

Factory explosions, tainted water and derailments: The cost of doing business for US capitalism

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Last week, a massive explosion rocked the small industrial city of West Reading, Pennsylvania. The blast originated at the R.M. Palmer chocolate factory, shaking several city blocks and spewing debris into the air.

The explosion is one of the deadliest workplace disasters in the US in years, with seven confirmed fatalities so far: Xiorke Nunez, 30; Susan Halvonik, 63; Michael Breedy, 62; Diana Cedenno, 44; Judith Lopez-Moran, 55; Amy Sandoe, 49; and Domingo Cruz, 60. Another 10 workers have been injured.

An investigation is underway, but, as always, early evidence points to criminal negligence by management. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) launched a probe into what it has called a “natural gas” explosion and fire.

Workers at the plant complained of gas odor for months, which management, evidently refusing to close down production to deal with it, reportedly ignored.

The horrific catastrophe in West Reading is part of an unending series of workplace tragedies in the US. Just a few days earlier, the previous Wednesday, six construction workers were killed near Baltimore, Maryland when a car crashed into an area where they were working.

According to the US government, 5,190 workers died from workplace injuries in 2021, the last year for which figures are available. A separate report by the AFL-CIO found that an additional 120,000 die every year from occupational diseases.

American capitalism not only kills workers with shocking regularity, it also poisons their communities. Indeed, the same day as the West Reading explosion, the water supply for the nearby Philadelphia metropolitan area, with a population of more than 6 million, was contaminated by a spill of more than 8,000 gallons of

toxic butyl acrylate. This is one of the chemicals released last month by the massive derailment and spill in East Palestine, Ohio, and detection of butyl acrylate from the disaster in the Ohio River prompted Cincinnati water authorities to shut off the water intake.

But Philadelphia residents were not even informed of the spill for another two days, when it was finally reported by local news. This prompted a run on bottled water in supermarkets, while local authorities flip-flopped, imposing and then lifting a water advisory and declaring, without clear evidence, that the water was safe to drink. This is a repeat performance of the government response in East Palestine itself, where officials falsely claimed the water was safe to drink and refused even to test for deadly dioxins for more than a month.

As for the railroads, derailments, which average three per day in the US, continue apace in the aftermath of East Palestine, showing that absolutely nothing meaningful has been done to prevent similar disasters. The most recent major derailments include one train carrying liquid asphalt and ethylene glycol in North Dakota, a runaway train that derailed only a few hours later in California while traveling at 80 miles per hour, and another derailment and fire Thursday involving 22 cars, including chemical tankers, in Minnesota.

Other recent major accidents include:

- On Wednesday, in Louisville, Kentucky, a barge containing 1,400 tons of methanol, a toxic chemical, broke loose in the Ohio River and began sinking;
- Last September, brothers Ben and Max Morrissey were killed in an explosion at an oil refinery near Toledo, Ohio. After a six-month investigation, the federal government earlier this month fined the company just \$156,250.

What emerges is a picture of a society in crisis. The

United States is the wealthiest country in the world, with access to cutting-edge technological advances which should make workplace deaths all but a thing of the past. But this is more than outweighed by the irrational and outmoded profit interests of the ruling class, which runs the country and uses the technology to ramp up the exploitation of workers to the nth degree, with the net result that workplaces are even *less* safe.

For example, advances in computer-assisted safety technologies, such as Positive Train Control on the railroads, are used primarily to eliminate jobs among train crews and dispatchers. Thus, these are not merely random, tragic accidents, but cases of social murder resulting from deliberate decision-making.

Meanwhile, in defense of US imperialism's global interests, no expense is spared in funneling weapons used for mass killing on the battlefields in Ukraine or for massive ship-building programs for the Navy to prepare for war with China. The same political establishment then turns around and pleads poverty to workers dying every day in American workplaces, claiming nothing can be done to prevent such deaths.

After each and every one of these disasters, the political system demonstrates its complete inability to respond in any meaningful way or to even convincingly pretend to care. It acts as an enabler, shredding whatever protections existed earlier and shielding corporations from any financial or legal liability.

The unions, controlled by corrupt bureaucracies and totally integrated with the capitalist state, are critical instruments in suppressing any response to this in the working class. They work openly to block strikes and enforce substandard working conditions. Last December, the rail unions worked hand in glove with Washington to stave off a national strike and buy Congress time to preemptively ban it. In the United Auto Workers, the new so-called "reform" leadership, elected in a vote where hundreds of thousands of workers were excluded from participating, is already preparing a sellout in the contract talks later this year.

The official indifference to human life is being demonstrated on a grand scale in the coronavirus pandemic, which continues to kill an estimated 500 Americans per day in spite of official attempts to declare it "over." Serious experts showed that the virus could have been contained within several weeks in 2020 through a globally coordinated response involving aggressive contact tracing and quarantining.

These measures either never took place or were

implemented only briefly because the cost of such measures was considered "worse than the disease," to use the phrase coined by *New York Times* columnist and multimillionaire Thomas Friedman. In other words, a preferable outcome for them to the swift end of the pandemic was the preventable deaths of 20 million people, including more than 1 million Americans.

But opposition is growing rapidly within the working class, and the class struggle creates the conditions in which these issues can be seriously addressed. There is a rising mood of militancy among rank-and-file workers and a growing awareness that they confront an entire social system, capitalism, which oppresses them. This is not only expressed in the rise of strike activity, such as the strike last week by 65,000 school workers in Los Angeles, but through the growth of new independent organizations of the working class. A major milestone was the meeting last Sunday of US autoworkers sponsored by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In countries around the world, including in France, Britain, Germany, Israel, Greece and Sri Lanka, millions of workers are participating in mass, nationwide strikes and demonstrations against austerity and growing political repression. This is also coming to America. The center of world capitalism is also the center of social misery, inequality and irrational social decision-making. But the critical question for workers, as it is around the world, is what the perspective of this movement will be.

In the *Transitional Program*, the Fourth International's founding document, Leon Trotsky stated, "If capitalism is incapable of satisfying the demands inevitably arising from the calamities generated by itself, then let it perish."

The fight for safe workplaces, as with all other social questions, raises the issue of how, by whom and in whose interests such decisions are made. This in turn raises the question of workers' control and the abolition of the profit system itself. The struggle of the working class must be turned towards the fight for socialism and the utilization of the world's vast resources for human need, not private profit.



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