

Dockworker crushed to death by straddle carrier in Newark, New Jersey

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Do you work at the docks? We want to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end of this article to let us know what your working conditions are like. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Early in the morning on July 13, a workplace accident at Newark Port claimed the life of Uriel Matamoros, 59, a dockworker from Elizabeth, NJ. Matamoros spent 8 years working on the docks, was originally from Nicaragua and was affectionately nicknamed “Popeye” by his friends and coworkers. A GoFundMe page was arranged by his coworkers and friends in support of his family.

From initial reports, the accident occurred at the Port Newark Container Terminal in Newark, New Jersey as Uriel was operating a straddle carrier (a vehicle that carries its load underneath by 'straddling' it) and was moving a 40-foot container to the yard's MT stack. The container carried was appropriately low and the vehicle was relatively stable.

A CCTV video revealed Uriel turning sharply to the right, causing the vehicle to become unstable and topple over, landing with the cab side down and smashing into the apron. Surviving such an accident was unlikely.

Hundreds of coworkers and friends shared messages of sympathy and support for the family. The common tone depicted a man who was loved for his humanity, humor and warmth:

Tye Gary: “He lived!! This man was consistently peaceful, joyful, and a pleasure to see. He would say the most kind things to me and boy was he a hard worker... praying for his family.”

Giuseppe James Cangiano: “I’m so sorry for your loss. My thoughts and prayers are with you and your family. Popeye was a coworker and friend of mine. He will be sorely missed. May he Rest In Peace.”

Lisa Thoroughman: “Your husband was a wonderful man just that little time that I got to know him.”

Uriel leaves behind his loving wife Rose Marie Ortiz and children. In a message that reveals the emptiness he left, Rose Marie commented: “My Loving, Hardworking and Brave husband... Popeye, you were loved by everyone, my heart is in a million pieces.... The love of my life is gone forever, on July 12th, 2022 at 6:15 p.m. he hugged and kissed me as he was leaving for work and said, I’ll see you around 1:30 hun, I love You and I said ok I’ll see you then, I Love You too... I wish I would’ve held on to your hug just a little bit longer hun, our home is empty without you.”

The sincerity of his family and friends is in sharp contrast with the cynical tone of the union bureaucracy, which sought to relinquish its own responsibility by presenting such preventable tragedies as an unfortunate fact of life on the docks: “Our industry is a dangerous profession which is why we fight hard in negotiations for top level training programs. Our industry partners and the ILA must redouble our efforts to make certain we prevent accidents like the one that took the life of Brother Matamoros,” said ILA President Harold J. Daggett.

The industry is notoriously dangerous due to a strenuous workload and challenging schedules. Fatigue is a common feature of this work, which often includes only 6-hour intervals between shifts. In response to labor shortages as COVID-19 continues to take its toll, companies are increasingly demanding more from dockworkers. Moreover, equipment maintenance is one of the many areas where maritime corporations seek to cut costs.

A worker’s comment on a media report of Uriel’s death summarized quite aptly the situation: “This is what happens when people work 6 hours on, then 6

hours off, 7 days a week. On poorly maintained equipment. Sleep deprivation is the biggest safety concerns on the waterfront. Shift work on all piers is a MUST to save lives.”

This worker’s death is not an isolated case. Fatal accidents occur on the docks around the world on a daily basis. On July 14, a worker suffered a heart attack after climbing a gantry crane stairway in Southampton, UK. On July 12, a lasher drowned as he fell from a container ship in Kingston Port, Jamaica. Three stevedores died in Bunyu Port, Indonesia on June 28 due to atmospheric deficiency on a coal ship. In Aqaba, Jordan, thirteen dockworkers died from the explosion of a chlorine-filled tank container during loading. On June 15, an over-the-road drayman was struck in a fatal yard run-over.

As 22,000 West Coast dockworkers are forced by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to work without a new agreement after their contract expired July 1, in Los Angeles two workers lost their lives three days apart at the beginning of this year, while the Pacific Maritime Association raked in a staggering \$200 billion in profits in 2021. The list goes on.

In a recent interview, a casual dockworker in Los Angeles commented on training and the reality of safety issues: “They talk a lot about training, but I’m not seeing any. You get it on the job. I took the online safety training thing. Down here, it’s the real world, the blood is real. Training should be done on the dock, not online. We take care of each other when we see new people come in, we watch out for them; when we get to the dock we get on the same crane as them to help them out, give them a heads-up on the radio if they’re doing something they shouldn’t. I don’t want to see anything happen to anybody.”

Uriel’s untimely death takes place on the eve of the 92nd Convention of the International Longshoremen’s Association’s South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District which is taking place July 25-28, at the luxurious Hotel del Coronado, Coronado, California. It will be jointly presided over by ILA President Harold Daggett and United States Maritime Alliance Chair and CEO Dave Adam, a particularly brazen example of the collusion between the union and the corporations.

Daggett is a millionaire himself. He collected \$7,348,964 million in total compensation between 2002

and 2019. Over that time, his annual salary has increased from \$251,188 to \$691,905, a more than 270 percent increase.

The ILA, no differently from the ILWU on the West Coast, has completed its full integration into the apparatus of corporate management. Instead of representing the interests of workers, who are faced daily with safety issues, they toast and break bread with the employers who are ripping unprecedented profits in increasingly exploitative conditions.



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