

New Mexico film set tragedy highlights deadly consequences of IATSE collusion with producers

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New questions continued to emerge about the dangerous working conditions on the set of the film *Rust* in New Mexico, where cinematographer Halyna Hutchins was killed in an accidental shooting on October 21.

At a press conference on Wednesday, the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office said a "lead projectile" had been fired from the gun, not a blank. "We would consider it a live round, a bullet," Detective Joel Cano reported.

The sheriff's department took over 500 rounds of ammunition into evidence. These included live rounds, so-called dummies—which are real bullets without a primer, propellant or explosive charge—and blanks. The latter are cartridges that have no projectiles and sometimes include wadding to keep the propellant in place.

There have been no explanations as to why there were any live rounds on the set, much less why they would be in the same location as the dummy and blank ammunition. The detective said there had been reports that the live rounds were being used for target practice, but this had not yet been corroborated, he said, emphasizing that the investigation was still ongoing.

Determining how the live rounds got there would be key to deciding whether criminal charges would be filed, the Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies said.

According to an affidavit filed by the sheriff's department and released Wednesday, the gun that fired the fatal shot was one of three "prop guns," which were left unattended on a cart outside of the film set, while the cast and crew took a meal break last Thursday. Before the rehearsals resumed, Assistant Director (AD) Dave Halls grabbed one of the guns and took it inside the church where filming was taking place.

Prior to handing the antique Colt 45 to actor/producer Alec Baldwin, Halls yelled "Cold gun!", indicating that the prop gun did not have any live rounds. After Baldwin pulled the gun from a holster and pointed the weapon at the camera it discharged, with the bullet fatally wounding 42-year-old cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and lodging in the shoulder of director Joel Souza.

The prop guns had been set up on the cart by the firearms specialist on the set known as the armorer, the affidavit said. One of the other two guns on the cart was plastic, and the other appeared to be modified not to fire, Detective Cano said.

Cano confirmed that six members of the camera crew had

walked off the set just six hours before the fatal accident. Reid Russell, the cameraman who was standing next to Hutchins and Souza, said the crew left after writing a letter to management outlining their concerns regarding working conditions, including long hours and gun safety. On October 16, there had been two accidental gun discharges on the set, prompting crew complaints to the supervisor. This refutes claims by the production company that they were "not made aware of any official complaint" before the tragic accident.

The producers, which included Baldwin, quickly moved to replace the workers who walked off the set with a local nonunion film crew, just hours before the deadly shooting.

The tragedy occurred just four days after the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) announced a last-minute deal with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) to prevent a strike by 60,000 workers demanding an end to exhausting and dangerous working conditions, which are prevalent throughout the industry.

"It brings me to my knees with grief and shock," a veteran prop master posted on social media. "My husband just wrapped a show where [safety] issues were happening. They had more than one bad accident, and the crew was not getting paid on time. Time for change. We gave that strike away. She [Halyna] would probably be alive if a strike had indeed happened."

Describing the safety protocols that should have been followed, Dutch Merrick, a movie prop master and armorer for 25 years and former president of IATSE Local 44 in Los Angeles, said, "An armorer is solely responsible to take the gun to the set and hand it directly to an actor."

"In this instance, the first assistant director was handling the gun," Merrick said, "and the guns were clearly mishandled and not locked up, and allowed to be used for actual gunfire shooting, which I've never heard of in my 25 years in the industry. It is unconscionable that you would take your movie guns and put live ammo in them ever. The camera crew walked off that morning because the conditions were so deplorable. They had gone three weeks without a paycheck; they were having to work 14 hours a day, with inadequate turnaround, to get home."

Halls, who as assistant director was one of the people in charge of safety on the set, told detectives he had not checked all the rounds in the gun, as he should have, before handing it to Baldwin.

According to the affidavit, Halls said the film's armorer, Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, had opened the gun for him to inspect, but he only examined three chambers.

There have been previous safety complaints against Halls. In 2019, he was fired from the set of the movie *Freedom's Path* after a gun unexpectedly discharged, injuring a crew member. The same year, Maggie Goll, a prop maker and licensed pyrotechnician, told the *Guardian* she filed an internal complaint with the executive producers of Hulu's "Into the Dark" TV series in 2019 because Halls was not following weapons and pyrotechnics protocols.

