

Caterpillar worker falls into molten iron crucible and dies at Mapleton, Illinois foundry

James Martin
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Caterpillar workers: We want to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end of this report to share your experience about any workplace or safety issues at your facility. All comments will be kept anonymous.

A 39-year-old Caterpillar worker, Steven Dierkes, died instantly last Thursday after falling into a molten iron crucible at the company's Mapleton, Illinois foundry. This is the second death of a worker in the last six months at the Caterpillar facility, which has faced increasing safety violations in recent years.

Dierkes, a resident of Peoria, was apparently working near the crucible, where different metals are melted at a temperature of over 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit, when he fell in. An investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) as well as the sheriff and coroner's offices is presently underway.

{Read More: "The death of Steven Dierkes: A victim of America's industrial slaughterhouse"}

"Steven Dierkes lived down the street from me when we were kids," said Jermaine Pigeo, who mourned his friend's death in a social media post. "We naturally grew up together. We were into professional wrestling, so every Friday night, we'd get together with friends and we'd try wrestling moves on each other. Then, we'd play video games all night. RIP, buddy."

Ron, a veteran Caterpillar worker whose name has been changed to protect him from retaliation, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "He was taking a sample of iron for the met lab and apparently just tripped. He died instantly, but not all of him went in. Part of his body remained on the deck for the coroner to retrieve. It must have been ghastly for those folks that witnessed it and to wait for the coroner with half of their coworker lying on the floor."

The foundry at Mapleton produces multiple engine castings using various combinations of metals, which are poured into various molds in different pour zones that produce engine blocks, heads, liners and other manufacturing components.

"The death occurred on one of the large melters in the main foundry melting area," Ron said. "I haven't seen the melting area in years, let alone the melt deck itself, so I cannot report what conditions are like. Our melting area is physically connected but operationally independent. Word spread fast and people were gathering trying to find out what happened."

"I don't know what time it happened but by 10:20 a.m. the entire facility was sent home. I received a text from my boss early evening last night that we were not to return to work until Monday. Presumably the company would have their whitewash mixed by then," he added.

Another worker noted in a social media post that Steven had "only been there for 5 days" and he should not have been on the iron floor

without sufficient training.

In a perfunctory and hollow statement, a spokesperson for Caterpillar stated, "We are deeply saddened by the death of an employee who was involved in a serious incident at our Mapleton, Illinois, facility on June 2. Our thoughts are with this employee's family, friends and colleagues. The safety of our employees, contractors and visitors is our top priority."

The United Auto Workers (UAW), which oversees a number of Caterpillar workers, said little more: "Local 974 lost one of our members this morning in a tragic accident at our Mapleton facility. He and his family are in all of our thoughts and prayers." The death of the worker has gone unacknowledged by the UAW International so far.

{Read More: "Horrific death at Caterpillar Mapleton foundry evokes outpouring of shock and anger among workers"}

The horrific death of Dierkes follows that of 50-year-old Scott Adams, an electrical contractor, who also fell to his death in the foundry on December 23, 2021. Adams was contracted from Shaefer Electric to work at the Caterpillar foundry, where he was installing new equipment. While an OSHA investigation is still under way more than six months after his death, Adams allegedly climbed a ladder and fell some 20 feet through a floor opening that was not properly covered.

Ron said of Adams' death that he was "surprised one of the local stations actually had the audacity to point out the death of a contractor only last December in our facility. I say that because local media are little more than advertising for Caterpillar."

Death, body trauma, broken ribs and amputations: A record of worker safety violations at Caterpillar's Mapleton facility

The Mapleton, Illinois Caterpillar facility has been the site of numerous safety and health violations in the past 30 years since the sellout of Caterpillar workers by the UAW in the 1990s. The UAW betrayed two strikes by Caterpillar workers, in 1991-1992 and in a protracted 17-month-long strike in 1994-1995, which ended with the imposition of the hated two-tier system and a 30 percent cut in wages for new hires by 1998.

Dierkes' death was the third in 30 years since Ron had started working there. "They dropped a 10-ton hook and block from an overhead gantry crane on a man during the strike," he said of the first fatality decades ago.

The recent history of OSHA violations point to a pattern of unsafe

conditions for workers. In 2020, OSHA fined the Caterpillar Mapleton facility \$5,750 for a serious safety violation concerning “fall protection systems and falling objects.” The full details have not been made public by OSHA.

In November 2019, OSHA fined Caterpillar \$4,337 for a serious health and safety violation at the Mapleton facility. The facility was also fined \$17,711 for multiple serious infractions such as “fall protection systems and falling objects” in May 2019. Full details have not been released by OSHA for either case.

In January 2019, OSHA fined Caterpillar \$10,419 for an incident where a worker’s finger was severed on the job at the facility. The report noted: “An employee was repairing a broken chain on an overhead conveyor system. The employee removed the guards and laid on the rollers then saw the broken chain and pulled out with his hands and counted the links on the damaged chain. The employee dropped the chain in between sprockets and pushed on one end to the east and continued sliding under the sprocket to put the master link. The employee placed his hands, one finger to pick up the chain next to the sprocket and received a finger amputation.”

Caterpillar was fined \$25,868 in November 2017 for a safety violation. The report stated, “At 4:47 am on November 1, 2017, an employee walked down an automated crane aisle to check a crane that he believed had faulted. The crane began moving and struck the employee. The employee was hospitalized with multiple fractures and body trauma.”

In July 2017, Caterpillar was fined \$5,079 for an incident in which a worker sustained six broken ribs. “At 10:00 a.m. on July 25, 2017, an employee was working in the iron foundry of a manufacturer of construction equipment. The employee was attempting to retrieve a part from a machine. He climbed up on a chair with wheels to reach the part. The chair rolled out from underneath the employee. He fell onto a concrete floor. He sustained six broken ribs. He was transported and admitted to OSF Saint Francis Medical Center.”

A climate of fear and retaliation by Caterpillar

In an exchange in 2016 between a UAW safety representative and OSHA, it was revealed that Caterpillar frequently retaliated against employees who reported safety violations, while the UAW did practically nothing.

Steve Mitchell, the UAW’s safety chairman for the plant, admitted to a panel of investigators that the company fired workers who reported safety issues, while fecklessly stating, “I’m not here to speak badly about Caterpillar.”

“In recent years at my local,” Mitchell stated then, “we’ve filed 53 11(c) complaints [whistleblower complaints under the section 11(c) of the OSHA act of 1970], and we haven’t had one complaint that’s come in our favor.” He added that people who made these complaints “were disciplined or discharged” and they “expressed to [him] that they wish they’d never reported their injuries, and that’s a sad state of affairs when you consider that your worst day at work of getting hurt just got made worse by potentially losing your job.”

Mitchell detailed horrific stories of workers who got fired as well. One worker who suffered an injury after falling over a trip hazard was fired by the company. “She broke her arm,” he said, “she damaged her knee, and she lost her job.” And he added of the UAW’s inability

to protect the worker, “because I got the complaint late, she lost her house and she ended up living in her car.”

Another Caterpillar worker moved his wife and eight children from Oklahoma to find work at the Mapleton facility. While the new worker was on his probationary period for training, he was fired for reporting a part that fell out of a fixture, causing him a minor injury.

“Once he reported [his] injury, he was discharged,” Mitchell said. “His services were no longer needed. It was really tough to sit there and hand the guy Kleenexes in my office as he cried, and he talked about, ‘What am I going to do now? I’ve moved away from my family. We don’t have any money. I’ve got girls in high school. What are we going to do?’ He was fired for not letting the part fall.”

Mitchell reported that since Caterpillar eliminated a line at the foundry in 2013, the company made the conditions even more dangerous. “In 2013, a line at our foundry was eliminated. It didn’t go away, but the work being done by UAW-represented people did. That job was sent out to a contractor and they continued to do that very same job in that very same spot on the floor, with the very same equipment that our people did.”

Caterpillar outsourced work in order to reduce workers’ compensation payments, Mitchell alleged. “The reason it was outsourced is because of high injury numbers and workers comp experience,” he said. “This was told to the union official down at that particular place of employment. It was told to the members in a factory meeting. They were told that it’s because you guys are getting hurt and our work comp costs are going up. They didn’t fix the job. They just handed off the injuries to another employer. Those injuries are still happening.”

The UAW has done nothing to stop the increasing safety hazards happening, as the repeat violations and injuries at the facility reveal. The union has also done nothing to protect workers from the unsafe conditions workers face since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ron, the veteran Caterpillar worker, noted that speedups and outsourcing of the workforce have created increasingly deadly conditions, “A number of operations like ‘chip and grind’ have been outsourced,” he said. “It’s very punishing work with a lot of carpal tunnel and similar injuries. Caterpillar’s production demands almost invariably lead to accidents due to rushing.”

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