

JBS Greeley meatpacking worker dies after being struck by machinery

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A worker at a JBS USA meat processing facility in Greeley, Colorado, died on Saturday, March 27 after having been struck by machinery and falling into a pool of water.

To date, at least 474 workers in the plant also contracted COVID in the plant, and seven workers have died, as a result of the unsafe maintenance of production in the plant by JBS management, carried out with the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union.

The Greeley Fire Department responded to calls made from the plant, arriving nine hours and 40 minutes later, at 18:10 MDT, according to the fire department. Upon arrival, fellow workers had moved the victim to another location and were providing medical aid. Firefighters and paramedics took the worker to North Colorado Medical Center, where upon arrival he died.

The Weld County Coroner's office identified the man on Monday, March 29, as 55-year-old Jonathan Bryan Duerst. Carl Blesch, the deputy coroner, said the incident that led to Duerst's death remains under investigation, and that his cause and manner of death would be released in the autopsy lab reports once the investigation concludes.

Ted Herrera, business manager for International Union of Operating Engineers Local 1, called the incident "shocking" and "sad," and that Duerst "had worked for JBS for some time." Herrera, alongside a call on JBS to increase safety at the plant, said the union would be conducting an independent investigation into the incident.

In an e-mail, JBS spokesperson Nikki Richardson stated, "On Saturday, a tragic accident occurred at our Greeley plant resulting in the death of one of our team members. We are deeply saddened, and our thoughts and prayers are with our team member, his family, co-

workers and friends." She continued, "[We] are working closely with local officials and OSHA [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration] to investigate the incident."

In reality, JBS, with the support of both the UFCW and the federal government, bears responsibility for deadly working conditions in the facility. Nationwide, more than 50,000 workers across the entire meatpacking industry have been infected, and at least 286 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network.

In Weld County, population 324,492, there are currently 27,606 cases of coronavirus and 326 deaths. The state of Colorado has more 466,000 cases of COVID-19, accompanied by 6,250 deaths.

On March 5, management temporarily idled the plant for two days as it began an on-site vaccination clinic, according to the *Greeley Tribune*. During the closure, the company provided workers a pathetic \$100 bonus and four hours' pay for receiving the vaccine.

UFCW local 7 under President Kim Cordova has done nothing in response to the massive outbreaks inside the plant, other than pay for a billboard in Greeley with photos and names of the dead. When workers took matters into their own hands last July and carried out a wildcat strike, the union staunchly opposed it, circulating a leaflet instructing workers to remain on the job, citing the terms of their contract.

As for the federal government, the Trump administration signed an executive order last year invoking the Defense Production Act to force meatpacking facilities to remain open. This order was never repealed by the Biden administration and remains in force. Meanwhile, OSHA has been covering up the extent of infections and deaths at workplaces and has meted out only minor fines for workplace safety

violations.

JBS Greeley has only received a wrist slap of a fine of \$15,615 by OSHA during the pandemic. After an OSHA inspection in May, the agency also charged JBS with failing to provide a log of injuries and illnesses in a timely manner.

Two whistleblowers at the plant revealed last fall that management was threatening symptomatic workers into remaining on the job, and providing screeners with faulty equipment.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the meatpacking industry was one of the most dangerous in the country, with repetitive-motion injuries in particular extremely common.

One press statement from June 2013 on OSHA's website reads, "The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration has cited JBS USA LLC in Greeley with 11 serious, one repeat and eight other-than-serious safety and health violations."

It continues, "OSHA began an inspection in December 2012 under its Site Specific Targeting Program that directs enforcement resources to high-hazard workplaces, where high injury and illness rates occur. The serious violations associated with the safety portion of the inspection pertained to workers being exposed to potential fall hazards from elevated work areas, possible amputations due to the lack of proper machine guarding, not properly locking out equipment energy sources prior to performing maintenance work and failing to use safe work practices for electrical elements. ...

"The repeat violation was cited for failing to properly guard machinery exposing workers to ingoing nip points and rotating parts."

However, the government agency proposed penalties totaling a mere \$83,414.



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