

Indiana government slaps pathetic \$7,000 fine on Amazon for death of 20-year-old worker

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The Indiana Department of Labor has fined Amazon \$7,000 for the death of 20-year-old worker Caes Gruesbeck earlier this year. This fine, which is the maximum that Indiana law allows, exposes the extreme deference that state and federal governments show toward Amazon and other companies, as well as their callous indifference to workers' lives.

Amazon is appealing the fine, considering even this pathetic penalty an unacceptable attack on its profits, which totaled \$9.9 billion during the last quarter.

The accident occurred on May 8 at an Amazon distribution center in Fort Wayne. Gruesbeck, who was 10 days away from his 21st birthday, was trying to clear an obstruction on an overhead package conveyor. He was using an elevated lift to get to the jam when his head struck another conveyor and became trapped by the machinery. He sustained blunt force injuries and was taken to a hospital, where he died.

Gruesbeck's coworkers were shaken by his death. "Having somebody pass away here, I'm not going to look at this job the same way again. I'm going to be extra cautious for sure," worker Rosa Garcia told 21Alive.

Other workers reacted with bitterness. "I'm sure the supervisors told everyone to keep working and pick up the pace," one worker posted on social media.

Indiana safety officials investigated the accident and concluded that Amazon had failed to maintain a workplace "free from recognized hazards that were causing or likely to cause death." They found that Amazon had failed to ensure that there was sufficient headroom underneath the conveyor while a worker operated the one-man lift. Moreover, Amazon should have trained workers properly, enforced safety rules about driving elevated lifts under low-clearance machinery and marked "danger zones" more clearly,

according to the officials. Despite these violations, which proved fatal, the Indiana Department of Labor issued only one serious safety citation.

This state has some of the weakest protections for workers in the country, former federal workplace safety officials told the *Washington Post*, which is owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. The maximum fine for serious violations is \$7,000 in Indiana. The state also blocks families from suing companies for wrongful deaths in civil court. This prohibition extends even to cases, such as that of Gruesbeck, in which state officials find the company to have been negligent.

"Seven thousand dollars for the death of a 20-year-old? What's that going to do to Amazon?" Stephen Wagner, a lawyer in Indiana, asked the *Washington Post*. "There's no real financial incentive for an employer like Amazon to change their working environment to make it more safe." Wagner agitates for reforms in state laws to protect workers.

Indiana failed to follow suit when the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) raised its minimum fines for safety violations in 2016. The latter increased its penalty for repeat violations from \$70,000 to a still pitiful \$124,709. It increased its penalty for serious violations from \$7,000 to \$12,471. But even the new OSHA penalties are "ridiculously low—even for fatalities where the company violated the law," former OSHA chief of staff Debbie Berkowitz told the *Washington Post*.

Amazon's contemptuous disregard for worker safety is amply documented. OSHA inspectors have found that workers at Amazon warehouses are at a "high risk for lower back injuries and other musculoskeletal disorders related to the high frequency with which workers are required to lift packages and other items." In April, an analysis of OSHA data found that the rate

of worker injuries was 70 percent higher at Amazon than at comparable warehouses. The rate of serious injuries was twice as high.

Yet the company has faced only derisory penalties for systematically putting its employees at risk of injury or death. When a 59-year-old worker was crushed to death by a forklift at an Amazon warehouse in Plainfield, Indiana, in 2017, the state issued four serious safety violations and fined the company a negligible \$28,000. Federal regulators have been no more stringent. Since 2022, OSHA has filed at least six safety violations against Amazon, resulting in total fines of about \$270,000. For a company that reported revenue of \$143.1 billion in the third quarter of this year alone, such a fine amounts to little more than loose change.

On some occasions, regulators do not bother to fine Amazon at all. When the warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois, was struck by a tornado and collapsed in December 2021, OSHA identified several “risk factors” that contributed to the deaths of six workers. For example, an emergency megaphone was “locked in a cage and not accessible.” Moreover, “some employees did not recall the location of the DLI4 designated severe weather shelter-in-place.” Nevertheless, OSHA declined to penalize the company.

The attorney generals for the Southern District of New York and the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions are investigating workplace safety at Amazon, including rate requirements, injuries and the reporting of injuries. These investigations are purely for public relations purposes; they are intended to create the illusion that the corporations are regulated and accountable for their negligence. But like so many previous investigations, the current probes into Amazon will not result in meaningful penalties or improvements in the company’s abysmal safety record.

The reason for this outcome is that both parties support the interests of the corporations and not those of the workers or the public. This orientation was on vivid display in President Joe Biden’s interventions into workers’ struggles at the Big Three auto makers, the West Coast docks and, most notoriously, the freight railroads. In all cases, Biden, with the support of both parties in Congress, acted to prevent or quickly end strikes and impose the concessions on workers that the corporations deemed necessary.

No faction of the ruling class will defend the safety of Amazon workers. This defense must be carried out independently by the workers themselves. Moreover, the fight for workplace safety is fundamentally a political question that requires a struggle for socialism.



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