

Tragic fatal shooting of cinematographer on New Mexico film set

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On Thursday, veteran actor Alec Baldwin fired a prop gun that tragically killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and injured director Joel Souza. The terrible incident occurred on set during the filming of the Western *Rust*, which Baldwin is a co-producer, on location in New Mexico. Hutchins died after being airlifted to the New Mexico University Hospital in Albuquerque.

Hutchins, 42 years old, worked out of Los Angeles and was a member of the Cinematographers Guild, IATSE Local 600. She was a 2015 graduate of the American Film Institute Conservatory. She was considered a rising star in the industry, and among her previous film credits are *Archenemy*, *Blindfire* and *TheMad Hatter*. Originally from Ukraine, she is survived by her husband, Matthew Hutchins, of Los Angeles.

The accident occurred while Baldwin was rehearsing a scene. As he backed out of a building, he discharged the firearm that shot Hutchins in the stomach and Souza in the shoulder. Originally listed as being in critical condition, Souza has since been released from the hospital.

International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 44, the bargaining agent for prop makers, set decorators and a variety of other film professionals, sent out an email that asserted, “A live single round was accidentally fired on set.” Union officials later clarified that they were unaware of what sort of projectile was in the gun, and that the term “live” only denoted that the weapon was loaded with material, which are usually blanks.

In reference to what type of ammunition had been in the gun, Juan Rios, a spokesman for the sheriff’s department investigating the case, declared on Friday that “The incident occurred not even 24 hours ago. We

don’t have any forensics on those particulars. We can’t confirm that one way or another. We’re going to allow our investigators to conduct our investigation.”

In an article Friday, the *Los Angeles Times* reported there had been a number of issues concerning poor working conditions on the set before the tragic incident. In fact, just a few hours earlier, camera operators and their assistants were escorted off the Bonanza Creek Ranch set near Santa Fe where filming was taking place. Once escorted off, they were replaced by non-union workers.

According to the *Times*, the production company was supposed to arrange accommodations for the film crew, but rather than provide them with hotels in nearby Santa Fe, the crew was expected to drive back and forth over 50 miles to and from Albuquerque on a daily basis.

Film workers on social media have explained the project was an ultra-low budget project. Camera crews had been working over 14 hours a day with one-hour lunch breaks and were begging for rooms nearby so they would not have to continue sleeping in their cars.

One camera crew operator said crew members walked off the job in the morning and that each had written a letter of resignation the previous evening. The worker stated that crew members cited “everything from lack of payment for three weeks, taking our hotels away despite asking for them in our deals, lack of COVID safety, and on top of that, poor gun safety.” There had apparently been an issue with three misfires of guns over the course of the previous two weeks.

The worker continued, “We wrote about this exact issue last night, and walked this morning because of it! That’s not in any of the papers! They brought in 4 non-union guys to replace us and tried calling the cops on us.”

The devastating episode comes less than a week after IATSE officials called off a scheduled nationwide strike by 60,000 members after announcing a tentative agreement (TA). IATSE workers were not only ready to strike, they brimmed with confidence after over 90 percent of the union membership turned out to authorize a strike with 98.6 percent voting in favor.

Workers voted massively in favor of a walkout and have been vociferously attacking the TA—and the highly paid IATSE bureaucrats who blocked the strike—on social media and at town hall meetings. The conditions that existed on the *Rust* set are not an anomaly but rather the norm across the entire industry: brutally long hours, few or no breaks, lack of decent food, the overall neglect of safety, all while workers are continuously on their feet.

There have been numerous deaths on the sets of films and television shows over the years. One of the most notorious occurred on July 23, 1982, when Vic Morrow and two child actors, Renee Shinn Chen and Myca Dinh Le, were killed during the filming of *Twilight Zone: The Movie*. While director/co-producer John Landis and five others were found not guilty of criminal charges based on their violations of labor laws concerning child actors, working hours and other conditions, Warner Brothers, Landis and Steven Spielberg (co-producer) later settled civil suits with the families for millions of dollars.

In a subsequent statement, Spielberg essentially admitted that the working conditions were responsible, by stating, “No movie is worth dying for. I think people are standing up much more now than ever before to producers and directors who ask too much. If something isn’t safe, it’s the right and responsibility of every actor or crew member to yell ‘Cut!’”

Two other tragic shooting deaths have taken place since the mid-1980s. In 1984, Jon-Erik Hexum shot himself in the head with a blank on the set of *Cover Up*, and nine years later, Brandon Lee (son of Bruce Lee) died after being shot in the abdomen with improperly made blanks. Many workers have been drawing comparisons between the Lee and Hutchins incidents and asking how could such a tragedy possibly take place, with safeguards having supposedly been put into operation.

After Thursday’s shooting, the Lee family tweeted, “Our hearts go out to the family of Halyna Hutchins

and to Joel Souza and all involved in the incident on “Rust.” No one should ever be killed by a gun on a film set. Period.” And they included a broken-heart emoji.

A number of workers pointed out on social media there was no reason why a “hot gun” (the term used for a weapon containing live rounds, blanks or otherwise) should ever be used on a film set. One prop master explained he had never even seen a weapon capable of firing anything on the productions on which he has worked. He noted that the productions either used rubber or plastic weapons, and that the real ones had their barrels sealed.

It should be stressed that the investigation is ongoing, and relatively little has been made public about the concrete circumstances of the shooting. Baldwin’s role in the death is obviously accidental and personally devastating. Nonetheless, as co-producer he bears some responsibility for the conditions on the *Rust* set. All in all, the awful death appears linked to the general circumstances prevailing in the film industry, the source of widespread and legitimate outrage among film workers.



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