

Horrific death at Caterpillar Mapleton foundry evokes outpouring of shock and anger among workers

Marcus Day
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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 with any workplace or safety issues at your facility. All comments will be kept anonymous.

Workers have responded with an outpouring of sympathy, horror and growing indignation to the horrific workplace death last week of Steven Dierkes at Caterpillar's Mapleton foundry in central Illinois. On June 2, Steven, 39, was working near a crucible with molten metal when he fell in, instantly killing him, the Peoria County coroner reported.

An obituary for Steven was published in the *Peoria Journal Star* on Monday with the following moving tribute:

Steven loved the outdoors and all animals. He was a loving person who enjoyed laughter from any source he could find. He was a hard-working teddy bear of a man with calloused hands and a tender heart. He would have done anything for anyone with no expectation of anything in return. He would have given a stranger the shirt from his back even though that may have been his last shirt. Most of all, he was a wonderful loving father to his daughters that he absolutely adored. He will be greatly missed.

The obituary noted that Steven is "survived by his best friend and life partner Jessica Sutter and daughters Rilie Myrl (12), Remie Jo (5) and Tamzlinn Jean (TJ) (4)," as well as his parents, Ron and Tori Dierkes of Bloomington, Illinois; a sister, Trina, and two brothers, Darren and Kyle.

Services are to be held in Bloomington on Thursday, June 9. In lieu of flowers, the family requested that contributions be made toward a memorial fund for his and Jessica's children.

Workers at Caterpillar, Deere, the Big Three automakers, and other manufacturing companies have widely shared news reports on Steven's tragic death on social media. A number contacted the WSWS to express their deep sadness over the event. Others denounced the dangerous conditions at

Caterpillar, the hostility of management to those who speak out on workplace safety issues, and the indifference of the United Auto Workers.

Steven Dierkes' death is the second at the Mapleton foundry in just six months. In December, a 50-year-old electrical contractor, Scott Adams, fell to his death through a hole in the floor that reportedly was not properly covered. The foundry has accumulated numerous violations from OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration). As is typical for the agency, which functions largely to whitewash corporate negligence, the violations have resulted in wrist-slap fines of only a few thousand dollars each.

"All comments workers had about safety issues were ignored and responded to with excuses"

One worker at the Mapleton facility told the WSWS Tuesday, "The first night back at the foundry (Sunday night), higher level management was on the shop floor patrolling and asking questions about how employees felt about safety. All comments workers had about safety issues were ignored and responded to with excuses."

Another Caterpillar worker described numerous safety problems at their facility, writing: "I was supplemental from January of 2022 to May 2022. On line 5 there is a railing of sorts that holds 18-22,000-pound engine molds.

"You don't get respirators and breathe in the chemicals coming out of the molds. Silica is all around the plant and is damaging to the lungs. Instead of respirators, in certain parts of the facility you get to go once a year to see how the damage is to your lungs caused by silica.

"I also had a drive shaft from a crane go out and drop one of these molds, and if it was up higher off the ground then what it was, three of us would have been killed. Didn't get any safety talk about it either.

"On one of the railings the weld is busted off, and you can

bounce on the metal. This was told to the supervisor and to the safety coordinator, along with maintenance, in March to get it fixed. As of May it wasn't fixed.

"We had a major water leak that came down onto electrical outlets and into molds that would be a major safety issue. Team lead was told about it and instead of being professional was told to get the f... out of the way.

"You don't get proper training. Instead, you get newly hired workers who barely know what they are doing. They get to train you, and in the process you're told to do this way or don't do it this way.

"In my time of being there, just line 5 alone, we had over 55 incidents: smashed fingers and hands, near misses of falling molds, wires snapping on cranes. Along with electrical issues on certain cranes that move several hundred pound mold pieces that would either cause it to lock up or would cause it to release the mold while suspended in the air. Also have employees who leave said mold pieces on the air and walk away from being too impatient, which is a major safety violation. No action is taken, just told 'don't do that,' but then it continues to happen."

"We were told that 'no one dies on Caterpillar property'"

A Caterpillar worker in East Peoria, Illinois, wrote, "I worked security at the East Peoria facility. We were told that 'no one dies on Caterpillar property.'

"I watched Cat firefighters perform CPR on a man we all could clearly see was deceased. His head was smashed by a hydraulic press. There was a vertical opening from the top of his head to the back of his neck. Brain matter was mixed in a puddle of blood on the floor. CPR continued on his lifeless body until his corpse crossed the property line.

"This is a regular practice for the company in an attempt to lessen liability and claim the death didn't occur on property."

"The UAW is just as worthless as Caterpillar"

Other Caterpillar workers spoke about the role of the UAW. Among the most bitter experiences by workers in the 1990s were a series of strikes at Caterpillar betrayed by the UAW, in 1991-92 and 1994-95, which left feelings of profound anger among workers and resulted in a historic regression in pay and benefits for new hires. More recently, in 2017, the UAW pushed through a brutal six-year concessions contract which maintained the tier system and gave Caterpillar a free hand to

close its Aurora, Illinois factory.

"I am one of the last union employees of a dozen that was on the liner line when Caterpillar outsourced it in July 2013," another CAT worker told the WSWS. "The UAW did nothing to help us. We were called into a meeting and told that was our last week and we were laid off indefinitely. I was called in November 2013 for a job at Caterpillar in East Peoria for almost \$4 less an hour. The UAW is just as worthless as Caterpillar."

"They really do force you into what feels like slavery"

Caterpillar workers beyond Illinois, including those at nonunion facilities, also spoke out on unsafe working conditions. A worker at CAT's North Carolina plant said: "I currently work for CAT in Sanford, North Carolina. Similar work conditions, working with broken tools.

"This company is very good at retaliation and keeping it quiet, but they also know how to cover their tracks to make sure when something goes wrong it doesn't come back to them but the employee. They really use a 'good ole boy' system, not what you know but who you know! They really have no regards for their employees.

"They say that safety is their main concern. However it's not, they really could care less about safety as long as the production numbers are met. They really do force you into what feels like slavery because they won't let you use your own PTO [paid time off], and if you do they retaliate by giving you positions that you aren't trained for, treated differently and alienated.

"They will ignore all of your concerns. They don't take action against sexual harassment. I myself have seen my current section manager sexually harass former colleagues. I've watched them use people like a dog and expect them to be okay with that."

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