Industrial Slaughterhouse

Young worker killed at Tyson meatpacking, family fights to get the truth out

Andy Thompson, Zac Corrigan
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Are you a worker with information about unsafe conditions or deaths in the meatpacking industry? We want to hear from you. We will protect your anonymity.

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On July 9, 22-year-old Casen Garcia died while working in extremely dangerous conditions in the rendering basement at the Tyson Foods meatpacking plant in Joslin, Illinois. “My son was treated like he was one of the livestock,” his mother Allison told the *World Socialist Web Site.*

Tyson is covering up how he died, but Casen’s family has spoken to numerous coworkers who say that he was electrocuted by faulty machinery, and that management rejected his calls for help and prevented workers from saving his life in order to keep production going.

Casen leaves behind a fiancée Jessica and infant son Arsi, as well as younger sister Katrina and younger brother Donovan. “He was like the rock of our family,” his mother said. “He was the oldest kid. I was still pretty much a kid when I had him so I kind of grew up with him. He took on a lot of responsibility in the family.”

Casen’s family reached out to the WSWS to get the truth out about his death and about the inhuman conditions workers face each day in the meatpacking industry. The following report is based on discussions with Casen’s mother Allison Rose.

A blatant disregard for humanity

On the night of July 8, Allison Rose dropped her son Casen Garcia off at the Tyson meatpacking plant in Joslin, where he had worked for almost a year. Casen had recently spoken to family members about the conditions in the rendering basement where he was to work that night.

“A couple of days before he passed away,” Allison explained, “Casen said to me, ‘Mom, I can’t believe that no one has died down there as bad as it is.’ They have barrels of rotting carcasses that are supposed to be cleaned out every week, that have been sitting there for months, that have methane gas coming off of them. A couple of people were fired because they refused to work in that basement.

“They stick unqualified people down there because the people who are qualified refuse. I have a voice recording from my son on June 4 where he says that he had just gotten to work, and the manager was threatening to write him and another coworker up because they refused to do work that they were not qualified for. This was in that rendering unit where he died. Those jobs were classified as level eight. Casen was only level five.

“There's a hoist that had bare wires,” Allison continued, “and apparently the door handle to the basement has shocked a few people due to these open wires on this hoist.” She added, “After all the research I have done since my son’s death I would not let my worst enemy work at Tyson. They have a blatant disregard for humanity.”

Lies from management, silence from the union

Allison recalls the last time she spoke to Casen, in the Tyson parking lot. “When he got out of the car, he said, ‘Mom, please don't forget, I'm off at 7:30 a.m.’ After a long night he didn't want to have to sit and wait for a ride.” When she returned in the morning, Casen was dead, and Tyson was already engaged in its coverup of what happened.

“It’s been one lie after another, one coverup after another,” she said.

Initially, Tyson managers told Casen’s family that he had been found dead in his truck in the parking lot that morning after he got out of work early. The managers didn’t know that Allison had dropped him off at work, and that therefore his truck was not even at Tyson.

Tyson managers also lied to coroner Brian Johnson, who performed Casen’s initial autopsy. Through discussion with Johnson, Allison learned that he was falsely told by managers that Casen “had a previous heart condition and possibly overdosed on heroin or fentanyl.” In fact, Casen was in excellent health. “He was a vegetarian,” Allison said. “He ate healthy and took care of himself.”

Allison has tried to obtain an incident report from Tyson about her son’s death. But to this day management claims that no incident occurred and therefore there is no report. “I found out at 8:42 a.m. that he was gone, and I started calling Tyson at 11:30 the same day. I called them every hour for the next three days.” Tyson eventually sent a manager to Allison’s home, who knocked on her door and told her there was no incident.

Later, when Allison sought to recover the contents of Casen’s personal locker at Tyson, management first claimed that he didn’t have a personal locker, only a tool locker. When workers told Allison where the second locker actually was, managers claimed instead that they had searched this locker already and found nothing.

“My son had reports, he had complaints that he was going to turn in to HR and to OSHA that were in his locker,” Allison says.

As for the United Food and Commercial Workers, which supposedly represents Casen and the other workers at Tyson in Joslin, “Not once have I heard from the union or anybody that's supposed to represent any of those workers,” Allison said. “Not at all. Even the HR managers showed up to the visitation of the funeral and sent flowers.”

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Workers reveal what really happened

The attitude of Casen's rank-and-file coworkers to his horrific death on the job was the complete opposite of management and the union. "They all reached out to me," Allison said. "Within two days, I had about 45 phone numbers."

"These people have hearts!" she said. "They know Tyson is in the wrong and they know what happened to my son. And the whole time, as Tyson's trying to cover it up, they told me, 'Don't stop fighting! Don't stop.' These people are putting themselves and their lives and their jobs at risk to make it known that Tyson is absolutely at fault for my son's death."

When Casen died on the morning of July 9 he was going on a scheduled "air quality break" during his shift in the rendering basement. Management had lied to Allison about this, claiming he was on a lunch break 20 minutes before the end of his shift.

On his way out of the rendering basement to give his lungs a break from the toxic air, Casen was shocked so badly by the door that one of his boots was thrown about 15 feet from his body. Workers later retrieved the boot after management sent Casen's body to the coroner without it.

Allison explains what happened next: "My son was still walking after he got shocked. He radioed management, saying his chest hurt and he was having a hard time breathing. And this manager told him, 'Oh, you're young, you're fine, walk it off.' My son collapsed right after that. The person who saw him hit the ground tried getting off production and was yelled at by management to get back onto production."

According to a timeline established by coworkers, "there were two minutes that my son was alone before one of the guys that worked in the basement came running in and helped him." Allison learned that "they don't even have a medical team there for the third shift. From what I was told, it was an office clerk that showed up, and when she got the defibrillators out, she didn't use them. They all froze up. Nobody did anything."

"We were informed that my son's body was kind of just thrown to the side," she said, "and that someone used their foot to push my son's hand out of the walkway," as production continued.

Casen's sister Katrina told the WSWS that one of Casen's coworkers, "reached out to me and told me that they started cleaning up the scene right away, so it would look like nothing was their fault. And in my eyes, not only is that extremely illegal, but it's unfair to us. Because I want to know what happened to my brother! He was a human being."

"There is absolutely nothing they can do to silence us"

Workers told Allison that when police officers arrived at the scene, "management did not allow any of the team members to talk to the police alone so they could say what they wanted to say. And I was told that management 'reminded' all the workers that did see what happened that they already signed contracts for nondisclosure, and they were asked to sign other paperwork stating they would not speak about this."

"Most of them are immigrants," she explained. "They target immigrants because they're less likely to have a voice for themselves. They don't have a choice. They have to keep their mouths shut."

In the face of this intimidation, Allison is adamant that the truth must come out. "I'm obviously going to find out the truth about what happened to my son," she said, "But that doesn't change what the other workers are going through. If they don't change something, it could be tomorrow, it could be today, somebody else is going to die."

Through her investigation of Casen's death, Allison has learned about four other unreported deaths this year alone at Tyson in Joslin. "It's just unreal how little they do to protect their workers," she said, "which are the people who are bringing them their money. If it wasn't for the workers, they wouldn't have a plant to do production in. And they just throw them aside like they're cattle–one goes down, the next one's coming up."

The meatpacking industry was also one of the hardest hit by COVID-19 in the first year of the pandemic, with many hundreds of worker deaths across the industry from the preventable disease. Allison reports that in Joslin, "Tyson did not give them the proper PPE. They would not let them work six feet apart. They did nothing to help."

Casen Garcia, 2000-2022

We asked Casen's family to explain what kind of person he was. "Casen was so extremely intelligent. He was kind and caring and would give anybody anything to help them out," said Allison. "He was always there when people needed it or if you needed someone to talk to. There's just not anybody that I have ever met like him."

Casen's sister Katrina said of her older brother, "He was my best friend. If I ever needed anything he was there to check up on me." Through tears she continued, "He taught me how to ride a bike, how to change a tire. Every year on my birthday he would call me right at midnight because he wanted to be the first to tell me happy birthday. He didn't want anyone else's messages to get through before he got to say it. He was a good friend and a good brother."

Allison spoke about the response she has received from workers at the plant. "Many of them can't speak up for themselves because they fear retaliation. But they have been incredibly supportive. One of his coworkers helped me set up a go-fund-me. Another came to my house with two bags of clothes for Casen's son."

"There is one who became close friends with Casen and he calls me on a regular basis to check in. He said that they always told each other that they have each other's backs and that he's still got his back by looking out for me."

But their lives have been changed forever. "My son is gone. For the other kids their big brother is gone. Casen's son is only one year old. Casen worked third shift so the only time he wasn't with his son is when his son was sleeping. It's heartbreaking."

"There's just so many different areas of heartbreak over this," she said. "I don't think there's anything Tyson could do to fix it. But there's absolutely nothing they could do to silence us."

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