

Following Milwaukee brewery shooting, Molson Coors starts a GoFundMe for victims' families

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Nearly two weeks have passed since a deadly shooting at the Milwaukee Molson Coors brewery left six workers including the gunman, Anthony Ferrill, 51, dead. Three of the victims were power operators at the brewery, Jesus Valle Jr., 33, of Milwaukee, employed since 2014, Gennady “Gene” Levshetz, 61, of Mequon, who started in 2008 and Trevor Wetselaar, 33, of Milwaukee, with the brewery since 2018. The two other victims were Dana Walk, 57, of Delafield, a machinist with the brewery since 2004 and finally, Dale Hudson, 60, of Waukesha, an electrician with the brewery since 2008.

Operations at the brewery were suspended for five days and resumed Monday evening. As many of the 1,400 workers returned to the brewery to begin their shift they were greeted by armed security agents and police. Workers have been subjected to bag checks and increased security screenings before entering the facility.

In response to the shooting the multinational brewing conglomerate Molson Coors, with revenue exceeding \$10 billion last year, set up a “victims fund” on the website GoFundMe.com for the families whose husbands, father and brothers were killed while on the job. Millions of workers in the US are forced to rely on crowdfunding websites such as GoFundMe to pay for everything from car repairs to medical costs, school supplies, and in this case, funeral expenses.

The initial goal for the fund was \$1 million, with the company providing \$500,000 and the rest expected to be raised by the general population. As of right now the fund stands at just over \$1.1 million, which is just over half of what the city of Milwaukee gave to the company last year to “refurbish empty office buildings,” and less than one-quarter of the \$4.3 million compensation package given to Molson Coors CEO Gavin Hattersly last year, according to salary.com.

News of the company starting a GoFundMe was met with justified scorn and derision on social media. Several commenters pointed out the hypocrisy of a giant

conglomerate shaking down the population for money to help pay for the consequences of deaths suffered while on the job.

“It’s publicity. They’re 100% aware that their insurance will be paying out with lawsuits. This will get families through until then. They’re sure as hell not going to give away any more shareholder cash than that. It’s a corporation. Employees don’t matter—shareholders do,” remarked Facebook user Valerie Ray. “This is a multi-billion dollar company. Why did they not pull off a few million from executives pay,” commented Thomas Reilly.

In the past couple of days the company, through the media, has sought to blame racism and bullying by co-workers as the reason for Ferrill’s apparent mental breakdown. Several media reports, using Molson Coors spokesman Adam Collins as a source, have boosted a report that a noose was found on Ferrill’s locker five years ago, 2015, while Ferrill was not at work. While Ferrill, who was African-American, was alerted to the incident, he had not filed any discrimination complaints with the company, government or the union during his tenure with company. Furthermore, there are no active race-based harassment or discrimination complaints from any employee at the brewery currently active with the Equality Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency empowered to enforce civil rights in the workplace.

The Milwaukee police, while emphasizing that they are still in the process of investigating, have pushed back against this racial motive of the shooting, stating that “neither race nor racism has been identified as a factor,” and that the department “is not aware of any of the victims targeted in the mass shooting being involved in any inappropriate or racist behavior toward the suspect.”

Despite these statements, State Sen. Lena C. Taylor, a Democrat running for mayor of Milwaukee, insisted that race was a factor, stating in the *Washington Post* that she had spoken to “colleagues” who “have told me, [Ferrill] had

to deal with a lot.” Taylor stated, “there’s no question I believe the racial harassment was a contributing factor. I don’t see how it would not be.”

It is in the interest of the company and politicians to blame the workers and their supposed ingrained backward racial attitudes as the cause of antisocial acts and conflict as opposed to the capitalist system, which is the source of all violence, poverty and war in modern society. While reported in several articles, less emphasis has been placed on the fact that Ferrill, in conversations with his neighbor over the years, showed signs of severe anxiety and expressed fear that the company was spying on him. Ferrill was working more than 50 hours a week before the shooting.

Like most electricians, Ferrill was forced to work in a combination of cramped, crowded spaces or high up in rafters on ladders performing his various tasks. The enormous brewery, with its several flights of stairs and multiple buildings, meant that a typical day required walking miles between jobs, while carrying tools and supplies. In June 2015, Ferrill injured his shoulder after falling off a ladder and was forced to take time off to recover. In addition, he applied to be put on a restricted work status.

After his injury, Ferrill reported to his neighbor, Erna Roenspies that the company had sent “spies” to his home and were watching him to catch him in an act that would allow them to deny him any workers compensation. Ferrill advised his neighbor that company spies were always watching him. Roenspies recalled a recent incident to CBS 58 in which Ferrill pointed out to her a car that was parked outside, advising her that the “spying irritated him.”

It is not uncommon for corporations to hire outside agencies to spy on and report back to the company if they suspect an employee of “abusing” their limited work status. Amazon, the logistics and technology giant, routinely hires private detectives to surveil workers in their own homes. Workers are also tracked closely for performance while on the job.

With Molson Coors going through several acquisitions and mergers during Ferrill’s tenure, it would not be surprising to find out that management in close coordination with the unions had set about clearing the books of injured workers like him, seen as “non productive” assets, in order to aid the company’s drive for greater profits.

The unions, working as partners with corporate management, have facilitated the shutdown of most of Milwaukee’s breweries throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including the shuttering of the 152-year-old Pabst brewery in December 1996. No longer workers organizations, they do not fight as advocates on behalf of workers, but instead work with the company in quashing workers’ demands regarding safety and grievances while offering to implement

“Employee Assistance Programs,” which replace decent wages and health care coverage with pamphlets and occasional counseling sessions.

Following the shooting, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), which legally represents approximately 50 mechanics and machine repair workers through IAM Locals 66 and 510 at the Molson Coors brewery, released a statement pledging to work “closely with the company and fellow unions ... in the process of deploying resources and counselors from the IAM Employee Assistance Program.”

President of the United Auto Workers, Rory Gamble, who is currently under federal investigation for a kickback scheme, also released a statement in which he pledged that the UAW would “continue to advocate for safety, mental health services and common sense gun provisions in the workplace.”

Gamble and the UAW do not advocate for “mental health services.” The UAW has overseen the destruction of workers’ health insurance plans while doing everything they can to push out well-paid legacy workers. Ferrill, with his seniority and expertise in a skilled trade, is the exact type of worker the UAW and the company would be keen to replace with a cheaper, younger worker.

Taking all of this into account, it is not hard to see where a worker would become suspicious or paranoid that they were being watched and harassed, and, compounded by the long hours of work needed to provide financially for his family, that this stress would be the catalyst for a worker lashing out in apparently inexplicable violence with tragic consequences for everyone involved.

That such scenes play out with frightening regularity in America is a symptom of a deeply sick society, where workers are driven over the brink by the unyielding demands of the capitalist system.



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