

JBS meatpacking worker killed in industrial accident in Grand Island, Nebraska

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26 January 2022

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A worker at a JBS USA beef plant in Grand Island, Nebraska, died on Friday, January 14, after being struck in the head by a piece of falling machinery.

The worker was identified as Esteban Mantilla, a 48-year-old Cuban immigrant and Grand Island resident.

The Grand Island Police and emergency services were called to the scene at 3:26 p.m., and CPR was provided to Mantilla, who had been struck in the head by a piece of machinery. He was then taken to CHI Health St. Francis where he was pronounced dead.

The Grand Island JBS beef plant is one of the largest employers in the region and currently employs nearly 3,000 workers. The plant has a 6,000-head capacity and can average nearly 5 percent of the daily feed cattle slaughter for the US market. JBS Grand Island is the primary producer of the Swift Black Angus brands, which JBS exports to more than 30 countries.

In a statement, JBS spokesperson Nikki Richardson said: “On Friday, a tragic accident occurred at our Grand Island production facility resulting in the death of one of our team members. We are deeply saddened, and our thoughts and prayers are with our team member’s family, co-workers and friends. We are working closely with local officials and OSHA to investigate the incident, and we are grateful to the emergency personnel for their quick response. We will be providing support to the family during this difficult time. Out of respect to our team member and the family, we will not provide further comment.”

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has announced that it is

investigating Mantilla’s death.

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 293, for its part, has yet to issue a statement concerning the death.

Over the past four years the Grand Island JBS facility has been investigated and cited by OSHA for numerous high-risk safety violations but has been leveled wrist-slap fines totaling just \$30,064. As is standard even with severe industrial accidents, JBS has contested each fine, succeeding in reducing even these token amounts.

In the spring of 2020, a series of COVID-19-related employee fatalities was investigated by OSHA at the Grand Island facility. Over the same period a massive outbreak of the virus was raging throughout the meatpacking industry.

At least 59,000 workers were infected with COVID-19, and 269 died between March 1, 2020 and February 1, 2021 at Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, JBS, Cargill and National, according to a report issued by the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee investigating the impact of the COVID-19.

These numbers, while far higher than earlier estimates, still only provide a partial accounting of the full toll on meatpacking workers. The Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, which has conducted its own tracking of cases and deaths, has pegged total cases at 86,000 and deaths at 423.

Despite the official acknowledgement of the four reported COVID-19-related deaths at the Grand Island facility following OSHA investigations, each case was closed with no financial penalty.

OSHA has long served to whitewash corporate negligence and cover up management’s responsibility for unsafe working conditions. At the same time, successive Democratic and Republican administrations have largely gutted the agency. In 2020, as

unprecedented workplace-related dangers unfolded with the first emergence of the pandemic, OSHA carried out only half as many on-site inspections as the year before, despite a substantial rise in complaints related to the lack of COVID-19 safety measures.

The UFCW, on the other hand, has stood by as the coronavirus has ravaged its membership, refusing to call strikes and collaborating with management to keep workers on the job. However, workers have sought to fight back against low pay and the abysmal conditions they face, as at the JBS in Greeley, Colorado, where they launched a wildcat strike in 2020 after six of their coworkers died. More recently, thousands of King Soopers grocery workers in Colorado struck against low wages and grueling working conditions, before the UFCW shut down the walkout and rammed through a contract on management's terms earlier this week.

Throughout the pandemic JBS has only halted production at the Grand Island facility on two occasions. The plant was closed for a day in May 2021 following a ransomware cyberattack that affected the company's IT infrastructure in the US and Australia. Later in September 2021, the Grand Island plant operations were halted following a fire in the rendering area which affected the roof. Production resumed the following day.



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