

Fatal accidents at work in Germany: What is a worker's life worth?

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A rail track construction worker was killed early on Monday morning, July 1. The 49-year-old, who was part of a construction crew working on the Diedelsheim-Gondelsheim railway line in the district of Karlsruhe, was hit and fatally injured by a passing regional train. So far, no further details are available about the circumstances and causes.

In the same week, a construction worker also died on the site of the Hamburg Aurubis copper smelters. On the morning of July 4, workers from a scaffolding company were busy loading a continuous casting plant when several rods came loose from a crane and fell from a height of several metres. The worker's head was so badly injured that he died in hospital shortly afterwards. He was only 26 years old.

Every year, several hundred thousand accidents occur at work in Germany, several hundred of which are fatal. According to statistics, more than 700,000 work accidents occur every year.

So far, the long-term trend has shown a steady decline from year to year. In the 10 years from 2011 to 2021, the total number of work-related accidents fell from 900,000 to 700,000. But this could change.

In recent years, especially since the coronavirus pandemic when the maxim “profits before lives” became the official policy guideline, the figures have been rising again. And above all, since the German government has been pursuing an unbridled pro-war policy, the question arises: What will the orgy of rearmament and war cost workers in taxes, cuts in real wages, deteriorating working conditions—and also in lives? What is a worker's life worth?

Fatal accidents at work, which fell steadily in the pre-pandemic era, could rise again. In 2011, 886 fatal accidents at work were registered (519 work accidents and 367 commuting accidents). In 2021, there were 369, of which 100 were commuting accidents. In the period from 2006 to 2021, the number of fatal accidents halved. Whereas in 2006, more than two in every 100,000 people in employment were victims of a fatal accident at work, in 2021 it was just under one in every 100,000. In the EU, the number fell from

2.31 fatal work accidents per 100,000 people in employment to 1.76 during this period. But this trend has apparently come to a halt.

According to the German Social Accident Insurance agency (DGUV), the total number of reportable work accidents in 2023 was almost 1 million. There were 783,462 work accidents and 184,355 commuting accidents that resulted in “incapacity to work for more than three days, or death.”

More than 10,000 of these were recorded as serious work accidents “resulting in the payment of a pension or death benefit.” The number of fatal accidents at work totalled 599 (381 at work and 218 as commuting accidents). In previous years, the total number of fatal accidents at work was 508 in 2020, 628 in 2021 and 423 in 2022.

Overall, the figures are not very reliable. They are mainly collected by the accident insurance companies, to whom by no means all accidents are reported. For example, construction companies that employ undocumented workers from Eastern Europe or Africa and hardly ever report them, even in the event of accidents, are responsible for the number of unreported cases. Others pay premiums for accident-free months, which can also distort the real figures.

As far as the coronavirus pandemic is concerned, the lockdowns led to a relative reduction in accidents at work. However, it is unclear how many people were infected or died at work and this has not been recorded in detail. In total, at least 183,000 people have died from the coronavirus in Germany.

In any case, the pandemic has led to increasing risks in the workplace. COVID-19 caused a significant increase in occupational illnesses. In 2022, the number of reports of suspected occupational illness rose by 62 percent compared to the previous year, totalling almost 370,000 reports. Almost 80 percent of these related to suspected coronavirus or Long COVID. They mainly came from hospitals and care homes.

A high number of serious and fatal accidents recently occurred at national rail operator Deutsche Bahn, which is

owned by the German government and is being cut more and more every year in favour of the war budget. In 2023, there were at least 11 fatal accidents on the railways. The fatalities included a train driver, a shunting engine driver, two track workers, six workers from external companies (in track construction and grounds maintenance) and a trainee.

The construction industry is the main cause of fatal accidents at work. On average, just over 14 percent of all work accidents occur in the construction industry. In other words, every seventh accident at work occurs on a construction site.

In 2011, more than 135,000 work accidents were reported on construction sites; by 2022, this figure had fallen to just under 100,000. This trend could also reverse again. In order to prevent industrial accidents, it is necessary to utilise all technical safety precautions and, above all, to train construction workers and equip them with personal protective equipment (PPE): safety shoes, helmets, safety goggles, hearing protection, gloves, ropes and snap rings, etc. But with ever-increasing levels of exploitation, a lack of trained foremen and a growing number of untrained unskilled labourers, accidents are inevitably on the rise again.

In the decade from 2011 to 2021, an average of 118,000 workplace accidents occurred on construction sites each year, which equates to over 320 accidents per day. These figures naturally include all accidents—from a minor crush to a fatal fall from a roof. However, construction sites are particularly affected by serious and fatal accidents. Of the 118,000 work-related accidents per year, an average of 2,700 were serious and as many as 85 were fatal. According to construction union IG BAU, 74 fatal accidents occurred on construction sites in 2022. No figures are yet available for 2023.

In plain language, these figures mean that every four to five days, more than once a week, a worker dies on a German construction site. They fall from scaffolding or a roof, are crushed or buried by items falling or toppling over or suffocate miserably when toxic gases unexpectedly escape from a pipe.

These accidents shed light on the fact that it is precisely the poorly paid, little-appreciated professions that harbour the greatest dangers. The trade unions—above all the EVG rail and transport union, IG BAU and Germany's largest single union, IG Metall representing workers in metal working and engineering sectors—are partly responsible for this. In their support of big business and the government's pro-war policies, they ensure that workers' safety takes second place.

In the construction industry, the IG BAU recently missed the best opportunity to address the precarious situation of

low wages with a high risk of accidents. It cancelled the first nationwide construction workers' strike in 22 years, agreeing a miserable wage settlement, whereupon the building contractors announced 10,000 job cuts.

In other words: IG BAU is helping to ensure that around 1 million construction workers not only pay for corporate profits and the pro-war policy with cuts in real wages and job losses, but also inevitably have to toil with an increased risk of accidents as a result of staff cuts.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) are appealing to all workers in such dangerous professions to join together in rank-and-file committees able to act independently of the trade unions. In this way they can collect and make available all the necessary information and unite with colleagues in other workplaces and countries in the struggle to defend their jobs and conditions. The lives and well-being of workers are more important than profits! And the problems workers confront from the global corporations and war economy are best tackled together internationally. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was founded precisely for this purpose.

Normally, the specific circumstances and causes of fatal industrial accidents remain in the dark. Apart from brief, impersonal police reports, one hardly ever learns more about how a specific death came about and what it means for relatives and colleagues. But there are more and more exceptions to the rule.

After the death of 19-year-old railway trainee Simon Hedemann in September 2023, his parents took up the fight for a full investigation. They told the WSWS: "Our son died while doing his job, but we are left in the dark about HOW and WHY."

Katharina Lopes Duarte, the partner of railway worker Ali Ceyhan, 33, who was hit and killed by a train during track construction work, also in September 2023, went on the offensive. "Ali must not disappear as a number in the statistics," she told the WSWS.



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