

US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports 5,333 workers died on the job in 2019, or one every 99 minutes

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The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), an agency within the US Department of Labor (DOL), reported last month that 5,333 US workers died due to workplace injuries in 2019, an increase of 2 percent from the previous year. This is the highest number of workplace deaths in the United States since 2007.

This grisly figure has been steadily rising since a temporary decline during the 2008-2009 recession, when millions of people left the labor force altogether. In the years since, the jobs wiped out by the financial crisis have been replaced by new jobs overwhelmingly concentrated in low-wage, highly exploitative sectors of the economy.

As horrific as they are, the BLS figures are in fact a vast undercount, in part because it does not count deaths due to workplace related diseases. Given the omission of disease-related deaths, as well as the undermining of reporting of workplace COVID-19 infections and deaths by the federal government, it is likely that the figures for 2020, once they are released in next year's report, will represent a far larger undercount of the real number of workplace fatalities than in 2019.

According to an AFL-CIO report, "Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect," which analyzed data from 2018, on average 14 workers died on the job each day in the US, and an estimated 95,000 workers died from chronic occupational illness.

"Due to limitations in the current injury reporting system and widespread underreporting of workplace injuries, this number understates the problem. The true toll is estimated to be two to three times greater—or 7.0 million to 10.5 million injuries and illnesses a year," the AFL-CIO report stated. According to the report,

only 3.5 million injuries were reported in 2019.

While the figures from 2019 do not include deaths which occurred during the coronavirus pandemic in the US, they shed light on why COVID-19 has had such a devastating impact in the United States. Even before the pandemic, workers in America were subjected to horrific conditions, with more Americans dying at work each year than died during the entire eight years of the Iraq War.

Meanwhile, rising levels of inequality have led to worsening health outcomes, including a decline in the average expectancy. The deadly social consequences of the engorgement by the corporate oligarchy on society's resources was demonstrated in a recent study by the *Lancet* medical journal which found that 200,000 Americans would still be alive if mortality rates in the country had kept pace during the pandemic with the average for advanced countries.

Meanwhile, both capitalist parties have systematically hollowed out workplace safety regulations and enforcement. Though the Trump Administration starved Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) of funds, under the Democratic administration of Barack Obama OSHA also faced a funding crisis. OSHA oversees the enforcement and implementation of safety rules at 8 million workplaces with a combined 130 million workers, but has little more than 2,000 employees and an annual budget of half a billion dollars.

Many of the deaths accounted for in the BLS figures had been previously reported on in the *World Socialist Web Site* in 2019. This includes:

- Two young UPS part-time package handlers, Austin Stache, 20, of Rancho Cucamonga, and Noe

Tinoco Jr., 22, of San Bernardino, California

- Duntate Young, 23, a young Federal Express worker with two young children was killed in November 2019 at the Memphis, Tennessee based company's World Hub

- Jill Greninger, 35, a young mother who died at the Economy Locker Storage Company in Muncy, Pennsylvania

According to the BLS report, 642 workers died in 2019 due to "exposures to harmful substances or environments," the highest level since records began in 2011. Workplace suicides increased in 2019 to a total of 307, a 34 percent increase from 2015. Unintentional overdoses also increased for the seventh consecutive year to 313. This means that over 11 percent of all workplace deaths in 2019 were "deaths of despair."

According to the report, 2,122 died due to transportation accidents in 2019, a 2 percent increase from the 2018 total of 2,080. A substantial portion of this figures are commercial drivers. "Nearly 1 out of every 5 fatally injured workers was employed as a driver/sales worker or truck driver," the BLS report states.

Workplace deaths were disproportionately concentrated among older workers, reflecting the impact among this segment of increased speedup and longer work shifts. "Fatalities among workers age 55 and over increased 8 percent from 1,863 in 2018 to 2,005 in 2019, which is the largest number ever recorded for this age group." The death toll for all workers over 45 years of age was 3,087, or 58 percent of the total. By comparison, only 44 percent of the workforce as a whole is over the age of 45. This figure remains significantly higher than it was before the Great Recession.

Some of the factors which have led to increased deaths among older workers can be seen among truck drivers, and the average age of the workforce is 55. Because of a lack of hiring, drivers face greater risks because they are forced to work longer hours, frequently at night, and have added physical responsibilities like helping unload their truck or trailer, factors which lead directly to driver fatigue.

It is plausible that the pandemic will cause a spike even in non-COVID-19 fatalities in the trucking industry. During the pandemic, even more goods have been transported by truck, which accounts for 70

percent of the total amount of goods shipped according to an estimate from the American Trucking Association (ATA).

The BLS study is a portrait of the social devastation of a society in deep crisis and driven by irrational profit motives. It demonstrates the need for the independent mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.



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