

“You can’t replace a human”: Anger erupts over death of Caterpillar worker killed by molten iron in Illinois foundry

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Caterpillar workers: We’d like to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end of this report to share your experience about any workplace or safety issues at your facility. All comments will be published anonymously.

The death of the 28-year-old Caterpillar worker, Daulton Simmers, who was killed instantly by molten iron at the Mapleton, Illinois foundry has provoked widespread outrage from workers. The Caterpillar foundry near Peoria has a record of unsafe conditions with three reported workers’ deaths in the past few years alone.

Daulton Simmers’ horrific death in the Caterpillar foundry has devastated his fiancée Lynn, their children and other family members. Speaking to the WSWs, Lynn said, “Me and the kids are lost for words and heartbroken right now. He was so great to us.” A GoFundMe has been set up by friends to help the family he leaves behind.

A worker in the Peoria area said, “His fiancée should sue the hell out of them. Not acceptable, they took him away from his family and children. You can’t replace a human.”

Simmers’ death takes place just two years after another Caterpillar worker, Steven Dierkes, was killed instantly by what the coroner termed as “thermal annihilation” when he fell into a molten iron crucible heated to over 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit at the Mapleton foundry. Dierkes’ death took place just six months after contractor Scott Adams died when he fell through a hole at the same facility in December 2021.

The death of Daulton Simmers follows reports about dangerous conditions by another Mapleton foundry employee who said she feared for her safety. According to 25News, “The worker told her story in response to a duct fire on all three levels of the facility on Halloween of 2023. The worker, who wished to remain anonymous, claimed there were no sirens or warnings at the time of that fire.”

An Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigation that concluded months after Dierkes death determined that Caterpillar failed to meet basic safety requirements, including the use of guardrails and restraints to protect workers. In November 2022, OSHA fined Caterpillar a mere \$145,000, a pittance despite the company having a record of safety violations for decades. Caterpillar contested the fine in court a month later.

The \$145,000 fine is a pittance for the global earth-moving equipment giant, which makes billions every year. In 2023, Caterpillar made an annual gross profit of \$24.29 billion, a 34.3 percent increase from 2022. CEO Jim Umpleby took in \$25.8 million as part of his total pay package last year. These massive profits and payouts for the CEO followed the sellout of rank-and-file Caterpillar workers in their contract fight last year by the United Auto Workers bureaucrats at the national and local levels.

As of this writing, UAW President Shawn Fain has said nothing about the death of Daulton Simmers. Officials at UAW Local 974 have not even

issued a statement. Fain is more concerned with campaigning for the reelection of President Joe Biden, a longtime corporate shill who has fully backed the Israeli genocide of Palestinians, the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia and other wars for corporate America.

Caterpillar’s profits also come from its collaboration with the war machine of US imperialism. The company’s D9R bulldozers are actively being used by the Israeli military in its mass slaughter and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

A report by Forbes stated, “The D9Rs can be fitted with crew-operated machine guns and grenade launchers.” These bulldozers have long been used by the Israel Defense Forces in Gaza, including between 2000 and 2005. The 23-year-old anti-war activist and American student Rachel Corrie was killed by an Israeli military bulldozer in 2003.

Trillions are spent by the US ruling class for war every year, while thousands of workers die every day in America’s industrial slaughterhouse. Every 96 minutes, a worker is killed in US workplaces. Over 240,000 workers die every year from chemical exposures or workplace illnesses such as cancer, according to OSHA. In 2022 alone—according to latest government figures available—there were over 5,486 fatal workplace injuries.

This process has been going on for decades, with the complicity of the trade union bureaucracy. A report in the early 2000s by Columbia University public health historian David Rosner asked, “When does a worker’s death become murder?” The report sought to examine “the social forces that shape how we define a worker’s death: as an accidental, chance occurrence for which no individual is responsible, or as a predictable result of gross indifference to human life for which management bears criminal responsibility.”

This underscores the need for workers to build rank-and-file committees to oversee working conditions in opposition to the pro-corporate UAW-Caterpillar joint safety and health committees.

Caterpillar, Mapleton: “It is a death trap”

A Caterpillar worker wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressing his anger at Daulton Simmers’ death and the root causes for it.

I worked in building BB in East Peoria for three years, probably the same plant that helped to create the D9 dozer that crushed Rachel Corrie.

I trained and worked with someone who transferred from

Mapleton whose job was to pound on something with a sledgehammer concurrently with another worker. He said one time a heavy hook abruptly descended from an overhead gantry crane, nearly falling onto his coworker. He said he was terrified because it would have crushed him. I also have multiple relatives and friends that have worked at CAT Mapleton and they all say it is a death trap.

