

Death of a Los Angeles dockworker

Rafael Azul
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On Wednesday May 15, at 7:15 in the morning, a dockworker was killed and another severely injured in the Port of Los Angeles in San Pedro. The two workers were inflating a large tire on a “top handler,” a large forklift that moves shipping containers at the pier, when the tire exploded.

Joseph Santoyo, a 58-year-old father of two grown daughters was killed. His co-worker and comrade, Pedro Chavarin, sustained severe head injuries and underwent emergency surgery while he was placed in a medically induced coma.

The tragedy took place at Fenix Marine Services on Pier 300. Management at Fenix, fearing protests from the workers at the pier, immediately sent members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) home for the day, ostensibly to overcome their “emotional distress.”

Santoyo’s death occurred during the annual “First Blood” observance of the deaths of two San Pedro striking longshoremen who were killed by company thugs on May 15, 1934 during the historic 83-day strike by West Coast longshoremen. The ceremony, organized by ILWU pensioners, commemorates ILWU martyrs Dickie Parker, who was shot and murdered by on May 15, 1934 during a confrontation with company goons, and John Knudsen, who died on June 5, 1934 as a result of injuries he sustained in that May 15 confrontation. The deaths of two others strikers during the ferocious battle of Rincon Hill sparked the insurrectionary San Francisco General Strike of July 1934.

The ILWU long ago abandoned the elementary defense of dockworkers conditions and living standards. It has collaborated with the Pacific Maritime Association in systematically undermining conditions, including expanding the number of low-paid second and third-tier workers.

Since 2008, eight workers have died on the docks. While the city of Los Angeles and the port have

promised to investigate the explosion that caused death and injury, it is imperative that dockworkers launch an investigation, independent of the ILWU, the PMA and the government.

While jobs and working conditions in the 29 West Coast ports covered by the contract between the ILWU and the employers’ Pacific Maritime Association have been deteriorating for many years—in fact since the introduction of shipping containers in the 1970s—the contracts signed between the union and the PMA in 2002 and 2008 have accelerated this process.

They ILWU has signed off on bringing in less skilled contingent workers, the destruction of jobs and speed-up conditions for those that remain—conditions that make injuries and deaths more likely.

The 2015 contract, which went unratified until 2016, was imposed on longshore workers through PMA lockouts and pressure from the Obama administration. It included major concessions from the ILWU. This contract, originally scheduled to end in July 2019, has been extended three years until 2022.

In the context of this long history of give-backs and betrayals, earlier this year ILWU Local 13 President Mark Mendoza cynically played the nationalist card, condemning Denmark-based shipping company Maersk for introducing plans to further automate Pier 400 at San Pedro. He complained that Maersk was a “foreign company coming in here to displace workers” and that “automation is not good for community, is not good for labor, is not good for America.”

The Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach handled a record 18 million containers a year in 2018, with fewer and fewer workers. Under these conditions more deaths and injuries are to be expected.

Because dockworkers play such a strategic role in the global supply chain and have capacity to shut down international trade, the unions have done everything to suppress collective action in defense of their jobs and

conditions. The deteriorating conditions of dockworkers are not the result of technological changes in of themselves but of capitalism, which subordinates every aspect of life, including life itself, to the profits of the giant corporations.

The tragic death of Santoyo and terrible injury of Chavarin are the inevitable outcome of the labor-management collusion of the ILWU. That is why dockworkers must build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, that are independent of the unions and committed to fight for workers' control of production, including the health and safety of all workers.



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