

Illinois John Deere worker dies following workplace accident

Marcus Day

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Anthony S. “Tony” LeCleir, 55 of Davenport, Iowa, tragically died on November 7 as a result of injuries sustained in a workplace accident on October 20 at John Deere’s North American Parts Distribution Center (PDC) in Milan, Illinois. LeCleir had worked for Deere, the global agricultural and heavy equipment giant, for 19 years and was a member of United Auto Workers Local 79.

According to his obituary, LeCleir loved spending time with his family, enjoyed the outdoors, had a love of animals, and was an avid golfer.

He left behind his wife, Tammy, two daughters, three grandchildren, his parents, and numerous other relatives.

He was “the nicest guy,” a veteran worker at the Milan parts center told the WSWs, who asked to remain anonymous. “He would jump right in and help anyone that needed help.”

According to the worker, LeCleir was injured when a forklift caught the vehicle he was near.

“He got crushed waist down by a forklift that was going around a pallet on the floor. He caught his cart and didn’t realize it, so he just kept going and it smashed him between the cart and TD [Taylor Dunn, a type of industrial vehicle]. It crushed his tailbone and pelvic bone in half.”

Following the accident, LeCleir spent weeks at the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics in Iowa City before succumbing to his injuries.

The Deere worker described an overall disregard for safety by management and the UAW, as well as speed-up and intense demands to hit productivity goals.

“The biggest issue is safety. The guy was a new

employee on the forklift, so there was definitely a lack of training. The company has been told about issues, and all they want to do is pass it onto someone else and then it’s forgotten. It’s the biggest joke ever.”

She also pointed to the “Continuous Improvement Pay Plan,” or CIPP. CIPP is an incentive pay scheme which resembles in many respects the hated piecework system which prevailed earlier in the 20th century. A major demand of Deere workers in their 35-day-long strike in 2021 was the abolition of the CIPP system and its replacement by a substantial increase in base wages. The demand was abandoned by the UAW, which nevertheless proclaimed the contract to be “groundbreaking.”

“You have CIPP that’s not being addressed by the union, so everyone is in a hurry to try to make CIPP numbers,” the worker said.

The last time a worker from the Deere parts facility in Milan was killed was during the 2021 strike. The worker, Richard Rich, was struck by a vehicle while crossing a highway on his way to the picket line in the early morning of October 27, 2021.

Deere’s parts center in Milan, Illinois—part of the Quad Cities metro region, where Deere is headquartered—is massive, spanning 2.8 million square feet. The facility is Deere’s main parts hub for North America.

LeCleir is among the most recent in an ever-growing list of unnecessary fatalities in American workplaces, which have grown more and more to resemble industrial slaughterhouses. In one of the most horrific cases, 39-year-old Steven Dierkes was killed at Caterpillar’s Mapleton, Illinois, foundry in June 2022 after he slipped and fell into a vat of molten metal, instantly incinerating him. Dierkes had been on the job for a few days when he died.

But the total disregard for workers' health and safety by the UAW and corporate management has been revealed most starkly in relation to the COVID-19, which has been allowed to spread without restraint. COVID continues to sicken, kill, and cause long-term disability for untold numbers of workers.

Despite the courageous struggle by Deere workers in 2021—their first national walkout in 35 years—the strike was betrayed by the UAW bureaucracy. Deere workers twice voted down contracts endorsed by the UAW leadership, including current UAW Vice President for Ford Chuck Browning, head of the union's Agricultural Implement Department.

As it did this past week at Mack Trucks, the UAW forced Deere workers to re-vote on a contract they had already rejected, ultimately ramming it through using voter intimidation and lies.

Meanwhile, at General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis, UAW President Shawn Fain, Vice President Browning and other top union officers are attempting to impose sellout contracts which meet none of the needs of workers. Ford's chief financial officer has openly stated that modest increases in wages will be more than offset via increases in "productivity" and cost cuts, which will inevitably erode safety even further.

To fight the endless sacrifice of workers' health and lives to corporate profit, it is necessary to establish rank-and-file committees under the control of workers themselves. Such committees will provide a means for workers to assert oversight of safety, the pace of work and overall workplace conditions.



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