

# US Labor Department reports 5,486 workplace fatalities in 2022 as on the job toll continues rise

**Steve Filips****26 February 2024**

On the job deaths are continuing unabated in 2024 amid an overall rise in workplace fatalities in the US and worldwide.

This past December, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) announced that 5,486 workers were killed on the job in 2022, the most recent year for which data is available. The deaths represented a 5.7 percent rise over 2023. This terrible toll was the result of the unrelenting capitalist drive to extract ever greater profits.

Highlighting the extent of the carnage, the BLS drew attention to the fact that one worker is killed on the job every 96 minutes amid a nearly decade-high fatality rate of 3.7 deaths out of every 100,000 US workers.

Workers in the Northeastern states are confronting historic rises in workplace deaths, with New Jersey reaching a nearly 20-year high. Pennsylvania incurred its highest fatality rate since 2013, and New York City alone recorded 83 worker fatalities in 2022, soaring nearly 19 percent from the prior year.

The rising toll of workplace deaths has continued under both Democratic and Republican administrations. The rise in deaths in 2022 took place under conditions of an ongoing pandemic and the dismantling of the public health system, including COVID tracking, by the Democratic Biden administration.

The Occupational Requirements Survey Summary published by the BLS earlier this month provides insight into the most dangerous occupations, where speedups imposed by employers lead to greater loss of life and limb. The summary states, "A consistent and generally fast work pace was required for 38.9 percent of workers in 2023." In addition, production workers in manufacturing companies such as General Motors, Ford, and Boeing, to name a few, had exceptionally fast-paced work rates, where "55.8 percent of workers had a consistent and generally fast work pace."

The transportation and warehouse sectors suffered the greatest number of deaths and are represented by multinational firms like UPS, Amazon, US Postal Service, and FedEx. "Within this occupational group, a consistent and generally fast work pace was required for 67.8 percent of packers and packagers and 82.9 percent of machine feeders."

The transportation sector remained among the deadliest workplaces in America, with 2,066 worker fatalities, over a third of the annual total. Older workers disproportionately fell victim to

fatalities at the workplace, with the BLS reporting the 55 to 64-year-old age group suffering the highest number of fatalities in 2022, with 1,175 or 21.4 percent of total deaths. "Transportation incidents were the highest cause of fatalities for this age group (455), followed by falls, slips, and trips (251)."

Highlighting the danger facing older workers was the death of 66-year-old Eugene Gates Jr., who was working in 113-degree Fahrenheit heat index-adjusted conditions in Dallas, Texas, this past June. He was a 36-year veteran letter carrier at the US Postal Service.

A month before his death he had received a disciplinary letter for a "stationary event." Postal officials have dragged their feet in ascribing the cause Gate's death, which was undoubtedly related to the extreme heat. His wife Carla Gates said the management reprimand may have pushed him harder in the heat, saying, "I will believe this until the day I die, that it was heat-related."

Child labor has increased as employers take advantage of those who are the most vulnerable, especially immigrant children who face the threat of deportation if they complain about dangerous conditions.

Duván Thomas Pérez, an immigrant worker, just 16-years-old, was killed at the Mar-Jac Poultry slaughterhouse on July 14 of last year, the third fatality at the Hattiesburg, Mississippi, plant in less than three years. His body became trapped on a conveyor belt he was cleaning.

The BLS reports that there has been an increase of 44 percent in the number of child labor law violations, with many involving workers employed in dangerous industries. The exploitation of child labor is extremely profitable and far outweighs any disincentives from fines, which averaged a paltry \$12,508.59 per violation in the case of Mar-Jac Poultry, and which in any case are extremely rare.

## Workplace death toll continues in 2024

While various unions may pay lip service to safety, in reality they work closely with employers to cover up workplace abuses.

Last year, the AFL-CIO released its annual worker fatality

report, “Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect,” which stated there were over 125,000 US workers who were killed or disabled from injuries and occupational illnesses in 2021. Significantly, the AFL-CIO acknowledged that there were 1.5 million nursing home workers who became infected with COVID-19, leading to over 3,000 deaths in 2021 alone.

