Striking Deere worker killed at Illinois parts distribution center

Marcus Day
27 October 2021

A striking worker at John Deere's main North American Parts Distribution Center (PDC) in Milan, Illinois was struck by a vehicle and killed early Wednesday morning.

The identity of the man was confirmed to be 56-year-old Richard Rich of Moline, Illinois, by Rock Island County Coroner Brian Gustafson in the afternoon. Gustafson told local media that Rich died of traumatic chest injuries.

The worker had been crossing an intersection when he was hit, another striking worker at PDC told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*.

The worker bitterly denounced Deere and placed blame for the killing squarely on the company, saying, "They have blood on their hands! Bastards!"

The incident happened around 6:00 a.m. Central Time at the intersection of Rock Island-Milan Parkway and Deere Drive, according to a local CBS news affiliate, near an area where workers park to get to their pickets. The Moline Police Department and a local fire department were still at the scene later Wednesday morning and had closed the intersection, the station reported. The Milan Police, Moline Police Department's Accident Reconstruction Division and the Rock Island County Coroner's Office are conducting an investigation of the fatality.

The worker had been employed at Deere for 15 years, according to a short statement released by the United Auto Workers union's national headquarters. Significantly, the statement did not place any responsibility on the company or denounce it for the death of the worker.

"On behalf of the UAW and all working families, we mourn the passing of our UAW brother," UAW President Ray Curry was quoted as stating. "It is a somber time to lose a member who made the ultimate sacrifice in reporting to picket for a better life for his family and co-workers."

The head of the UAW's negotiations with Deere and director of its Agricultural Equipment Department, Vice President Chuck Browning, said in the statement, "We are heartbroken over the tragic loss of our Brother. Our most sincere condolences go out to his family and his co-workers and they are all in our thoughts and prayers as they go through this difficult time. The entire UAW mourns today."

It remains unclear at this point who was driving the vehicle that struck Rich, whether they were employed by Deere or were simply passing through the area and tragically did not see him walking. Several workers have complained about darkness at the location and the failure to repair lights at the intersection, which workers must cross to get to their vehicles.

Even if it is not a case of deliberate company violence, however, there is no question that Deere is ramping up its strikebreaking efforts. Moreover, workers have been left vulnerable by the UAW to attacks by the company and its efforts to deploy state repression.

The union did everything it could to avoid calling a strike and, after being forced to call it on October 14, has done everything in its power to isolate the Deere workers in the face of the company's strikebreaking campaign. In response to the death, the UAW has announced plans to do nothing more than fly the flag at its national headquarters at half-staff.

UAW Local 79 stated later Wednesday morning that it was cancelling pickets at PDC for the rest of the day. Workers who went to the scene of the incident to honor Rich were told to leave by the local union president "for their safety," but stayed long enough to erect a small memorial to him.

With harvest season still underway and farms looking to repair equipment quickly, Deere has been desperate to keep its parts distribution operations running, particularly

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at its facility in Milan, which serves as the hub for all North America.

The day the strike began, the company announced it was initiating its contingency plan and would deploy management personnel and salaried employees to maintain operations. Many of these employees have been sent from across Deere's facilities in the Quad Cities area, which straddles the Mississippi River along the Iowa-Illinois border, to PDC in Milan, workers have previously told the WSWS.

The use of strikebreakers has predictably led to dangerous and potentially deadly conditions on the picket lines. One striking worker was hit by a car pulling into Deere's Des Moines Works earlier this month, but luckily escaped serious injury, according to the *Des Moines Register*. Local police did not bring any charges against the driver.

Facing the emergence of the largest strike wave in decades, corporate America is resorting to all its old brutal methods of class violence and state repression, while at the same time relying on its "partners" in the trade union bureaucracies to either block or contain walkouts. The heavy use of strikebreakers and corporate violence was last seen in the 1980s, when striking workers were either injured or killed at Greyhound bus and NYNEX telephone, and in a series of miners' strikes, culminating in the shooting death of John McCoy, an AT Massey coal miner in 1990.

More recently, a General Motors worker was killed by a vehicle near the company's Spring Hill, Tennessee, plant during the 40-day 2019 strike.

At Warrior Met Coal in Alabama this year, where miners have been on strike since the beginning of April, strikers have repeatedly been hit by vehicles driven by company scabs and have reported being shot at. Kellogg's has hired the global strikebreaking firm AFIMAC in response to the strike by 1,400 food processing workers in Michigan, Pennsylvania and other states.

For its part, Deere secured a court injunction last week from Judge Marlita Greve that severely constrains workers' pickets at the company's facility in Davenport, Iowa. Greve issued the injunction just two hours after the company requested it, limiting pickets to only four workers, and, in a clearly vindictive move, barring the use of fire barrels or chairs on the line.

The UAW initially responded to the injunction without the slightest degree of criticism, ordering workers to abide by it, and more recently has sought to channel workers' indignation over the ruling into impotent appeals to the very same corporate-controlled courts.

At the same time, it brought Biden's Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to picket lines in Des Moines, Iowa as a supposed "friend" of the strike. The UAW made no mention of the fact that Vilsack himself appointed Greve to the Seventh Judicial District when he was governor of the state in 2006.

The killing of the striking worker immediately prompted an outpouring of sadness and anger in comments on local news Facebook pages and among other Deere workers.

"All this for corporate greed?" a worker Deere's Harvester Works in East Moline, Illinois told the WSWS. "We are getting hurt outside the factory and salary people are getting hurt inside the factory." She predicted that Deere will try to "turn this on us. They will say see this is why we put injunction in place in Iowa!"

The brutal conditions and strikebreaking Deere workers face must be denounced and opposed by workers everywhere, with the old slogan taken up, "An injury to one is an injury to all!"

However, the UAW will respond to the death of the worker not by seeking to mobilize its hundreds of thousands of members in defense of the strike, but rather by doubling down on its backroom talks with Deere and its plans to shut the strike down and get a sellout agreement through at the earliest opportunity.

To mobilize support in the working class and defend themselves against the company's efforts to break their struggle, Deere workers should form rank-and-file strike committees at every plant and warehouse, appealing to parts workers, autoworkers and others to join the strike, and link up with the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee to coordinate a counteroffensive against the company across Deere's operations worldwide.

To learn more about joining the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, Deere workers can email deerewrfc@gmail.com or text (484) 514-9797.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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