

Illinois steelworker killed on the job, police launch investigation

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A 26-year-old steelworker, Adrian Gomez, was killed on the morning of September 26 when his body was pinned between two pieces of industrial machinery while working at Earle M. Jorgensen Metals (EMJ) in Schaumburg, Illinois, a suburb northwest of Chicago.

Gomez leaves behind his fiancée and two young children, a son and a daughter. Like many working-class families in the US, they relied on multiple incomes to survive. The family resides in Crystal Lake, a suburb near the Wisconsin-Illinois border, which has no major industry. Adrian Gomez was forced to make the nearly hour-long drive to work in Schaumburg at EMJ Metals. It is reported that he was an employee of a third-party equipment maintenance contractor at the facility.

Few details have emerged from the police and county authorities regarding the circumstances surrounding his death. Early reports indicate Gomez and a fellow coworker were operating heavy machinery when Gomez became trapped in the machine. He was eventually freed, but medical professionals pronounced him dead at the factory at 10:40 a.m., approximately 40 minutes after the initial call was made to emergency services.

Gomez's death has prompted the launch of investigations by the Schaumburg Police Department and the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). EMJ Metals spokesperson Jasmine Juarez offered no comment on Gomez's death.

The plant in Schaumburg was hit with \$65,811 in OSHA fines after an accident on July 13, 2017, in which an employee operating a circular saw lost three fingers. The company has contested the violations.

OSHA has six months to complete an investigation, enough time for federal regulators and the companies they are ostensibly in charge of regulating to work out

an agreement that ensures minimal blowback to the company while offering the fig leaf of "improving conditions" to ensure "future accidents" don't occur.

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workplace deaths rose steadily overall from 2009-2016, while a slight dip occurred in 2017. However, this drop could have been due to under-reporting by OSHA as opposed to any actual change in safety measures adopted by industries in the US. The organization has suffered budget cuts year after year during the Obama and Trump administrations, including cuts to investigators and other staff. These cuts, which have never been fully restored, guarantee that workers are increasingly put in dangerous and potentially life-threatening situations.

A report by the National Employment and Law Project, "Workplace Safety Enforcement Continues to Decline in Trump Administration," determined that the total number of inspections and OSHA enforcement activity has been declining for several years, from 41,000 workplace inspections in 2012 to roughly 32,000 inspections in 2017 and 2018.

Earle M. Jorgensen Co. and its 39 facilities located throughout the United States were sold to Reliance Steel & Aluminum Co. in 2006 for \$984 million, catapulting Reliance to eventually claim the mantle of the largest metal service operator in North America. In 2017 Reliance had \$9.72 billion in revenue and since the 2006 acquisition of EMJ has gone on to acquire 18 more companies, some for over a billion dollars each.

EMJ Metals was originally founded by Earle Jorgensen, a part of Reagan's so-called "kitchen cabinet," a group of 10-12 ultra-wealthy businessmen and industrialists in California who supported, advised and encouraged Reagan to run for office. Recognizing the Hollywood actor could be an effective tool for

promoting their class and business interests, this “kitchen cabinet” remained his advisers and champions throughout his political career.

Jorgensen borrowed \$20,000 in 1921, nearly a quarter of a million dollars adjusted for 2019 prices, to begin his business. He used his story to influence Reagan’s decision to adopt free-market policies in support of free enterprise for big businesses during his time in office. “Reaganomics” became official government policy and with it the unrelenting assault on workers’ rights, including safety, pay and benefits that has continued unabated for over 40 years while CEO and executive pay has increased. From 1978 to 2018, CEO compensation increased by a staggering 940 percent while workers compensation has flatlined at 12 percent over the same period.

This bipartisan assault on workers rights, safety and benefits has been allowed to continue for so long due in large part to the betrayal of the trade unions, including the United Steelworkers and the United Auto Workers. These organizations, while claiming to represent workers’ interests, have long abandoned any defense of workers. Instead they have overseen and implemented management and Wall Street dictates in exchange for a share of the profits.

In case after case the USW and OSHA, working with management, have covered up the deaths of workers. In April 2, steelworker Edwin Fleming, 49, was killed working at ArcelorMittal’s Indiana Harbor plant in East Chicago, Indiana. There had been many safety complaints by workers at the mill, but the USW and management had worked to cover them up while attempting to shift the blame for accidents to workers. In June OSHA slapped the company with a paltry \$14,000 fine for violations relating Fleming’s death.



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