

US Labor Department reports 5,190 workplace deaths in 2021, a nearly 9 percent increase

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11 January 2023

This past December, the US Department of Labor (DoL), headed by Democrat Marty Walsh, reported the death toll of workers killed on the job had precipitously increased by 8.9 percent in 2021 to 5,190. For the prior year, there were 4,764 worker lives lost on the job.

Each December, the Labor Department releases a report on occupational deaths from the previous year. The year-long delay in the release of figures is an indication of the lack of any serious investment in the reporting, let alone prevention, of workplace deaths and injuries by the poorly funded and undermanned Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

A worker died every 101 minutes from a work-related injury in 2021, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported. The fatal work injury rate of 3.6 fatalities per 100,000 workers was the highest annual rate since 2016.

Once again, the transportation industry leads all other sectors in fatalities on the job by a wide margin. In 2021, 1,032 truck drivers were killed at work, up 16.3 percent from 887 drivers killed in 2020. Construction and extraction occupations had the second highest occupational deaths (951) in 2021.

Work related fatalities due to falls, slips and trips increased 5.6 percent in 2021, from 800 fatalities in 2020 to 850 in 2021. Falls, slips and trips in construction and extraction occupations accounted for 370 of these fatalities in 2021, an increase of 7.2 percent from 2020.

In 2021, workers between the ages of 45 and 54 suffered 1,087 workplace fatalities, a 13.9 percent increase from 2020. This age group accounted for just over one-fifth of the total fatalities for the year (20.9 percent).

According to the website CDL Training.org, the life expectancy for truck drivers is 61 years old, or more than 15 years lower than the US life expectancy in general. At the same time, life expectancy in the US has dropped as a result of the pandemic to 76.1 years old in 2021, the largest decline in nearly 100 years.

The uptick in 2021 deaths corresponded to the full reopening of the economy after workers forced the shutdown of many industries in 2020 due to the pandemic. On returning to the job workers were forced into long, often exhausting and dangerous hours due to the labor shortage. The unions colluded in this process, downplaying the dangers of the still rampant COVID virus and assisting in the cover-up of the full extent of COVID infections and deaths.

It should be pointed out that the Labor Department figure of more than 5,000 deaths in 2021 does not include the likely tens of thousands of workers who were infected on the job and died of COVID.

In fact, those figures are no longer even being collected and reported as part of the effort of the ruling class to normalize mass death caused by COVID.

In April 2022, the AFL-CIO union federation issued its annual report on workplace-related deaths, which estimated that another 120,000 worker deaths had been caused by occupational illnesses in 2020. The report also noted that the median OSHA penalty was a paltry \$9,753 for killing a worker, a fine so low as to be a virtual blank check for industrial murder by corporations.

The AFL-CIO noted, “America’s workplaces are a primary source of COVID-19 outbreaks, with thousands of workers infected and dying as they work in indoor, poorly ventilated spaces.” The report admitted that information on outbreaks remains limited due to the lack of a national data collection effort, a failure abetted by the policies of the unions which sought to herd workers back into COVID-infected workplaces in order to continue generating profits for Wall Street.

Since taking office in 2021, the Democratic Biden administration has continued the “herd immunity” policy of the Trump administration, systematically dismantling all COVID mitigation measures, while falsely declaring the pandemic “over.” Meanwhile, the White House has set new

records for military spending to fund the US-NATO proxy war with Russia and preparations for war with China.

The killing and maiming of workers in America's industrial slaughterhouse continued into 2022. Among the victims were:

- Stephen Dierkes, a 39-year-old Caterpillar worker, who was killed at a Mapleton, Illinois foundry on June 2, 2022 when he fell into a crucible of molten iron at the safety violation-plagued facility. At the time of the accident, the WSWS reported, "Another worker noted in a social media post that Stephen had 'only been there for 5 days' and he should not have been on the iron floor without sufficient training."

- Brothers Ben and Max Morrissey, ages 32 and 34, who were killed in an explosion and fire at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio on September 20, 2022. Workers at the refinery point to BP Husky's cutting of corners as contributing to the fatal explosion. A veteran pipe fitter told the WSWS, "During a 10-hour day, we only had one 45-minute break. BP allowed us to have every other Sunday off. One of our guys on night shift had a heart attack which could have been caused by not allowing us adequate breaks. Not to mention the shutdown took place in the spring/summer. Long, hot days and only allowed one break. Carelessness and forgetfulness are results of fatigue and BP should be ashamed to break down our conditions. Their penny pinching ultimately led to tragedy."

- Courtney Edwards, 34, a mother of three children, who was employed as a ramp agent by American Airlines. Courtney was working outside when she apparently lost her footing and was drawn into a running aircraft engine. This tragedy underscores the heightened risk to life and limb faced by workers in the transportation industry.

- On December 27, 2022, 61-year-old Rick Jacobs died at the Amazon DEN4 warehouse in Colorado Springs, Colorado, after experiencing a cardiac event just before shift change. Witnesses say managers erected a makeshift barrier of cardboard bins around the dead worker so the day shift workers, who were not informed about the death, could continue production. "Finding out what had happened after walking through there made me feel very uncomfortable," a DEN4 worker told the *Guardian*. "There is a blatant disregard for human emotions at this facility."

The US leads most other industrialized countries in annual workplace-related deaths, with the exception of the world's workshop, China, whose National Bureau of Statistics reported 66,000 workplace deaths in 2015. In the UK, there were 142 workplace deaths reported by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), which was a 29 percent increase from the prior year, reflecting the intensifying crisis of workplace safety globally.

Bangladesh, with a population of over 165 million people, is one of the poorest countries in the world and a contractor for cheap labor on behalf of multinational corporations. The Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies reported 1,034 lives lost on the job in the last year.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and International Labor Organization (ILO) released their joint 2021 report, stating that 2 million people die from all work-related causes each year. The data was for 2016, and they found the primary risk factor was working long hours, which was linked to a staggering 750,000 deaths. No new report has been issued. The ILO, however, reported 2.78 million workplace deaths from injury or illness in 2019.

In 2019, the United Nations-affiliated ILO established the Global Commission on the Future of Work, which is composed of business and government representatives on the one hand and union bureaucrats on the other. Its claim to fight for "social justice in the 21st century" is belied by the ILO selection for chairman: the current South African president and ex-trade union bureaucrat for the National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), Cyril Ramaphosa.

In August 2012, Ramaphosa was on the Lonmin Board of Directors and supported the police massacre of 34 striking Lonmin platinum miners during the Marikana Massacre.

The appalling state of workplace safety underscores the urgency of workers forming rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union bureaucrats to enforce safe and healthy workplace conditions. This is an international issue under conditions where multinational corporations can shift production from country to country in the search for higher profits. To unite workers against the common corporate foe, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)

The fight against the pandemic, exploitation, inequality, war and dictatorship is a fight against the entire capitalist social and economic order. Workers of all countries must be united in a common political offensive to take power, expropriate the oligarchs, and establish a socialist society based on the rational, scientific and democratic control of production for the purpose of serving social need, not private profit.



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