

Anger grows at Illinois Tyson food plant where 22-year-old worker was killed: “This stuff needs to change”

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On July 9 Casen Garcia, a 22-year-old worker, was killed on the job at the Tyson Foods plant in Joslin, Illinois, under as-yet unexplained circumstances.

In a family obituary posted last month, Casen was described as an avid outdoorsman and lover of animals. “He enjoyed working with his hands, music, photography and drawing,” it stated. “Some of his favorite times were those spent with family and friends. He will be greatly missed by all.”

Casen left behind his fiancée, Jessica, and their 14-month-old son, as well as parents, siblings, grandparents and other family members.

The company has sought to evade responsibility for the death, claiming it was the result of a “medical episode.” However, reports continue to emerge of the lack of safety in the plant and in the area where Garcia was working.

A source at the Tyson Joslin plant recently contacted the WSWS, wanting to expose the dangerous conditions and blatant disregard for workers’ safety. John, whose name has been changed, requested to remain anonymous, fearing reprisals from Tyson.

“At the spot where Casen died at least six other workers had reported getting shocked by the hoist. So, management knew there was an electrical safety issue and did nothing,” John told the WSWS.

“This happens with all kinds of issues. In my department, the machines that hook and carry the beef down the line are constantly jamming.” He continued, “When that happens workers have to manually climb

up and push the beef putting them in an awkward position where accidents are likely to happen.”

He described one incident where during a machine jam a large carcass fell from the hoist and landed right on a worker’s station. “Luckily he was on break and no one was there. If he hadn’t been he would have been seriously hurt.”

John went on to say that in just his department there have been at least eight “near-misses” where an accident nearly caused a serious injury or death. “All of them had been reported but nothing was ever done,” he said.

“Often, in the mornings management will call a meeting to discuss operations. They spend only a few seconds on safety, you know: ‘Alright let’s talk about safety... everything good? Any near misses?... None? Okay good.’ And then they move on to production goals which is practically the entire meeting.”

“They always preach ‘safety first’ in the office, but on the floor it’s production first.”

He said that Tyson has been heavily pushing speed-up and setting production goals that are impossible to reach. “Management only comes out onto the floor when we have to stop the line. That normally only happens when there is a safety issue and we have to stop to make sure no one will get hurt. So, they come out demanding production continue and don’t even ask about the safety concern. Managers have been asleep in their offices when they are supposed to be checking that everything is safe, and someone was disciplined for waking up a manager who was asleep on the job.”

According to John, the pressure to keep production high despite a significant shortage of workers is fueling the safety issues. “They recently reported that we had

150 people either quit or be terminated. They are avoiding reporting any safety issues that normally would have resulted in a suspension because they are so short on labor. There were problems before, but since the pandemic this has basically been how things are done.”

“Just yesterday there was a drain that backed up and the whole health services department was flooded. Even with the flooding going on they wanted production to continue,” he said.

He explained that in the plant management promotions are awarded out through nepotism to the friends and relatives of the upper management. “Once there was a manager who had gotten so many write-ups that she was about to be suspended, but because she was related to the plant manager they announced the next day that managers can’t be disciplined anymore.”

When asked specifically about Garcia’s death, John told the WSWS that although he was not a witness and works in a different department, he has witnessed similar conditions.

“I don’t doubt at all that the stories I have been hearing about his death are true. Especially about no one answering the ‘man down’ calls over the radio. I had something similar happen in my department. There was a worker who was having a medical emergency and health services were radioed but never answered. We kept asking that the radio chatter be kept clear because we were having an emergency but it was ignored and everyone kept talking over us. A worker had to run all the way to the health services office before they came to help.”

John said that any calls to address safety concerns are falling on deaf ears. “I don’t want to witness someone’s death and go to a funeral and tell the family ‘I’m sorry.’ We can fix these problems before anyone else is killed. I don’t want that to happen to me. I don’t want that to happen to a coworker.”

When asked if the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), the union at the plant, had responded to Garcia’s death, he said, “No, the union has said nothing at all.” He added that the union rep in his department often ignores issues brought up by immigrant workers. In particular he noted that the union makes no attempt to address concerns of workers who do not speak English.

He concluded saying that there has been a lot of

discontent among the workers since Garcia’s death and a fear that they too could be killed, saying, “This stuff needs to change.”



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