

US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports 4,764 job deaths, not including thousands from COVID-19

Steve Filips
6 January 2022

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released its report on workplace deaths in 2020, showing a total of 4,764, a slight decrease from the previous year's total, mainly because it did not factor in worker deaths caused by COVID-19.

The BLS “publishes estimates of incidence rates and counts of workplace injuries and illnesses,” but doesn't include any information on those workers who were infected and succumbed to COVID-19, stating further “information on COVID-19-related fatalities in source data is inconsistent and often unavailable,” in effect shifting the blame for their failure to report.

In the course of 2020, the pandemic affected the worker death toll in two ways. It pushed down the toll somewhat because millions of workers were off the job for long periods, and therefore removed from the chemical poisoning, explosions, crushing by machinery and other “accidents” that are the everyday cost of the extraction of profit by the capitalist class.

Far more important was the undoubtedly large increase in the death toll from coronavirus, which hit 373,356 for 2020, with many, perhaps the majority of these infections contracted in the workplace. This dwarfs the “normal” death toll from capitalist negligence by a factor of 100 to 1. In the handful of states that actually publish figures detailing where outbreaks occurred, schools and nursing homes are usually first and second, with other workplaces following closely behind.

This death toll has undoubtedly increased in 2021, although BLS figures will not be available for another 12 months. According to data compiled by worldometer.com, the US COVID-19 death toll for 2021 was 473,923, substantially more than in 2020,

even though 63 percent of the US population has been vaccinated. The Democratic Biden administration's removal of most safety measures, including ending online instruction for US schoolchildren, has been a major factor contributing to this past year eclipsing of the 2020 COVID-19 death toll.

The trade union apparatus, in keeping with its support for the ruling class policy of mass death and its long-time indifference to workplace safety, praised the BLS report of a nominal decline and actually portrayed the pandemic as a positive. AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler said COVID-19 “meant fewer people were in direct contact with preventable hazards, production priorities shifted and businesses were forced to do more prevention planning.”

Undermining Shuler's claims that there has been any improvement in worker safety or the workplace death toll, the AFL-CIO's own annual report warns of the vast undercount of annual worker occupational fatalities by the BLS. The union federation's annual report on workplace fatalities and injuries, “Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect,” estimates at least 95,000 workers are killed each year, but it also does not include COVID-19 deaths.

Sectoral and regional reports on death tolls in certain industries and states cast more light on this grim subject.

The death toll among education workers remains incomplete. According to the Florida Education Association, “This fall, parents and school employees have been forced to make extremely tough choices with scant, confusing and often contradictory health and safety guidance from their local, state and federal government.” The teachers' union is compiling the

COVID-19 death toll for this school year, with at least 28 students and 109 educators dying since July 2021.

The death toll in Florida is likely higher, but this figure gives an indication of the impact the pandemic has had on American workers and their families across the country as the highly contagious Omicron variant begins to run rampant through the population. The website Edweek.org has compiled a death toll of the number of educators who have died from COVID-19, citing a national total of 1,223, of whom 414 were active teachers since the beginning of the pandemic.

There were 3,607 US health care workers who died in 2020 from COVID-19, none of them added to the BLS total of 4,762 lives taken on the job. This figure is based on an investigative report by the *Guardian* and KHN.org called “Lost on the Frontline.” The report released in April 2021 points out that the federal government does not keep track of deaths of health care workers, but the investigators had the expectation that the Biden administration would begin to keep track of health care worker deaths from COVID-19. Instead, however, Biden’s Labor Department has followed in the footsteps of the Trump administration.

Furthermore, the extensive investigation confirmed that the deaths were preventable: “Widespread shortages of masks and other personal protective gear, a lack of covid testing, weak contact tracing, inconsistent mask guidance by politicians, missteps by employers and lax enforcement of workplace safety rules by government regulators” meant that health care workers were “three times as likely” to be infected by COVID-19.

US autoworker infections and deaths from COVID-19 were not tracked on a national basis by the UAW, but there were at least five deaths in just the Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant near Detroit, which is representative of the conditions faced by workers across the auto and manufacturing industries in the US.

The US meatpacking industry had a total of 269 deaths attributable to COVID-19 through February 2021, according to a congressional report, and 59,000 workers were reported infected. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) trade union found the congressional figures were a significant undercount. At least 456 grocery store workers died from COVID-19, according to information released by the UFCW. The union did nothing to stop this mass killing.

Transit workers across the US suffered deaths from COVID-19, with the New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) alone experiencing at least 100 transit worker deaths according to Transport Workers Union Local 100 (TWU).

As in previous BLS reports, the occupation with the highest proportion of deaths is truck driving and the related transportation and warehousing industry, where the agency reported 1,282 deaths on the job. Again, this didn’t take into account the loss of life due to coronavirus, which swept through giant companies like Amazon, UPS and FedEx.

US workers and their brothers and sisters internationally should draw the conclusion that the capitalist political parties and trade unions have worked to suppress the class struggle. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the protection of profits has primary importance over that of the lives of workers. Workers need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, to be linked together through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), in an effort to implement scientifically determined necessary safety measures to save lives.



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