

Two utility workers electrocuted on the job in upstate New York

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Two contract workers for Orange and Rockland Utilities in New York state died on Monday when they were electrocuted under a transmission line by a wire that was not supposed to be electrified.

Derrick Paris, 51, and Justin McLoughlin, 28, employed by the subcontractor E-J Electric, were working alone in a remote location in the town of Warwick. Their bodies were discovered when the Greenwood Lake Volunteer Fire Department responded to reports of black smoke coming from the area.

The transmission pole that the two workers died under was reportedly inspected and flagged last week, and Paris and McLoughlin were responding to the report.

Officials say the crew went to tighten the guy wire—the braided metal support wire that helps hold up utility poles. Normally guy wire is not electrified. For unknown reasons, this time it was carrying 69,000 volts and several hundred amps. This horrific surge of electricity killed the pair, started a small brush fire, and melted their all-terrain vehicle nearby down to the frame.

Orange and Rockland Utilities (O&R) spokesman Mike Donovan said “on investigation, we observed that there were wires down, and there were also two men down on the ground, unconscious and unresponsive.”

O&R and the New York State Public Service Commission (PSC) have both opened investigations into the incident, but so far neither have provided an explanation. Power in the area was turned off for 13,000 Orange and Rockland customers for part of the day following the incident to help aid a safe investigation.

Donovan said that the workers “were doing line inspecting, fixing something following up on an inspection. These guys do this all the time.”

While it is true that utility workers do conduct similar work on transmission and distribution lines daily, this does not mean that the work is safe. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) labels workers in power transmission and distribution systems as a “high-risk occupation group for work-related deaths” and reports “a moderately large number of workers are at extremely high risk of fatal injury.”

OSHA’s “Fatal Four” list—the four leading causes of worker death in the construction industry (which includes electrical power line work) and responsible for 60 per cent of construction worker deaths in 2017—includes electrocutions as the third most common cause of death, behind “struck by object” and “falls.”

According to OSHA’s Fatality Inspection Database, 208 workers in the US have died from electrocution between January 2017 and June 2019. This accounts for seven worker deaths a month by electrocution, with most incidents involving direct or indirect contact with a live electrical power line.

Hot summer weather also effects work on transmission lines. Increased power consumption causes the lines to overheat and expand, sagging up to 20 feet, which can create dangerous working conditions.

O&R is a subsidiary of Con Edison, one of the largest energy companies in the US. Utility companies under private ownership are notorious for cutting costs, through layoffs and the increased use of cheaper subcontractors--such as E-J Electric, one of the largest electrical contractors in the New York area--working on many public projects to create higher profits for stockholders. O&R itself has notoriously reduced preventive maintenance on the infrastructure it handles.

In 2012 Con Edison and the Utility Workers Union of

America local 1-2 imposed an agreement on workers in New York City that significantly expanded the company's use of contractors and part-time workers.

Con Ed faces fines after the PSC began an investigation of its safety supervision of contractors in relation to a gas explosion in Manhattan last year.

The unnecessary death of two more American workers is a tragic expression of a system that will do anything to put private profit over the necessary modernization of public infrastructure that should support human life.



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