

Holiday shipping season begins with deaths of two UPS workers at California airport

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Two young United Parcel Service (UPS) workers in California were killed last month when their cargo tugging vehicle overturned and entrapped them at the Ontario International Airport, 40 miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

The November 25 industrial accident claimed the lives of two part-time package handlers, Austin Stache, 20, of Rancho Cucamonga, and Noe Tinoco Jr., 22, of San Bernardino. A GoFundme page set up for Noe Tinoco raised more than \$7,000 from family members, friends and co-workers to cover funeral expenses. One commenter said, “Noe was a hard-working young adult. Noe loved two things in this world the most: his family and baseball.”

The tragedy occurred as the holiday shipping rush was just beginning. The company has hired 100,000 seasonal workers and is expecting to handle an average 32 million packages a day from November 29 through December 30, up five percent from last year, and 60 percent more than the rest of the year.

Posts by workers on the UPS Ontario Facebook page said workers were putting in back-to-back 15-hour workdays, with only as little as one-and-a-half hours of sleep in between. The Ontario Airport is a major hub for UPS, which expanded operations there in 2016 to double its output.

The cargo-hauling vehicle, known as a tug, did not have a roof to protect the occupants from being crushed in a rollover accident. In comments to the *Daily Bulletin* in California, UPS spokesman Steve Gaut claimed “that topless tugs are typically used in areas where there is more favorable weather.”

In fact, the open tug is far cheaper for the giant company than investing in closed cabs that would not only protect workers from rollover injuries but could also be climate-controlled to prevent heat illnesses in

that region of California where temperatures frequently soar over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

It is likely that there were surveillance cameras at the airport that could shed insight on what led to the accident, as well as maintenance records of the equipment, but the release of any information to the family and the public could take months—if it is ever released.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) has not issued a public statement about the loss of two workers, nor have union officials announced whether they would initiate an investigation into the accident. The union has a long record of colluding with management at UPS and undermining the safety of the 240,000 Teamster members at the company.

A December 4 article by Bloomberg News described a “culture of fear” at UPS with managers retaliating against workers for reporting injuries and unsafe conditions. It began by describing an injury during the peak holiday season last year when a worker fell from a loading dock and broke his hip, pelvis, wrist, and elbow at a UPS facility in Manchester, New Hampshire. Managers responded by putting the injured worker on a package cart and rolling him to the parking lot where he was put into the vehicle of a supervisor who drove him to get medical attention.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) found that UPS failed to maintain a safe workplace and criticized the company for “failing to call emergency services.” Moving the worker, who had “visibly broken bones,” endangered his life, the report found. In April 2019, OSHA cited the company for serious safety violations and imposed a wrist-slap fine of \$13,260. The company challenged the fine and after it met with the involved employees to “review information on how to respond to workplace accidents,

including when and how to call emergency personnel,” OSHA settled the case and dropped the fine without so much as a citation.

Interviews with workers and dozens of lawsuits reviewed by Bloomberg Law showed that the coverup and underreporting of injuries, largely to save worker compensation costs, is commonplace at UPS. As the article noted, the Teamsters are complicit in trampling over the rights of workers. “Under the collective bargaining agreement between the International Brotherhood of Teamsters labor union and UPS, the company has the right to select the medical provider that examines injured employees.

“The bargaining agreement also mandates the creation of management-worker Safety and Health Committees to resolve safety issues. However, some workers allege the committees are superficial and do not provide remedies for workers injured on the job.”

On December 15, 2017, William Stubbs, 51, was killed while working when a trailer backed over him at a loading dock at a UPS hub near Atlanta, Georgia. At the time of William’s death outraged workers took to Facebook to decry the collusion between the joint Teamster-UPS sham safety committees and said, “The company doesn’t give a crap about safety. They’ve shown they only care about meeting production standards, no matter the cost.”

The peak Christmas season leads to even greater pressure on workers. Amazon is the company’s largest customer and is also a direct competitor with UPS. The company, with the collusion of the Teamsters, has responded to the challenge by Amazon by increasingly mirroring its methods of brutal exploitation of warehouse and package delivery workers. This includes the Teamsters ramming through lower-tier UPS drivers in the last contract.

This is also the first year that UPS will hire drivers to use their own personal vehicles to deliver packages in order to reduce overtime hours, which regular workers rely on during the holiday season. The move also helps UPS avoid having to buy trucks it won’t need after the holiday rush ends, the company said.

Each day 14 workers are killed in the United States due to a preventable work-related incident. The transportation and warehousing industries are perennially listed as among the most dangerous occupations in the US industrial slaughterhouse with

882 workers perishing on the job in 2017, according to OSHA statistics. The largest number of fatalities is in the construction industry with 971 deaths.

The dangerous conditions in the transportation industry are compounded by the token fines OSHA imposes, which are regularly reduced or dropped when the offending company initiates an appeal. Last February the WSWS reported that OSHA only fined XPO \$10,347 for safety violations that led to the June 25, 2018, deaths of XPO workers Christopher Klosin, 38, and Roger Mangine, 62. The two workers were killed when the slabs of construction material they were unloading tipped over on them.

In yet another example of companies putting profit over safety, FedEx truck driver William L. Murphy, 69, slipped and struck his head on January 31 in East Moline, Illinois, and died of traumatic brain injury. More recently, on November 18, Duntate Young, a 23-year-old father of two was killed at the FedEx World Hub in Memphis, Tennessee, when he was crushed by a 7,000 pound shipping container.

For workers to protect themselves from unsafe conditions they should organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the company controlled unions, to organize investigations into unsafe conditions and take the needed actions to make their workplaces safe. These committees should fight for industrial democracy and workers’ control over production and safety conditions.



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