Other veteran crew members blamed the cost-cutting, speedup and long hours that are prevalent in the industry, conditions which led to a near-unanimous vote for strike action by IATSE members. "This situation is not about Dave Halls," Goll told the *Guardian*. "It's in no way one person's fault. It's a bigger conversation about safety on set and what we are trying to achieve with that culture."

Although her father is the highly regarded Hollywood weapons expert Thell Reed, the head armorer on the set of *Rust*, 24-year-old Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, had little experience. She had only completed her first movie as head armorer last month during the shooting of a Western *The Old Way*, starring Clint Eastwood and Nicolas Cage. During the filming there were several complaints lodged against her, including walking on the set with live rounds or blanks without announcing it to the cast and crew and firing guns without warnings, which prompted Cage to storm off the set.

Movie producers were putting inexperienced people in critical jobs to cut costs, Stu Brumbaugh, who served as a key grip on *The Old Way*, told TheWrap.com. "It's happening more and more as producers refuse to bring more experienced people because their rates are higher, they demand we take our time and (producers) don't want to pay it. So, they hire a newbie who is energetic and wants the job and will do it with less people," he said.

The problem on *Rust*, Brumbaugh told TheWrap.com, was Gutierrez-Reed did not have help.

"She was doing everything by herself in that movie and on the other movie. If there was one more person in the other movie, the tragedy wouldn't have happened. A second person would have inspected to make sure the barrels were clear," he said.

Rust was what was termed an Ultra-Low Budget film. This is part of a tier structure agreed to by IATSE and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which allows for more "union" shows while at the same time permitting producers to hire nonunion crews if union workers are unwilling to accept the low wages and poor conditions. As one worker told the WSWs, that was "the case on *Rust*. I personally know two prop masters who turned it down because they knew it couldn't be done safely."

The exploitation of film crews has been exacerbated by the pandemic as Hollywood producers rush to churn out new low-cost products for TV and streaming services to meet surging demand. But the subordination of health and safety for corporate profit would not be possible without the collusion of the entertainment unions, including IATSE.

"*Rust* is a union-certified production, in good standing with all of the major production unions and guilds, including IATSE, the

Teamsters, SAG, and DGA," Allen Cheney, one of the film's executive producers said in a statement Wednesday.

Whether an individual or a few people are found culpable for Hutchins' tragic death, it could not have happened if workers were not forced to earn a living under such brutal and exploitative conditions as those that existed on the set of *Rust* and countless other productions, and this fact will be covered up and minimized as much as possible by the AMPTP, IATSE and the government in favor of a one-sided narrative of individual "negligence." This was the outcome after the death of Brandon Lee—the 28-year-old actor and son of martial arts artist Bruce Lee—who was killed in 1993 by a prop gun containing a live round.

The tragedy has generated enormous anger among rank-and-file production workers, which the IATSE leadership is scrambling to contain. "I want justice, and I want our industry to change," one worker wrote on the Crew Stories Facebook page. "This is about more than the details of which person did what on this project to lead to this unbelievably dark outcome—it's bigger—it's about an industry full of money-grubbing, greedy producers, all of whom are being squeezed themselves by an unjust system of capitalism run amok—SYMBOLIZED BY THE AMPTP—whose members will stop at NOTHING to wring their BILLIONS OF DOLLARS of profits out of us. We have all experienced this squeeze, grown unbearable after the pandemic, which has now resulted in yet another senseless death of one of our own, HALYNA HUTCHINS, a rising star."

To fight these conditions, workers need to form new organizations of struggle, to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of IATSE and the other corporatist unions. This means building rank-and-file committees, which will mobilize to defeat the sellout deal agreed to by IATSE, which has and will perpetuate the unbearable conditions that produced this tragedy.

TV and film workers must unite their struggle with the growing national and international strike wave against low pay that is being eaten away by inflation, exhausting levels of overtime that rob workers of their health and family life, and the capitalist system, which has sacrificed the lives of millions during the pandemic for corporate profit.



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