

19-year-old killed while cleaning industrial meat grinder in Vernon, California

Luis Marquez, Marc Wells
16 July 2025

On Sunday, July 13, a 19-year-old worker was killed in an horrific workplace fatality at the Tina's Burritos frozen food plant in Vernon, California, just outside Los Angeles. The teenager, whose name has not yet been released, was part of the after-hours sanitation crew responsible for cleaning industrial equipment after the facility's last shift.

According to initial reports, the young man was in the process of cleaning a meat grinder and preparing it for the next day's production when the machine suddenly turned on. His co-workers heard his screams but were unable to stop the machine or pull him out before the young worker was crushed to death.

By the time emergency responders arrived, the teenager was already dead. The scene was one of horror and trauma, with visibly shaken workers gathered outside the facility. Tina's Burritos--a budget frozen food brand which markets its products with the slogan "Made in California"--has issued no public statement on the death of its employee.

The Vernon Police Department immediately ruled the killing an "industrial accident," even before California Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) began a formal investigation.

There are many questions that must be answered on how and why this young worker lost his life. But to call it an "accident" only conceals the brutal reality that exists in America's factories and workplaces. Instead, it was an entirely predictable and preventable consequence of a profit-driven system that treats workers' lives as expendable.

In any society that upheld basic safety standards, it would be physically impossible for dangerous machinery to remain operable while workers were performing cleaning or maintenance work on it. But lockout/tagout (LOTO) procedures—a standard requirement to ensure that industrial equipment is safely shut down and incapable of restarting during maintenance—are routinely ignored by companies.

The ongoing investigation initiated by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) into the death of Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. has already revealed that such violations are rampant across the country. Workers routinely clean, repair and service dangerous machinery with no safeguards, risking their lives every single shift. Violations of LOTO procedures happen every hour in every city in America. One cannot speak of rare tragedies or

accidents. These are systemically produced crimes.

That a teenager was sent into a confined industrial machine to clean it without elementary safeguards is a damning indictment of the conditions faced by millions of workers, especially the youngest and most vulnerable. These basic safety procedures have been known for decades. That they were not in place indicates that speed, cost-cutting and disregard for human life took priority. The absence of emergency kill switches, proper LOTO systems, or basic operational oversight suggests not just management negligence, but an entire economic system built on criminal disregard for workers' lives.

The case at Tina's Burritos follows a similar pattern as the Esparto fireworks explosion earlier this month, which killed seven workers—many of them young, low-paid laborers. Both incidents occurred in California, which despite its immense wealth and resources ranks second only to Texas in the number of workplace fatalities in the United States.

The role of the Democratic Party in California must be exposed. Governor Gavin Newsom and the Democrats posture as defenders of "working families," but their record is one of complicity with the corporate and financial oligarchy. California is home to some of the wealthiest individuals and corporations on the planet, yet it remains one of the most dangerous states in which to work. The state's political establishment has allowed unsafe workplaces to proliferate, regulatory agencies to rot, and enforcement to vanish—all in service of corporate interests.

That the victim was 19 years old is not incidental. American capitalism increasingly views working-class youth as cannon fodder. Whether sent to die in imperialist wars abroad or crushed to death in meat grinders and warehouses at home, their lives are cheap in the eyes of the ruling class. The ruling elite offers no future to young people beyond debt, servitude, exploitation and death.

The killing in Vernon must be placed in the context of the sweeping assault on workplace safety carried out by the Trump administration, particularly in 2025. Every measure implemented since January has been designed to dismantle the already fragile regulatory framework and give employers complete impunity to cut costs, increase workloads and ignore hazards.

Within weeks of taking office, the Trump administration froze all spending for OSHA rulemaking. This included vital standards for heat illness prevention and emergency response protocols. The attack intensified with a catastrophic assault on the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), whose workforce was slashed by more than 90 percent, from 1,400 employees to fewer than 150, alongside an 80 percent budget cut.

Trump issued executive orders mandating that federal agencies eliminate 10 rules for every new regulation, creating an environment where the very idea of worker safety is regarded as a bureaucratic inconvenience. OSHA enforcement has collapsed. Inspectors are at their lowest number in history and enforcement has been replaced by so-called “compliance assistance.”

Even the General Duty Clause, requiring employers to keep workplaces free of known hazards, has been effectively nullified.

In a further act of class war, Trump moved to dismantle the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, ensuring that future disasters—explosions, toxic leaks, machine fatalities—would go unexamined and unpunished.

At the same time, the administration launched a campaign to normalize and expand child labor. Republican-led states across the country, emboldened by Trump’s return to power, have rolled back child labor laws and legalized the employment of minors in hazardous industries. The goal is to prepare young workers early for lives of brutal exploitation. The death of a 19-year-old janitor in a meat processing plant is not an aberration. It is a preview of what this system has in store.

California’s state regulatory agency, Cal/OSHA, has also been gutted. Many high-hazard or lower-profile workplaces may go uninspected for years unless there is a formal complaint or serious accident, increasing the risk of preventable injuries. Gaps in proactive hazard identification have been exposed, particularly in rapidly evolving industries, smaller firms and in sectors with high immigrant or temporary worker populations who may hesitate to file complaints.

According to a former Cal/OSHA compliance officer, the agency has been “castrated” by funding cuts and deregulation. Directors at Cal/OSHA, he said, have told inspectors not to issue willful violations or fines over \$100,000 “unless there are bodies or body parts on the ground.”

Moreover, there is a relentless campaign of intimidation and silence to prevent workers from exposing these conditions. In the case of Ronald Adams, several workers have been threatened and told to “keep their mouths shut.”

This is not an isolated case. Salima Jandali, a Colorado woman employed at JBS USA—the world’s largest meatpacking company—reported that management pressured her to falsify safety records. Workers, she said, were “regularly losing fingers and limbs” due to lack of training and deliberate neglect.

This wall of silence is enforced especially against immigrant workers, who are among the most exploited and vulnerable. These workers are placed in the most dangerous positions and then threatened with deportation or termination if they dare to speak up.

Tina’s Burritos is a nonunion facility. But the presence of a union would not have fundamentally changed the outcome. The AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions have become tools of corporate management, working not to protect workers but to suppress struggles and defend profits.

United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain and the UAW apparatus have responded to the death of Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. by colluding with management to conceal their mutual responsibility for the deadly conditions in the plant. It was the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) that took up the call for an independent investigation by workers themselves.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) ostensibly “represents” workers at the JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado where workers routinely suffer amputations and other injuries. The union bureaucracies—whether in the UAW, Teamsters, UFCW or any other—serve the corporations and the state. They will not lift a finger to stop these deaths because they are complicit in the very system that causes them.

The killing of this 19-year-old worker must not be allowed to pass in silence. We call on workers at Tina’s Burritos, throughout Vernon’s industrial corridor, and across the country: Take up the fight for the building of rank-and-file committees, which will empower shopfloor workers and organize collective action to defend their lives and enforce strict safety standards. These committees must organize an independent investigation into the young worker at Tina’s Burritos.

Only through the socialist reorganization of society—based on the public ownership of the industries and production centered on human need, not private profit—can the working class put an end to these atrocities once and for all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact