

“There was blood everywhere”: Former Caterpillar worker speaks out on lack of safety

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Caterpillar workers: Make your voice heard. 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 published anonymously.

The death of 39-year-old Steven Dierkes in a molten iron crucible at Caterpillar’s foundry in Mapleton, Illinois earlier in June continues to evoke outpourings of anger by current and former workers. Steven’s untimely death was the second in just six months at the foundry.

A number of workers have written in to the *World Socialist Web Site* to express their outrage against the company, the United Auto Workers (UAW), and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)’s toothless response to these deadly industrial conditions.

“Every day the plant manager came to harass us”

“I worked from 2005 to 2013,” said Jon, a former Caterpillar worker in the Peoria, Illinois area (Jon’s name has been changed to protect his identity). “I started as a welder in building LL. Then I found out there was a spot open for a touch-up booth in another building.

“I loved that job for the first five years,” he said looking back on his first few years. “We had a really good manager. She was from the floor, but she never forgot who she was.

“Then they brought on a new plant manager named Chad. He was the most hated. He harassed paint lines. He would walk right by other departments in accessories and walk over to us to harass us.

“Every day the plant manager came to harass us, to the point that we joked about getting a restraining order on him. He used to be a big intimidating presence. But I wasn’t afraid of him.

“One day he wanted my boss to walk a woman out because she was on the phone. He told the foreman she should be walked out. ‘Chad,’ the foreman said, ‘her mom died.’ Chad replied, ‘I don’t care.’

“I made it obvious that I thought he was a piece of sh—t. He started hawking over me. I went from nothing on my disciplinary record in six years to, within a span of a few months, verbal to written warnings, then to one-day, to three-day, to indefinite suspensions. It was over trivial BS.

“I was fed up and ended up bidding out and going back to building LL as a kit builder. There’s this area full of little parts, clips, things you can bolt on to a case frame, the gut of a tractor, etc. I’d gather up these parts, put them on a cart, and take them down to a D-11 cart, D-6 cart. We’d take them to the designated areas to where they were building the tractors. You’d restock the area. I worked there for probably two years.”

Jon said workers faced divisions in the plant due to the UAW imposing concessions contracts that pitted newer and older workers against each

other. “There was this older guy who didn’t like anyone,” he recalled. “The only people he got along with were other people who had been there for decades. This was due to the divisions in the older contracts.”

He added of the UAW, “They’re worthless. What they will do and won’t do depends on that two-tier system. One UAW guy, we called him ‘Maybe’: maybe he’d help you, maybe he wouldn’t. There was a woman who worked there from a temp agency who had to pay union dues and got no protection whatsoever.

“I got written up once for not using a ladder to get up on a D-6 cart. I got to climb up on the ladder and jump down on the D-6 cart. The thing is you could grab the irons like a ladder. I filed a grievance for my write-up. A few months later, I asked the union rep whatever happened about the grievance I filed. He said, ‘I think it got dropped.’ I said, ‘Why?’ For ‘insubordination,’ he said.

“I lost it. I said, ‘You don’t do anything for people on this contract.’ Every time I had a problem, they said pointing to the contract that there’s nothing they can do because ‘you’re on the new contract.’

Jon said he was told again and again by the UAW, “Well there’s nothing I can do ...”

“I then asked for core membership forms,” he continued. “Your normal dues were two hours of your regular pay every month. The core form is when you feel UAW is not representing you as it should, you ask to drop down your dues.

“I was also getting a divorce at that time. I had heard the union would help you pay for a divorce lawyer. First thing out of his mouth, ‘That depends when you were hired in.’ If you were hired after February of 2005 you couldn’t get it.

“Not only was the guy working alongside me working the same job as me, he’d get paid \$10 more than me,” Jon angrily said about the two-tier system.

“We’d have meetings about quality having suffered. They’d say, ‘We got to ramp quality back up.’ One of the guys said we want to get quality back to the 1980s level. All of it went back to the ‘new contract’ when they screwed everyone and quality suffered.

“The year we had a contract up in 2011, they were talking about how much we made and how much we should make. Jim Owens, the CEO of the time, got around \$20 million. I took that number at my wage, and calculated I’d have to show up to work every single day, five days a week for 43 years to make what he made in a month!”

“I came back and they said, ‘You’re fired.’”

Jon said he was finally pushed out of Caterpillar as he tried to take time off for his dying father. “The reason I left, back in 2013, was because my dad was dying. I made a mistake by not going on FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act]. I was down in Peoria, but my dad was in another town. I went up there a lot. I was calling in a lot. They didn’t have a point system then. It was up to your foreman. When you call in on that automated system, they say if you are absent more than three days, you need a doctor’s note.