One of the most unfortunate things I hear from those that have worked in or with management is that these accidents are the result of the workers' negligence or incompetence, and that the fault of management is that they are not firing these temp workers that have only been employed for weeks to months. The reality is that root cause and proximate cause are two different things. The so-called caliber of workers that CAT is employing is not the root cause, nor will it ever be. To say otherwise is not only wrong, but frankly disgusting.

* Caterpillar's hiring practices of cycling in supplemental workers to avoid paying benefits is a root cause.

* Caterpillar's hasty training and onboarding processes are a root cause.

* Caterpillar's forced overtime and the worker fatigue that comes with it is a root cause. Two out of every 3 weeks is a 'forced' 6-day week. Daulton's girlfriend even posted before his death "please don't work this weekend—let's go fishing."

* Caterpillar's pursuit of quarterly gains leading to engineers dragging their feet on expending budget towards implementing safety measures is a root cause. The engineers that could be implementing safety measures either have to fight tooth-and-nail, or they are just holding out for stipends/bonuses (they get thousands of dollars while operations personnel may be lucky to get a couple hundred) for not going over budget.

* Caterpillar's failure to build preventative/mitigating measures into the design of their processes is a root cause. There is no reason for workers to be in physical proximity of molten metal when technology exists to remotely monitor and operate equipment.

* Caterpillar's refusal to redesign unsafe processes and production lines in favor of maintaining profits is a root cause.

* Caterpillar's refusal to ameliorate workers' concerns around safety is a root cause. "Greasy, rickety ladders? Who cares? Go maintain our archaic machinery."

* Caterpillar's power imbalance with unions/UAW leading to routine poison-pilled, subpar labor contracts is a root cause.

I could go on. Corrupt Caterpillar needs to be held accountable in the most stringent and unequivocal manner possible and unfortunately it seems like that won't be the case until there is a more significant public pressure on corporations brought on by a shift in collective awareness in the United States. Until then, it is only going to get worse as wealth is consolidated in the owning class and workers become more and more desperate. I am holding out hope for a tipping point. If COVID-19 didn't prompt it, H1N1 will."

Another Caterpillar worker wrote in about the WSWS reporting on the death of Steven Dierkes and said, "What they say here is true. I work in one [CAT facility] in Illinois. Coworkers get hurt and then you say it didn't happen here or they will punish you and they will end your career. Some team leads have been harshly abused with endless motion that they can't talk about it.

"If you're strong-willed and minded you definitely will leave because money is just that, but losing your life or body parts is unacceptable. They

will entangle you to feel low about yourself and not ever make you feel human."

Anger on Reddit: "It's just the cost of doing business"

On the social media site Reddit, there was an outpouring of anger at Daulton's death in response to the WSWS report.

One person said, "The article says they were fined \$145,000 for the death of another worker, but that the fine hasn't been paid because CAT is fighting it in court. OSHA has been there and investigated and literally nothing has come of it." Another replied, "Because justice is a luxury the poor are too poor to afford."

Another person condemned Caterpillar, stating, "A multi billion dollar corporation fighting having to payout a pittance of a penalty, name a better combination."

One worker responded, "[I] used to work for a company called ViscoTeepak, they changed names to try and bury OSHA records (don't remember the old name). Got another claim filed against them with their new name for the exact same problems. Fired me for trying to focus on safety related items in their OSHA reports, because of course they still had not corrected them. The Department of Labor stepped in, didn't really keep up with them till now. Just checked, their new name in the OSHA records is ViscoTeepak (Still Visco according to Google Maps). Someone crushed their arm in the press machine I was trying to replace.

"It's just the cost of doing business, they don't give a f—k about you, it's all about the bottom dollar."

Another worker relayed their experience. "We've had two OSHA investigations for workplace injuries this year. 1) A worker stuck their hand and foot into a guard mechanism. While their hand was in the machine they actuated a foot pedal that cycled a saw blade up. The operator lost 3 fingers. 2) A worker had the guard on a press set incorrectly. He was able to stick his hand between the fixture during the 'work cycle' of the machine. He lost the first knuckle of his thumb.

"The overall outcome: company was fined (I don't think 150k is enough, the workers are screwed even with disability) and the company was able to reduce headcount by four simply by automating the processes. OSHA needs to push for greater change, but they don't have enough reach to enforce change beyond some fines."

A worker who did service work at the Mapleton facility said, "I've done service work for them a few times. On multiple installs, I've had issues with loading big machines into place. Their rigging training is atrocious."

A former lawyer for Caterpillar wrote, "I used to represent Cat in a limited capacity legally. They don't have the breadth or scope of a Monsanto or a Pfizer, but they are a bottomless evil corporation and they don't give a flying f—k how many people die or how bad the ecological damage is in service of their bottom line."

Another person wrote about the death of Caterpillar worker Daulton Simmers by quoting Friedrich Engels's description of "social murder" from his monumental work from 1845 on *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. "When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder.

"But when society places hundreds of workers in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable

consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offense is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.”

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