

Second worker death at Mar-Jac Poultry in Mississippi since December

Cordell Gascoigne**7 June 2021**

For the second time in six months, a worker at the Mar-Jac poultry plant in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, has died. The accident took place on May 31, around 11:30 p.m., and police were called to the plant. Bobby Butler, 48, was rushed to Forrest General Hospital where he was later pronounced dead. Local reports revealed that the fatal accident was related to heavy machinery.

According to reports from the facility, Butler was working in what is known as the “evisceration department,” where the internal organs of poultry are removed, at the time of the incident. There were no witnesses of the accident, but when the injury to Butler was discovered, he was immediately rushed to the hospital. An investigation is under way, but plant officials have issued no further information, updates or statements.

Last year in December, Joel Velasco Toto, 33, was severely injured in the battery-charging room at the same plant. He was transferred to Forrest General and died following surgery. According to the Forrest County Coroner’s report published in the *Hattiesburg American*, Toto perished as a result of trauma to the abdominal and pelvic regions via compressed air. According to an Associated Press report, police stated that the incident “involved known acquaintances, who were horse-playing with machinery in the facility when Toto was injured.” Mar-Jac management shared no details on the incident.

According to a report published on the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA’s) website, 5,333 workers died on the job in 2019, the largest annual number since 2007. This amounts to more than 100 workers killed each week, 15 every day, or 1 every 99 minutes. With tens of thousands of new COVID-19 cases daily and around 500 deaths, the Biden administration, with the tacit

support of the unions, is rushing to end even the most minimal measures to contain the spread of the virus. Vaccination levels in Mississippi are at some of the lowest levels nationally, with factories continuing to be major vectors of transmission.

From the early 1970s, when OSHA was established, workplace deaths in the United States saw a significant decline, from an average of 38 worker deaths a day in 1970 to 15 in 2019. Prior to the pandemic, worker injuries and illnesses had also fallen, from nearly 11 incidents per 100 workers in 1972 to around 3 per 100 in 2019.

This has been sharply reversed in 2020. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March last year, more than 50,000 workers in the US meatpacking industry have tested positive for COVID-19, and more than 250 workers have died from the disease. The state of Mississippi has seen nearly 320,000 reported cases of COVID-19 and 7,325 deaths. Hattiesburg, located in Forrest County, accounts for 7,791 and 153 of the state’s cases and deaths, respectively.

Mar-Jac, founded in 1954 by brothers Marvin and Jack McKibbon, employs 750 people and has an annual revenue of \$300 million. The average worker, according to *Zippia.com*, is paid \$28,285 annually, while production supervisors, foremen, human resources supervisors, and lead persons are earning an annual salary between \$60,000 and \$70,000. A worker with the title “‘Poultry Husbandry Worker’ at Mar-Jac Poultry earns an average salary of \$17,203 per year,” a poverty-level amount on which it is impossible to live.

Internationally, impoverished workers are being forced to brave the pandemic, risking not only their lives, but also the lives of their family members, neighbors, and co-workers, to labor for starvation wages. In March, 1,850 low-wage workers at the

Olymel's Red Deer pork processing facility in Canada were forced to return to work, despite 515 workers having been infected last November when a major outbreak occurred at the plant. Last year in May, less than two months after the pandemic was officially declared, two slaughterhouses in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia saw 264 of 1,200 workers, or 22 percent, many subcontracted from eastern Europe, were infected.

According to *Census.gov*, population estimates published July 1, 2019, show there are 45,863 people in Hattiesburg, with veterans, who account for 12,141 of the 610,000 coronavirus deaths in the United States, making up 2,181, or 4.76 percent, of the city's population. The average household earns \$34,735, far below the US median household income of \$68,703 reported in 2019.



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