“I spent the whole week out of town with my dad. But I didn’t have a doctor’s note. I came back and they said, ‘You’re fired.’”

Jon had seen others fired callously by Caterpillar as well. “I’ve seen other supplemental workers fired. One guy got in a motorcycle accident. They fired him,” he said.

“Cat approved me for unemployment. But that lasted for nine months. My dad died in 2013. From October to New Year’s, I lost my truck, my apartment, and after my dad died, in December 2013... I thought nothing worse could possibly happen. Then a girl I went to school with died.”

Life got progressively more difficult for him for a few years. “2014 was a blur. Then I did odd jobs after that. I did a job welding.” He currently works a job that pays considerably less than what he made at Caterpillar.

“There was blood everywhere... it chewed his arm off”

Jon went on to describe glaring safety issues at Caterpillar while he had been there.

“In the touch-up booth, they had military tractors they wanted painted military green,” he said. “At first they wanted me to lift these blades up that weighed thousands of pounds and were hoisted.

“I was frequently under the blades, and if it would have fallen it would have landed on me and killed me. The hoist was rated at so many pounds, but the blade weighed so many more pounds. I told them I’m not doing this anymore.”

A few years had passed since he left Caterpillar, but one day in 2016 he got a text message from his former coworker still working at CAT. “The text said, ‘Remember what we said would always happen the way we painted the tracks?’ It happened. The woman I talked to said there was blood everywhere. I texted a few former coworkers to confirm it as well.”

Describing the horrific accident, he continued, “The tractors go into the booth on a dolly. Once in the tack booth the tractor is started and put into gear making the tracks rotate. The painter then maneuvers his gun at several different angles to cover the track with paint. They reach in and under the track and within inches of the final drive.

“The painter got his paint hose caught up in the final drive and within a second his arm was pulled into where the drive and the track meet, and it chewed his arm off.

“We told them for years it would eventually happen, but they didn’t care as long as the numbers were made. Last I heard he was moved to building LL and is on permanent light duty.

“This was in East Peoria. The only time they really care about safety at all is like when something like the death of a worker like at Mapleton happens. They go on the head hunt about who to fire for this.

“Other than that, safety is used as a termination tool, as a discipline tool,” Jon said.

“The most ridiculous thing I ever saw in there was this guy,” Jon noted, describing a widely hated foreman. “He put the tracks on the tractors. This guy was such a colossal jerk. He told his crew, ‘If you get hurt, I’m gonna write you up.’ One woman was putting her boots on in the locker. A spider bit her, and it was a brown recluse,” he said, a spider with toxic venom that can cause inflammation, fevers and skin ulcers.

“She went to the ER, came back to work the next day. She told the foreman the next day, and the foreman wrote her up because she didn’t go to medical.

“The foreman ended up dying, he had some illness. That guy was so hated, when he died the department had a potluck to celebrate.”

Another time, he said, “I saw a guy get walked out. He grabbed a platform ladder. There was a barb on the ladder that he had asked maintenance to handle. They walked him out for not wearing a glove!

“I saw another woman get walked out because she was standing on the ladder wrong. Management just went around and told people what they’re doing wrong. They’re totally reactive, they’re not proactive at all and don’t train anyone.”

Jon added sarcastically, “If you fell into a pit, they wouldn’t throw you a rope. They’d write you up.”

Jon recently was at the hospital and heard the news of Steven Dierkes’ death there. “The woman I talked to... her husband is a ‘safety guy’ at Cat. She said the husband heard about this over the radio. There was apparently a huge plume of black smoke over there. A few minutes later they said there was a fatality that was non-recoverable.

“What I was told, what she told me, he had only been there six days. He should not have been on that platform because he had no training. He wasn’t able to get a hold of his supervisor.

“From what she told me, the crucible wasn’t entirely full, but it burned him in half.

“I don’t know how true it is, but I had heard the same thing happened in the ’70s. A worker fell into the crucible then. There was a ceremony. They buried the crucible.

“With the contract coming up in 2023, they’re going to do contingency training. They’re going to have people from the office coming down to train. If there’s a strike, there’s a potential of having under-trained people doing this job.

“Before Caterpillar, I worked at another plant for 10 years, when I was 19 to 31. When I left there, I was sure I couldn’t get anything worse. Then I worked at Caterpillar.”

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