

Worker found dead after being crushed by forklift at the Port of Los Angeles

Joshua Rodriguez, Jacob Crosse
19 March 2024

On Monday, March 18, at around 10:30 in the morning, firefighters and emergency crews responded to a call of a worker pinned underneath a forklift on Terminal Island at the port of Los Angeles.

Upon arriving at the scene firefighters with the Los Angeles Fire Department declared the worker dead. The only details released so far by the department are that the worker was a man estimated to be between 30-39 years old.

Terminal Island is a largely human-constructed island that occupies both the Port of Los Angeles and the Port of Long Beach. The deceased was working at Berth 270, according to the fire department.

As of this writing it is unclear if the worker was a member of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), or what the circumstances were that led to him being tragically pinned under the forklift.

According to data from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), being crushed by forklifts that have tipped over is the most common cause of death using this machinery. On average, 42 percent of the roughly 87 forklift deaths tabulated by the agency every year are the result of a “vehicle tipping over.” Another 25 percent occurred when the operator was “crushed [between the] vehicle and a surface.”

Forklifts, or hi-los, are operated by workers in the United States and around the world to transport heavy loads. They are ubiquitous at docks, warehouses, factories, industrial parks and logistics hubs. While the average forklift operated in a warehouse can weigh up to 4,999 pounds, larger, medium-capacity forklifts, operated on the ports, can weigh up to 10,000 pounds, about three times the weight of an average midsize car or twice the weight of an American SUV.

On average, OSHA estimates there are nearly 35,000 “serious” and 61,800 “non-serious” accidents involving forklifts every year in the United States. In addition to nearly 100 deaths per year, these preventable accidents, on average, result in up to 65,000 injuries, which include amputations, concussions and fractures.

The Industrial Truck Association estimates that there are 855,900 forklifts in operation throughout the US. Using OSHA statistics, and assuming only one accident per forklift, this means some 11 percent of forklift operators are involved in an accident every year.

While it is unclear how much of a factor exhaustion played in Monday’s incident, workers who labor for 12 hours or more are at 37 percent higher risk of injury, according to OSHA.

Despite the huge toll of deaths and injuries related to forklifts, the official unions in the US and internationally have done nothing to hold the corporations and governments accountable or to mitigate this terrible toll. The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously reported on a number of forklift-related fatalities, including Anthony “Tony” LeClerc, 55, a Deere worker in Milan, Illinois crushed by a forklift last November.

On the ports, the trade unions, working hand in hand with the corporations, have allowed dangerous working conditions to persist in order to cut costs and ensure the maximum rate of profit. As a result highly preventable workplace deaths continue to plague workers and their families.

Last January at the Port of Los Angeles a crane repairman fell 50 feet to his death. A year before, on January 18, 2022, longshoreman Edgar Ruiz died when a 4,500-pound piece of metal fell on him while he was setting up a crane. Three days before Ruiz’s accident, 64-year-old ILWU dockworker Chulaih Ang was struck and killed by a crane.

While deaths and serious injuries are a regular occurrence at the ports, the fact is workers everywhere face similar, if not more onerous and deadly working conditions.

Citing US Bureau of Labor Statistics, (BLS), the *Los Angeles Times* reported on Monday that “the number of workers who are dying on the job” in California “has been increasing since 2013.”

It continued: “In California, more than 500 workers died on the job in 2022, an increase from 2021, when 462 workers died. In 2022, the largest share of those workers who were fatally injured—26 percent—were in the transportation and material moving occupations, according to the bureau.”

The death statistics provided by the BLS do not take into account the thousands of workers who have contracted COVID-19 on the job and then died.

This most recent death comes amidst a resurgence of cargo traffic to the West Coast after a pro-corporate contract was forced on dockworkers last year. Despite the rank and file voting to authorize a strike, the ILWU, working in concert with the Biden administration and the port operators internationally, kept workers

on the job for over a year, even as their Canadian brothers and sisters went on strike.

After the contract was forced through, shippers, confident that the threat of wildcat strike had passed, began returning to the Port of Los Angeles.

In his monthly “Cargo News Briefing,” Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka boasted that there had been a “significant uptick” in the last year, with “overall February volume exceeding our running five year average by 15 percent.”

Seroka touted, “781,434 Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units processed,” which he called “a huge 60 percent improvement over last year’s very soft February.” Seroka noted it was the “seventh consecutive month” of growth.

The increase in cargo is also in anticipation of a potential strike by East Coast dockworkers in the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA). With the ILA contracts expiring on September 30, corporate news outlets have begun warning major suppliers to send their cargo to the West Coast, where “labor peace” is being enforced by the ILWU apparatus.

“The potential for a strike by...the International Longshoremen’s Association is beginning to rise on the list of concerns among logistics decision-makers and advisors in a year already fraught with a multitude of trade uncertainties,” CNBC wrote earlier this month.

The Loadstar, an industry publication, headlined a March 18 article, “East coast port strike threat prompts shipper to consider heading west instead.”

By accepting the diverted East Coast cargo, the ILWU is essentially scabbing on East Coast dockworkers as the contract expiration nears. This is not a new development; the same process occurred last year, but in reverse, when the ILA accepted diverted West Coast cargo.

The increasing demands placed on dockworkers amidst this surge in cargo volume could have been a key factor in this deadly workplace incident.

Workers dying on the job is just the “cost of doing business” for the nationalist trade unions which, under globalization, abdicated any role in advancing the interests of rank-and-file workers, and instead transformed themselves into a labor police force for the US government and major corporations.

In preparation for direct war with Russia, China and Iran, the ILWU, UAW and other major unions are being assembled into Biden’s “arsenal of Democracy.” While UAW President Shawn Fain was Biden’s guest of honor at the State of the Union address earlier this month, for years ILWU president Willie Adams and the rest of the bureaucracy have imposed 24/7 operations on the docks and a no-strike pledge in service of the corporations.

The nationalist trade unions, which treacherously pose as

defenders of the working class, are in fact direct agents of the shippers. The immediate task for dockworkers, and workers in every industry, is to break with these rotten appendages of the corporations and the state and form new independent rank-and-file committees led and beholden to workers themselves.

It is only through a rank and file rebellion from below that the deaths on the docks will be stopped and that the will of the workers for a safe and effective work environment will actually see the light of day. We urge all dock workers on the West Coast docks, in alliance with dock workers internationally, to form rank and file committees to take up the fight against deadly and dangerous working conditions which otherwise will continue to kill workers in the coming years.

In response to the death at the Port of Los Angeles, Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Jerry White posted a statement to Twitter/X, which reads in part:

On Monday, March 18, a worker was killed after being pinned underneath a forklift on Terminal Island at the port of Los Angeles. The still unnamed worker is one of the latest victims of America’s industrial slaughterhouse.

In America, one worker is killed on the job every 96 minutes. In 2022, the latest year calculated, there were 5,486 fatal work injuries. Another estimated 120,000 workers died from occupational diseases ...

As the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice president, I urge workers to organize an independent investigation into the death of this worker. This is because workers can place no confidence that the International Longshore and Warehouse Union bureaucracy or federal and state authorities will produce anything but a whitewash ... they have spent decades collaborating with corporate management and suppressing the efforts of workers to protect their lives, including during the current Covid pandemic.

SEP presidential candidate Joe Kishore and I #socialism2024 are fighting to expand the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees #IWARFC to coordinate the struggle by workers to enforce safety standards. We are fighting for socialism to end the subordination of workers’ lives to corporate profit once and for all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact