

# Tina's Burritos worker killed in industrial meatgrinder identified as 19-year-old Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj

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The 19-year-old worker who was killed earlier this month at the Tina's Burritos frozen-food plant in Vernon, California has been identified as Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj. He was from Santa Lucía Utatlán, a small town of 22,000 people in the Sololá department of Guatemala, whose economy is sustained by agriculture, artisanal crafts and the remittances of migrant workers who sacrifice everything to provide for their loved ones from afar.

Brayan's life was cut short in the most horrifying way imaginable. While cleaning an industrial meat grinder, he was pulled inside the machine. Colleagues heard him screaming but could not stop the mechanism. By the time emergency responders arrived, Brayan was already dead.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department coldly described this as an "industrial accident." In reality, it was an act of social murder, the product of profit-driven negligence of basic safety procedures.

Brayan's family announced his name and death on July 17 via Facebook:

It's with great sadness that we share the passing of our beloved cousin Brayan, who tragically lost his life in a workplace accident at Tina's Burritos in Vernon, CA. Brayan was one of the kindest, most loving people you could ever meet. Just eight months ago, he made the brave decision to leave his home in Guatemala in hopes of supporting his mother and siblings. We are organizing fundraisers to help cover the costs of sending his body back to our family in Guatemala so he can be laid to rest in his homeland.

A TikTok video posted by family speaks of a young man full of life and hope, who dreamed only of working hard and helping his family.

Brayan's story exposes the lie, promoted relentlessly by

Trump and the extreme right, that immigrants are in conflict with "native born" Americans. In reality, Brayan was a member of the international working class, and the class brother of all workers regardless of national origin or immigration status.

He was one of millions of immigrants, from countries oppressed for decades by US imperialism, who came to the United States seeking to improve their lives and those of their families. But once they enter the country, they are treated as a super-exploitable labor force, pushed disproportionately into the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. This includes food production: according to figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median wage of food processing workers in 2023 was only \$ 17.73.

The terror campaign against immigrants is aimed at splitting workers along racial and ethnic lines in order to drive up exploitation to the maximum possible level. Only one month prior to Brayan's death, the Trump administration had sent thousands of National Guardsmen and Marines to the Los Angeles area to suppress protests against ICE's rampage across southern California. In response, millions participated in the "No Kings" protests on June 14, possibly the largest protest in American history.

## The case of Vernon, California

Vernon, California, where the Tina's Burritos plant is located, is a town built for factory exploitation and not human beings. It is a major industrial hub, in particular for the food processing and meatpacking industries. Approximately 46,000 people are employed in factories in the city, but the resident population was only 222 in the last census, in 2020.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "Vernon has long

been dogged by accusations that it is a fiefdom run by a family that has held sway over the town for generations.” Former mayor Leonis Malburg, who ruled the city for fifty years, was brought down in 2009 by a major corruption scandal. The city, whose slogan is “Vernon Means Business,” was named “Most Business Friendly City” among cities with less than 50,000 residents by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation in 2008.

## **America’s industrial slaughterhouse**

This is the kind of preventable tragedy which affects workers and their families every day across the United States regardless of race, color or creed, but which is all but ignored in the media. Every day in the United States, about 14 workers die on the job due to workplace accidents, according to the latest government figures, which only go up to 2023. An average of 385 workers die from workplace injuries or occupational diseases, over 140,000 per year, according to the AFL-CIO.

The past year has seen a grim series of workplace tragedies: a fireworks warehouse explosion in Esparto, California; two postal workers dying from heat exhaustion; crane collapse fatalities in Florida; a sewage boat explosion in New York City; an Amazon warehouse death. Each one is a stark indictment of a profit system that treats workers’ lives as disposable.

Brayan’s death was entirely preventable had basic safety protocols been followed, including lockout/tagout (LOTO) procedures, which are supposed to isolate industrial machinery from power sources during maintenance.

The circumstances bear striking similarities to the April 7 death of 63-year-old autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. at Stellantis’ Dundee Engine Plant in Michigan. Adams was crushed by an overhead gantry while he was performing maintenance.

An ongoing rank-and-file investigation has revealed that management in the plant bypassed LOTO procedures with “cheater keys,” a serious safety violation which contributed directly to Adams’ death. The United Auto Workers union, which has kept a stony silence, is also implicated through its participation in joint labor-management safety committees which act as a rubber stamp for the company.

According to OSHA, lockout/tagout violations are among the most frequently cited workplace safety infractions. In 2024, there were 2,443 LOTO-related citations. But this figure barely scratches the surface. OSHA, gutted by

decades of bipartisan budget cuts, is incapable of even basic oversight. At current staffing levels, it would take OSHA nearly 185 years to inspect every workplace in the United States once. Looming budget cuts threaten to stretch that timeline to 226 years.

The agency’s leadership is now in the hands of David Keeling, former “safety” executive at Amazon and UPS, logistics companies infamous for harsh working conditions and high injury rates.

## **For a full investigation into Brayan’s death!**

Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj’s death is not just a tragedy for his family and friends—it is a crime against the entire working class. The WSWs calls for a thorough investigation from top to bottom to expose how his death took place, and to hold management responsible. This means taking testimony from witnesses, co-workers, safety experts and others with relevant knowledge.

This must be organized by workers themselves: any internal investigation by management or by the government will lead to a whitewash, and at most a wrist-slap fine.

The model for this must be the investigation into Ronald Adams’ death by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The goal of the investigation, the IWA-RFC explained, is “is to empower rank-and-file committees to take control of safety conditions and line speed, abolish toothless joint labor-management safety committees and end the dictatorship of production for profit.”



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