

Industrial carnage in US: 5,250 workers killed on the job in 2018

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27 December 2019

There were 5,250 worker fatalities in the United States in 2018, according to this year's annual report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), an agency of the US Labor Department. The report was released on Tuesday.

An average of 101 worker fatalities a week, the 2018 toll represents a 2 percent increase over the 5,147 workers killed on the job in 2017.

The BLS monitors the incidence of work-related fatalities, while the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), also an agency of the Labor Department, is charged with enforcing health and safety regulations at US work places. OSHA has jurisdiction over 130 million workers at 8 million work places. In 2018, the agency had 2,265 employees and a budget of \$552 million, far below the level of staffing and funding needed to carry out its stated mission.

The OSHA budget barely kept pace with inflation in 2019, increasing by a mere \$5 million.

The toll of dead and injured workers has risen in parallel with the rise on the stock market. The period 2011 to 2018 saw an increase of 12 percent in lives lost, with a total of 39,150 people killed on the job. Tens of thousands of additional deaths resulted from occupational illnesses resulting from exposure to toxic substances.

The upward trend has occurred under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, which have plowed ever greater sums into the military budget while spending trillions of tax-payer dollars to bail out the financial aristocracy following the Wall Street crash of 2008. Funds for social programs, public health, the environment and infrastructure have been slashed.

The occupations with the highest fatality rates are related to the logistics, transportation and warehousing sectors, followed by construction. The BLS stated in a

news release on Tuesday that 2,080 fatalities, or 40 percent of the 2018 total, were the result of transportation incidents. The BLS noted: "Driver/sales workers and truck drivers had the most fatalities of any broad occupation group at 966." Most of these were heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers, with 831 fatalities.

The broader trade, transport and utilities industry sectors reported 1,443 on-the-job deaths in 2018, unchanged from the year before.

A truck driver in the Northeast spoke with the WSWs, saying: "There are many dangers you face while on the road, or while making deliveries, from inattentive drivers, poorly maintained infrastructure, and congested highways. I work a regular shift, and in the mornings I frequently see trucks crashed in the median, through a guardrail, or down an embankment, which is likely to be caused by lack of sleep for the overnight drivers, who are under pressure to make delivery appointments before they run out of allowable on-duty time."

The transportation and warehousing sectors, including companies such as Amazon and United Parcel Service (UPS), employed 5.58 million workers as of this November, according to the BLS. The WSWs has reported extensively on worker fatalities at XPO Logistics, UPS and Federal Express (FedEx), under conditions of a relentless drive to maximize profit at the expense of worker health and safety.

A Bloomberg News article from September points out that the BLS does not include Amazon workers in the nearly 700,000 workers in the "Courier and Express Delivery Services" category. Amazon has been rapidly transitioning toward delivering the products it sells.

Bloomberg found through a records request filed with OSHA that the agency is planning to step up its

inspections of warehouses, but that Amazon will not be included because it is classified as an e-commerce rather than a warehousing company.

A Gizmodo.com article published last month, on conditions faced by workers at the new Amazon fulfillment center on Staten Island in New York, reported a high incidence of injuries. It cited one worker who said that a coworker who was five months pregnant suffered a miscarriage because “The managers just refused to put her in a different section where she might have had less bending, stretching and things to do.”

The greatest number of work fatalities occurred among older workers, with 1,114 deaths among those 45 to 54, 1,104 among those 55 to 64, and 759 among those over 65. These age groups accounted for a combined 57 percent of fatalities in 2018.

The BLS also reported a 12 percent increase in on-the-job “unintentional overdoses” from alcohol and drugs, from a total of 272 in 2017 to 305 last year. There was an 11 percent increase in work place suicides, from 275 to 304.



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