s, the trade unions adopted the policy of corporatism based on the claim that the interests of the working class are identical to those of the corporate masters. On this basis the unions have collaborated in the establishment of joint labor-management health and safety committees in which they work hand-in-hand with the bosses to roll back safety standards.

No amount of pressure on the unions will compel these organizations to fight for workers interests. Fundamental rights such as health and safety protections must be fought for by workers themselves. Workers need to form their own rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to oversee and enforce safe practices in the workplace. The scourge of workplace deaths and injuries can only be eradicated by uniting workers across industries and national boundaries in a common struggle against the capitalist profit system.



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