

“It’s like a death sentence in that place”: Former Caterpillar Mapleton foundry worker speaks out following death of Steven Dierkes

Marcus Day
14 June 2022

Caterpillar workers: We want to hear from you! Fill out the form below the article to share your experience with any workplace or safety issues at your facility and your thoughts on the death of Steven Dierkes. All comments will be kept anonymous.

Since the death of 39-year-old Steven Dierkes at Caterpillar’s foundry at Mapleton, Illinois, a number of current and former workers at the heavy equipment giant have contacted the *World Socialist Web Site*, sharing horror stories about the dangerous conditions they have confronted.

Dierkes, a father of three, fell into a crucible with molten metal on the morning of June 2, just days after starting work at the plant. It was the second death at the foundry in just six months.

Much remains to be uncovered about the circumstances which led to Dierkes’ barbaric death. The company issued a boilerplate statement following the death, claiming that safety “is our top priority.” In its own statement, United Auto Workers Region 4 said that the plant’s UAW safety chair and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) were conducting an investigation. The UAW International has yet to even acknowledge the death.

The foundry had already accumulated a number of OSHA violations in recent years, resulting in wrist-slap fines of just a few thousand dollars each. Based on the pro-corporate record of both OSHA and the UAW over many decades, however, their “investigations” are certain to result in little more than a whitewash, allowing Caterpillar to continue to sacrifice workers’ health and lives to its pursuit of profit.

A worker who was previously employed at Caterpillar’s Mapleton foundry spoke with the WSWs at length about the numerous safety problems she encountered during her time there. The worker said she was unjustly terminated after raising her concerns. The union did nothing to address the safety issues nor to save her job, she said. Her name is being withheld to protect her anonymity.

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“We were nobody for them”

I started out at CAT around September 2018. I was on Line 5 at the foundry, which is the mold line, where they make the molds. It’s the one where the pourer and everything is. And I was back by the pour line, where we made the molds for the engine blocks.

The machine that I would run, we made molds. Well, we would have to clean that machine out, clean the sand out of it so stuff wouldn’t stick from the resin, and the molds would come out right.

We were cleaning out that machine one day, me and another girl I worked with. There were guys that were supposed to be working with us, keeping an eye on us, because I would say we hadn’t been there long enough to be on our own doing what we were doing.

So we had to brace the machine because it had a hydraulic arm that would raise and lower, and there was a safety button that would lock the machine.

Someone thought we were done, and that everything was removed, but we weren’t. And the brace, which was supposed to stop the machine from closing, didn’t. It busted that brace. So the brace did not do its job. Fortunately, nobody got hurt or anything like that.

Well, then maintenance came in, and they said it was something to do with the safety button, that it malfunctioned or something like that. I don’t know if any of this was ever reported. And the people that were supposed to be keeping an eye on us at the time, they were in the break room.

We were nobody for them. That’s how I felt. And I hated it there, I hated it.

And then they put me on third shift, and I drove a tractor and a spotter truck. I would haul engines to get chipped and grinded with the tractor, and when I got them done, I would drive the spotter truck to dock the empty trailers, pull out the ones that they got loaded and put them in the yard.

I got a major pay cut going to third shift, which was really degrading to me. I think I went down to about \$13 an hour, from about \$20 when I had been working on Line 5. And I'm sorry, but it's not easy to be able to back in a trailer. You've really got to know what you're doing.

But I was really good at what I did. I had worked at SC2 Supply Chain Services for a number of years. They contract with Caterpillar and do packaging for them.

I also drove the tractor that hauled the engine blocks down to sand and blast. And that tractor had a busted-out window on the passenger side that you couldn't see out of; it was covered up with cardboard.

Everything was malfunctioning every day, it seemed like to me. I was shocked. For a big company, a billion-dollar company, you would think they would look out for their people a lot better than what they did.

So, the front row of the brakes on the spotter truck didn't work. It's like one side of the front brakes worked, and you would just slide. And I'm driving a 1,000-pound engine in its trailer and had to drive through walkways where people were walking. I mean, you would stop eventually, but you had that weight behind you. It also had no defrosters, so you had to use a rag to clear the windshield, which in my eyes was a severe safety hazard.

When I got there one night, the tractor that I drove had already broken down. And they later said I put the wrong gas in the vehicle. But I'm like, "Wait a minute, I've been doing this for a long time. I know the difference between diesel and regular gas. I'm not stupid."

But anyway, I left that night, because I tried to find somebody to help me with the spotter truck. And the UAW told me they aren't going to do anything about it, you just have to drive it. And I felt, "No, I don't have to just drive it, no way. I'm not putting my life at risk or anybody else's. I'm not doing it."

Nobody would do anything; they wouldn't even get me a safety person. So I went home, I didn't know what else to do. And when I came back, I think the next Monday (this was in 2019), the UAW said, "You're terminated." And I said, "Well, okay, what am I terminated for?" And they said, "Well, apparently, you put the wrong fuel in one of the vehicles."

Then I said, "Wait a minute, what? What vehicle?" And they said, "The tractor." And I said that the tractor was broken down when I came in Friday night. So I don't understand what we're talking about.

I thought to myself, they're upset because I threw a fit about the brakes on the spotter truck, and they're afraid I'm turning them in or something.

So they dragged me to my locker, and I cleaned it out. And, you know, I didn't fight it. I felt like, what am I going

to get? I'm nobody. I was a temp. And I don't think the UAW looked out for the temp people. I hadn't been there two years and hadn't been hired full-time.

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CAT, they just used people while they could, that's how I felt. They used me to get what they wanted out of Line 5, then shoved me somewhere and gave me such a pay cut that it was degrading because I knew what I was doing there. And when they fired me, I was like, because I spoke out about a safety issue? Are you serious? Don't you want to know these things so you don't get sued?

The company did that to a lot of people. They would say, after two years, you know, you're going to go full-time, but then one little mess-up or anything like that, and they get rid of you. Because really, they just use you for that short amount of time to get those parts out. I mean, you constantly see that they're hiring people. And they hire so many. And then they get what they need out of them. And then they get rid of them, lay them off or ship them somewhere to another plant further away or whatever.

I'd never work down there again. I don't know. ... It's like a death sentence in that place. It was. I was terrified. Every day.

The stuff's old, and that plant has been open for so many years. I think it's probably the worst plant they got. There's so much maintenance needed.

It's sad about that guy, Steven Dierkes. It really is. Why wasn't he harnessed? I mean, I thought they were supposed to wear harnesses? Where was that, keeping him from falling? I don't get it.

The companies, they don't pay attention to safety problems. They care more about money than lives, and that's why they're rich.

I'm hoping that we can get something changed, where it's a safer place for people to work. I hope others come forward. It shouldn't be this way. People should not be losing their lives. It's ridiculous.

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