A revealing February 17 article in the liberal publication *Truthout* quotes former US presidential candidate and safety advocate Ralph Nader on the role of the unions in the establishment of OSHA in 1970. He remarks, “We thought the labor unions would muscle in some stronger amendments in the '70s. Well, they didn't do that. And it was hard to get most of the unions behind OSHA to begin with....”

The report touts the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, which led to the establishment of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), tasked with improving safety on the job. However, OSHA has been grossly underfunded by both Democratic and Republican administrations, has minimal enforcement powers and only inspects a tiny fraction of workplaces. As a consequence, workers continue to face illness and death from exposure to unsafe conditions at an alarming rate.

As part of the ongoing government attempt to obscure the impact of COVID the BLS is classifying the deaths attributable to COVID as miscellaneous or other illnesses.

### **Three million worldwide die each year from work related causes**

The November 2023 report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) on workplace safety highlights the global character of the problem. It noted that 3 million workers die annually from workplace related accidents and illnesses, a 5 percent rise since the last report in 2015, with silicosis a leading cause.

Highlighting the international nature of the threat to worker safety, the November 2023 International Labor Organization (ILO) report calls attention to the nearly three million annual worker deaths, a 5 percent increase since the last report in 2015. Most fell victim to a workplace fatality or occupational illness, with silicosis being a leading cause of the former. It was also reported that 395 million workers are injured at work annually.

Workers in the European Union (EU) did not fare much better than in the US, with 3,347 workplace deaths in 2021. Deaths increased in almost half of the 27 member states over 2020 according to Eurostat.

*Some recent tragic workplace deaths from EU countries include:*

- Domenico Fatigati, a 52-year-old contract worker, was killed at the Stellantis Pratola Serra engine factory in Avelino, Italy, on February 22. The union apparatus was compelled to call a limited strike at the plant in an effort dissipate worker anger.
- Two construction workers in Lochem, Netherlands were killed when a steel beam being hoisted into position collapsed onto them

February 20.

- On February 16, a grocery store under construction in Florence, Italy, had a concrete pillar topple and crush five workers to death; four of the deceased were North African migrant workers. This spurred the Italian trade union apparatus to call for limited general strikes to dissipate worker anger over the recent spate of deaths.

The “Zero Death at Work” campaign, an initiative of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which calls for ending workplace deaths, has pushed back its target date for zero fatalities in EU countries seven years to 2062.

Commenting to the *EUobserver* ETUC deputy general secretary Claes-Mikael Stahl said regarding the dire predictions of the partial failure of the Zero Death campaign, “Many lives have been saved through stronger safety legislation over the last few decades, but our figures show that progress is coming to a halt in some countries and being completely reversed in others.”

The Health and Safety Executive of Great Britain released data in November that revealed work fatalities in 2022 increased by nearly 9 percent from the previous year; however, this report does not include work-related deaths from COVID, whose worldwide cumulative excess death toll has risen to 24.7 million since the beginning of the ongoing pandemic, according to *The Economist*.

Climate change is another important aspect of the crisis of workplace deaths, where workers more often now face extreme conditions that produce severe bodily harm and frequently lead to death. The *Guardian*, in an article concerning the increase in heat-related deaths, termed it a “silent killer.” Gregory Wellenius, an environmental health expert from Boston University School of Public Health, told the *Guardian* last summer “We are seeing the full spectrum of risks, from heat exhaustion to more injuries from dehydration to even new food or water borne illnesses because bacteria can replicate faster in warmer weather.”

Workers cannot leave the defense of health and safety on the job to the bureaucratized, pro corporate trade union apparatus or capitalist governments and their toothless regulatory agencies. The ongoing workplace death toll underscores the need for workers to take matters into their own hands to protect health and lives through the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus to link workplaces across industries and national boundaries through building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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