

The death of Steven Dierkes: A victim of America's industrial slaughterhouse

Jerry White
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A funeral service is being held today in Bloomington, Illinois. Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old worker who was killed in a horrific industrial accident at Caterpillar's Mapleton foundry on June 2, will be laid to rest.

Dierkes was working in the main melting area when he either fell through flooring or tripped into a crucible holding molten metals at temperatures of more than 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit. The young worker died instantly from "thermal annihilation," Peoria County Coroner Jamie Harwood reported. He added that it took his team several hours to "sort through the metal fragments and find his remains" after the red-hot metals were cooled off.

Dierkes had just begun working at Caterpillar days earlier. He was described in an obituary as a "hard-working teddy bear of a man with calloused hands and a tender heart," who is "survived by his best friend and life partner Jessica Sutter and daughters Rilie Myrl (12), Remie Jo (5) and Tamzlinn Jean (TJ) (4)."

This tragedy will leave a life-long scar on his family and co-workers. As for Caterpillar, management issued a perfunctory statement saying it was "deeply saddened by the death of an employee" before resuming production of engine blocks at the foundry.

Dierkes' death recalls the conditions that workers confronted a century-and-a-half ago in Carnegie's steel mills in Pittsburgh. In the 1880s, the incineration of steelworkers was so routine that the companies would pour a "death ingot" from the vats they fell into. It was equivalent to the man's weight so that their widows had something to bury.

Though more information must come to light, one thing is certain: the "accident" was entirely preventable, and Steven Dierkes did not have to die. He is another worker sacrificed on the altar of profit.

This was the second fatality at the Mapleton foundry in six months. In December 2021, 50-year-old Scott Adams, an electrical contractor, fell to his death through a hole in the floor that reportedly was not properly covered.

Caterpillar has been repeatedly cited by the Occupational

Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for serious safety violations at the Mapleton foundry. Though these violations led to finger amputations, broken bones and other serious injuries, OSHA only issued a few wrist-slap fines that totaled less than \$70,000 over the last five years. This is less than the daily compensation of CEO James Umpleby III, who was paid \$24.3 million in 2021. Caterpillar spent \$1.4 billion on share repurchases and dividends in the first quarter of 2022 alone.

In posts on social media and messages sent to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Caterpillar workers described the conditions that led up to Dierkes' death. "Safety is not a priority, just profit," one CAT worker wrote. Another said, "I did that job for four or five years running, the melter he fell into. I cannot tell you the times I have thought how horrific it would be to trip and fall in. Those melters hold 110 thousand pounds of iron. What a terrible way to go." Dierkes had "only been there for 5 days," another worker wrote, adding that he should never have been on the iron floor without sufficient training.

Scoffing at the company's mantra that "nobody dies on Caterpillar property," a former security guard at its East Peoria plant said he witnessed company firefighters perform CPR on the lifeless body of a worker killed by a hydraulic press until he was moved off the property. "This is a regular practice for the company in an attempt to lessen liability and claim the death didn't occur on property."

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

Dierkes was only one of thousands of workers who are killed and maimed every year in America's industrial slaughterhouses. Most of these deaths go unreported in local news outlets, let alone the national media.

In the last few days alone, the United Support and Memorial Workplace Fatalities Facebook page listed the following victims:

- Thirty-six-year-old construction worker Ronald L. Bryant Jr. was struck and killed Wednesday by a

construction truck in Hamilton, Ohio near Cincinnati;

- Two unidentified workers at the Big Rivers Electric Corporation power plant in Henderson County, Kentucky died Tuesday after falling into a confined drainage system;

- Reaver Boone Vaughn, 61, died at the Granges America aluminum engineering and manufacturing facility in Salisbury, North Carolina on June 8 in an accident involving a forklift;

And on and on...

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 4,764 fatal work injuries in 2020, the latest figures available. Another 50,000 deaths and 119,000 illnesses occur every year from cancers and other fatal diseases linked to chemical exposures on the job, according to OSHA.

The US government boasts that the 2020 fatal workplace injuries were down 10.7 percent from 5,333 in 2019. But this statistical change is solely attributable to the sharp slowdown in the first year of the pandemic, when millions of workers stayed at home.

The 2020 and 2021 figures do not include the hundreds of thousands of workers who needlessly died from COVID because they were deemed “essential” or after temporary lockdowns were ended. After bailing out the banks, the ruling class rushed to reopen the auto factories, meatpacking plants, oil refineries, public transit systems, schools and other workplaces. These became central vectors for the spread of the deadly disease, which has killed more than 1 million people in the United States.

This is capitalism. The death of Dierkes and so many others is a terrible loss for loved ones, family, children, co-workers and friends. For the profit system, the worker is a commodity that can be replaced by another to perform the same task. And the capitalist production system grinds on...

While it takes a particularly brutal form in America, capitalism is a worldwide system of exploitation. Some 2.3 million women and men around the world are killed by work-related accidents or diseases every year—or more that 6,000 deaths every day—according to the International Labour Organization.

Last week, more than 50 workers were killed in an explosion at a port container depot in Bangladesh. The country was also the site of a 2013 disaster that saw 1,200 workers killed when a garment factory complex collapsed outside of Dhaka.

Workers are given no protection by government agencies or the unions. The class character of the state reveals itself clearly in its attitude to workplace conditions. Minor fines that corporations consider a “cost of doing business” are the norm, under Democrats and Republicans alike. The life of a worker is measured in dollars and cents, and never enough to affect the bottom line.

As for the unions, they are the last place that workers would now look to address their grievances, including over safety violations. The upper-middle class executives are engaged in a continuous conspiracy with management to increase exploitation.

The corrupt bureaucrats in the United Auto Workers (UAW) sold out a series of bitter strikes against Caterpillar in the 1980s and 1990s. With their blessing and complicity, the company ripped up gains won through generations of struggle.

Workers are not, however, simply an exploited mass. The ruling class is sowing the wind, and it will reap the whirlwind. A powerful counter-offensive is emerging in the United States and throughout the world—in health care, education, manufacturing, logistics and other industries—against the subordination of life to profit.

The industrial carnage can and will be stopped through the independent action of workers themselves. This means building rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace to fight cost-cutting, exhausting hours and workloads, and layoffs, which endanger workers’ lives. These committees must fight for workers’ control of production speed and control over all aspects of health and safety, including protection against COVID-19.

To fight multinational giants like Caterpillar, these committees must coordinate their struggles across national boundaries by building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In opposition to a system that subordinates human life to private profit, the working class must, and will, respond through the development of a political movement for socialism, that is, the reorganization of society on the basis of human need. It is through the fight for socialism that it is possible to put an end to the conditions of exploitation that led to the death of Steven Dierkes and so many other workers.



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