

“Nothing has changed”: Workers speak out after death of Caterpillar worker Steven Dierkes

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Caterpillar workers: We'd like 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 published anonymously.

Current and former Caterpillar workers continue to come forward and share their stories with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the company's unsafe working conditions in the aftermath of the death of 39-year-old Steven Dierkes earlier this month.

Steven Dierkes died instantly after reportedly falling into a molten iron crucible at Caterpillar's Mapleton, Illinois, foundry, according to the Peoria County coroner. Dierkes had only begun work at the foundry a few days earlier.

Many workers who have reached out to the WSWS have condemned both the company and the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has done virtually nothing to protect workers from the daily horrors they confront. And despite Caterpillar having a record of repeated safety violations, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has also done nothing more than issue wrist-slap fines to the company.

The stories Caterpillar workers have shared harken back to the brutal sweatshops of much earlier periods, as depicted in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1908), the muckraking novel detailing conditions in the meatpacking industry, or Friedrich Engels' *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845), which powerfully exposed the conditions facing English workers in the mid-19th century.

“Nothing has changed since either of these deaths”

A current Caterpillar worker in the same foundry where Steven Dierkes died stated that Caterpillar has done nothing to address any safety issues, despite two recent deaths,

Dierkes' and that of 50-year-old contractor Scott Adams last December.

“I currently work for Caterpillar in Mapleton, Illinois,” the worker said. “Nothing has changed since either of these deaths or dismemberments.

“Caterpillar has a culture of ‘Come in, shut up, keep your head down and obey.’ If you don't, you're walked out or targeted. They do not care about your safety and they never have.”

The UAW, he added, provides “no protection” for workers.

“They show total indifference, total apathy”

Another current Caterpillar worker responded to the WSWS's interview with a former worker who worked on line 5 in the foundry and described the conditions there as “a death sentence.”

“You may have noticed that line 5 comes up a lot,” he said of the reports of safety issues there by workers. “I can't begin to describe the whole operation for you. I'll let their letters paint the picture. I worked line 5 and did those jobs. Sounds like most of the safety measures we had have gone by the wayside. As for it being ‘old and broken down’? It was old and broken when I was hired a long time ago.

“Management,” he added, “if they mention it at all, still refer to Steven's death as an accident, as if he stubbed his toe. I honestly believe not one of those f—s could tell you his first name.

“They show total indifference, total apathy,” he said of Caterpillar management. In their eyes, “We are not human. We are beasts of burden. And our plant manager for one would gladly ‘put us down’ if we got injured. Just like an old mule. A right piece of work she is with a Cheshire cat

smile. The impression is almost literal. She'll speak to you, smile, then walk away and the smile will still be floating there as if it wasn't even attached to her face."

"People started screaming ... "

A worker at Volvo Truck's New River Valley Plant in Virginia said, "I used to work for a Caterpillar subcontractor myself. While [Steven's death] is tragic and shocking, I have no trouble believing it.

"They're utterly neglectful about keeping up with their PMs (preventative maintenance), like most corporations are. I know because I was their Engineering Analyst and was in charge of filing the paperwork for when they completed the PMs.

"They let a Cincinnati 6-axis lathe sit for 14 months with no PM, and then one day just fired it up and put an 800-pound rod in it. It threw the rod across the work area crushing the operator's leg, but thankfully missing the rest of him.

"It was creepy how it sounded. It was a shaking crash as it tore through the door of the Cincinnati and then 'ding ding da-ding ding' as another crash quaked the area.

"And then people started screaming," he recalled.

"Even though our office was upstairs you could hear everything clear as a bell. It was miraculously fortunate that no one else was hurt, and that it was only the man's leg that was injured. I offered him the paperwork to prove that they were neglectful of their PMs when I saw him again a year and a half later, but he declined. As far as I know he didn't sue them and he was out for almost a year and a half with his injuries.

"I was working then for a company called Swanson Industries in Rural Retreat, Virginia. The managers drove the company into the ground with bad quality and safety. Everyone got laid off and they closed shop. As far as I know the company still exists at its parent site in West Virginia. This was circa 2011.

"Corporations view people as just interchangeable and inexhaustible resources," he concluded. "They don't really care if people get hurt or die. They just put a 'Now hiring' advertisement up and keep bribing those who would punish them."

"The UAW did nothing for me"

A former Caterpillar worker who worked for more than a decade in Illinois said, "I quit Caterpillar in May of 2015 when my mom was told she had cancer and not long to live. I was upset and just left. They would not give me my job back. The UAW did nothing for me."

When it came to safety or health issues at his facility, he felt that CAT's medical personnel were "only looking out for the company. Heating pad and ibuprofen was the cure for everything. I had surgery on both elbows for the cubital tunnel, surgery on the right hand for carpal tunnel and surgery for a torn left rotator cuff."

Speaking about the two-tier system that the UAW imposed on behalf of management after two bitter and prolonged strikes in the 1990s, he said, "We felt less than human working along with the other union people that were getting higher wages from the first tier. Caterpillar management treated us differently also. It was degrading."

"This facility is a danger to everyone in it"

Another current worker in the Mapleton foundry said, "I've been everything from just a floor worker, all the way to working closely with management people and have seen startling things.

"Privately they will acknowledge safety shortcomings, but instead of fixing it, they just say that we should have an experienced person do it because they can't afford the down time and not making parts.

"I personally have seen a multitude of safety hazards that go unresolved. The production number outweighs the risk. Supervisors are given bonuses and raises based on product numbers, but neither the company nor the union hold them accountable for injuries in their area.

"This facility coupled with the management," he warned, "is a danger to everyone in it."

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