

Kroger warehouse worker dies of heat-related illness in Memphis, Tennessee

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A worker died last Friday at a Kroger distribution warehouse in Memphis, Tennessee amid a blistering heatwave which impacted much of the United States. Tony Rufus, a Memphis Kroger Distribution Center worker, was found unresponsive Friday night and declared dead by Memphis police.

Rufus worked in the distribution center's Salvage Department loading and unloading product from trailers. According to reports, he was sweating profusely, asking for water and was desperately seeking places to cool off in his area, which was not air conditioned. He was later found slumped over his pallet jack.

Friday's high reached a blistering 101 degrees Fahrenheit (38 Celsius) in Memphis, and workers say the interior of the Salvage Department is often much hotter than outside temperatures. While workers are contractually guaranteed a fifteen-minute break every two hours, this is simply not enough in such dangerous temperatures.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 2011 and 2021 there were 436 work-related deaths caused by heat exposure in the United States. This will no doubt get worse as temperatures rise as a result of climate change.

One group of workers who have been particularly hard hit by the increasing temperatures are delivery drivers, whose vehicles frequently lack air conditioning. At UPS, the company actually removes air conditioning systems from its vehicles after purchasing them, and at least 143 UPS workers suffered heat or dehydration-related injuries since 2015, according to OSHA reports.

Rufus' death came only three days after the Teamsters union declared the ratification, under suspicious circumstances, of a new contract at UPS.

While the union bureaucracy claimed the deal contained historic improvements, it is in reality a sellout which maintains UPS as one of the most exploited unionized workforces in the country. The contract includes an agreement with the company to include A/C for all *new* vehicles, a meaningless concession given that the company operators its trucks for two decades or more. Last Wednesday, the day after the contract was ratified, a UPS driver died of heat-related illness in the Dallas, Texas area.

The Teamsters also cover Kroger warehouse workers. A representative for Local 667 in Memphis claimed that before Rufus' death they had pressed Kroger to improve its heat-related safety standards in the distribution center, including more breaks and cooler temperatures.

However, such demands were never even raised in relation to UPS hubs, which also lack air conditioning and where the vast majority of UPS employees work as low-paid part-timers. Also last Friday, temperatures reached 99 degrees Fahrenheit in Louisville, Kentucky, where the company's massive Worldport air freight hub is located. A worker from Worldport told the WSWs that the complex, which has more than 8,000 workers, no longer even has emergency medical services on site as a cost-saving measure. Instead, Worldport shares EMS with the Louisville passenger airport a mile and a half away.

The Kroger Company is the largest grocery retailer by revenue in North America, with a workforce of over 465,000. The company is infamous for its low pay and poor working conditions, which have gotten worse during the pandemic. In fact, Kroger warehouse workers in Memphis walked off the job in March of 2020 during the opening surge of the pandemic. In 2021, 19-year Kroger veteran Evan Seyfried took his

own life after being harassed and bullied by a store manager for taking COVID precautions at work.

These conditions are enforced with the complicity of the union bureaucracy. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which covers many Kroger store workers and workers at its subsidiaries, has forced through one sellout after another. Last year, the UFCW rammed through a contract with below-inflation raises in Indianapolis in a second vote after workers had rejected it the first time, then deleted their social media page in order to pre-empt any opposition. The UFCW also isolated a strike by King Soopers workers in early 2022.



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