

Dockworker falls to his death at Port of Los Angeles

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30 January 2023

Are you a dockworker? Tell us what your working conditions are like by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A worker at the Port of Los Angeles fell 50 feet to his death from a crane last Wednesday, on the deck of a containership owned by the Maersk multinational shipping company.

The Los Angeles Fire Department released a statement that “firefighters/Paramedics initiated resuscitative measures, but sadly, the man was beyond medical help. Crews determined him to be dead on scene.” An investigation of the incident will now be handled by Los Angeles port police.

According to another statement released by Maersk, the worker was a repairman hired through a subcontractor and was responsible for assisting the crew of the *Maersk Eindhoven*, the ship where the accident took place, with repair work.

News footage of the fall’s location appears to show the crane in question without any fall prevention netting underneath it. This concern was raised by longshore workers on social media. While details of the incident are still murky, it is highly improbable that such a fall could have taken place with adequate safety measures present.

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) guidelines require a safety net underneath workplaces that are 25 feet or higher in the air when other safeguards such as safety lines are unavailable or impractical. “Was there no fall arrest in play here?!” wrote a dockworker on Facebook. “This should have been 100% preventable.”

Despite the shock and distress felt by dockworkers who witnessed and heard of the incident, there was no pause in port operations after it took place. “My boyfriend is on his way to that port and according to

dispatch they’re still working full service, shaking my head.” another Facebook user wrote.

This is at least the second death on the Port of Los Angeles in the last 12 months. In February of 2022, 37 year-old Edgar Ruiz died in an accident while setting up a crane, when a 4,500-pound piece of metal fell on top of him.

The incident is the latest indicating a rise in workplace injuries and deaths across the US. According to recent report released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a worker died every 101 minutes from a work-related injury in 2021. Overall, 5,190 workers died on the job in all of 2021, an 8.9 percent increase over the prior year. Fatalities due to falls such as the incident in Los Angeles, increased from 800 fatalities in 2020 to 850 in 2021.

Furthermore, that report only takes into account workplace injuries and not workplace diseases, which are a growing hazard particularly with the absence of any public health measures to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2.

An AFL-CIO report released in 2022 entitled *Death on the Job* found that 120,000 US workers died from occupational diseases, not including COVID-19, in 2020 alone. An occupational disease is defined as a disease associated with a particular workplace such as coal worker’s pneumoconiosis, black lung, affecting coal miners.

Responsibility for the conditions which led to last week’s preventable accident lies not only with the Port of LA, but the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The ILWU has kept more than 20,000 west coast dockworkers on the job without a contract for more than six months after their contract expired on July 1, as part of a deal brokered by the Biden administration.

This is in spite of the fact that the Pacific Maritime Association is determined to eliminate the highest paid positions at the docks through automation and to increase the length of the working day through a “double flex” shift along with proposals to begin operating the ports on a permanent basis 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Meanwhile, the ILWU is allowing shipping companies to re-route traffic from the West Coast to east coast ports to reduce their exposure to any potential work stoppage. Said one mid-size retailer to the *Journal of Commerce*, “For the time being and foreseeable future, Southern California ports remain on an as-needed basis.”

The ILWU is working hand-in-glove not only with the PMA but the Biden administration, which has made an unprecedented intervention in the contract talks to block strike action. The use of the corrupt trade-union bureaucracy to block strikes and enforce substandard contracts has been the *modus operandi* of the administration, which used similar methods against refinery workers and, infamously, against railroaders, who were forced by Congress last December to work under a contract they had rejected.

In the fall of 2021, the Biden administration brokered an agreement with the ILWU to keep the Port of LA operating 24 hours a day.

This has only emboldened the operators to continue and deepen unsafe work practices, not only on the West Coast but around the country. Last July, a Nicaraguan immigrant and port worker was crushed to death in Newark, New Jersey. As with last week’s death in Los Angeles, Newark port workers were kept on the job even as crews cleaned up the workers’ remains.

To prevent more needless deaths and accidents, the path must be cleared for a struggle by dockworkers in defense of working conditions. Dockworkers must organize rank-and-file committees to reject the ILWU’s “no-strike” pledge and appeal for the broadest possible unity and support from workers all over the country, including dockworkers on the east coast.



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