

3 killed in Nebraska biofuel plant explosion: America's industrial carnage continues

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On Sunday, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) held a public hearing on its investigation into the death of Stellantis Dundee Engine worker Ronald Adams Sr. and the unending wave of fatalities in America's industrial slaughterhouse.

In the three days since, the significance of the meeting has been revealed in a series of workplace disasters that have claimed more lives.

On Wednesday, authorities confirmed that a worker, Dylan D. Danielson of Columbus, Nebraska, and his two children were killed in the massive explosion at the Horizon Biofuels plant the day before in Fremont, 32 miles northwest of Omaha. The two young girls, ages 8 and 12, were reportedly waiting for their father to get off work and take them to a doctor's appointment when the plant's concrete storage elevator exploded in a huge fireball around 11:45 a.m.

Robby Baker, the stepfather of one of the girls, told KMTV-Omaha that Danielson made a desperate call to his wife to try to save the children. "Right after the building collapsed, he was pinned inside of it. He made a phone call to his wife and said where the girls were at, get someone in there to get them out, and he was pinned in, and there was fire all around him."

Intense flames, smoke and fears of collapse prevented emergency crews from entering. Fremont Mayor Joey Spellerberg confirmed the deaths at a press conference Wednesday, where authorities said it could take days before the bodies are recovered.

The plant recycles pallets and wood waste to produce animal bedding and wood pellets for home heating, industrial purposes and smoking food. Officials suspect the blast was triggered by accumulated dust in the elevator and tons of wood waste and alcohol-based materials stored on-site. The company has issued no statement.

The scale of the disaster could have been worse. The company had 10 employees, but it is surrounded by other plants like Cargill, Fremont Beef, and Lincoln Premium Poultry, which employ hundreds. Windows were blown out at the Jayhawk Box factory, and homes half a mile away

were shaken.

In 2014, a fire at the Horizon plant took over eight hours to put out. Dangers in the wood pellet industry are well known. Dust and gases like methane and carbon monoxide are highly flammable, and large volumes of pellets can spontaneously combust.

A 2018 Environmental Integrity Project report found that 8 of the 15 largest US wood pellet facilities had fires or explosions since 2014. A 2017 fire at the German Pellets facility in Texas burned for two months, killing a worker and forcing residents to seek medical care. Similar disasters occurred in Europe, including a 2010 incident that killed three in Germany.

Before this explosion, Horizon had a history of safety violations. In 2012, OSHA cited five serious violations, including failure to implement lockout/tagout procedures, inadequate forklift training, and failure to prevent chemical exposure and fire hazards from wood dust. Fines were reduced from \$12,000, already pocket change for the corporation, to \$6,000 after the company contested them.

The deaths in Nebraska are only the latest in a national workplace death toll.

On Monday, July 28, a 30-year-old worker in Willoughby, Ohio, was killed when a box truck crashed into the "cherry picker" lift he was working on. The sign company he worked for is a franchise of YESCO, which has had at least 15 separate OSHA investigations since 2015, including for a 2020 death in Michigan and failing to provide harnesses and other fall protections.

On Sunday, July 27, Kim Jung Won, a 34-year-old South Korean contractor, was killed at the LG Energy Solutions lithium battery plant in Holland, Michigan. According to the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), the "34-year-old senior researcher was installing and setting up a machine at a customer location when the machine activated, and the victim was caught between the frame and the lifting mechanism."

In a statement on what must have been a horrific scene, the Holland police said, "Due to the injuries, the victim was

clearly deceased.”

In both the circumstances and scale of injuries, the death of Kim Jung Won at the facility owned by LG Energy—which operates several joint ventures with Stellantis in the US—is strikingly similar to the April 7 death of Ronald Adams Sr. The 63-year-old skilled tradesman was crushed to death at the Dundee Engine Complex when an overhead gantry suddenly activated and pinned him to a conveyor.

These are only the publicized deaths. The US government does not maintain current workplace fatality data. The latest posted OSHA inspection record is from February 2025, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics will not publish 2024 data until December. Each year, more than 5,200 workers die from injuries and 135,000 from work-related illnesses. Another 3.2 million suffer non-fatal injuries, likely a severe undercount, given that reporting is voluntary, and workers fear retaliation.

The toll will grow as Trump slashes OSHA. In the next fiscal year, OSHA will conduct nearly 10,000 fewer inspections, face an 8 percent budget cut, and lose more than 12 percent of its staff. A former UPS and Amazon executive has been tapped to head and dismantle the agency.

On July 16, Rebecca Reindel of the AFL-CIO testified to Congress that in 2024 OSHA conducted 34,682 inspections—meaning each workplace is inspected once every 185 years. If reduced to 25,000 inspections in 2026, this will jump to once every 266 years—the lowest rate ever, even worse than during COVID-19.

But the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party will not challenge this. The union bureaucracy has spent decades betraying and suppressing the class struggle, including the bitter strikes by Iowa Beef Processing workers in Nebraska in the 1980s when the National Guard was deployed.

The union bureaucracy is collaborating in Trump’s drive to overturn a century of labor protections and restore conditions depicted in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*.

The United Food and Commercial Workers union has done nothing to oppose Trump’s mass roundups of immigrants, including at Glenn Valley Foods in Nebraska and JBS in Iowa, which are aimed at intimidating and silencing opposition by immigrant and native-born workers alike to deadly, sweatshop exploitation. A 2021 study found that immigration raids from 2001 to 2019 led to a 50 percent drop in OSHA complaints at workplaces with large Hispanic workforces and a 30 percent rise in injuries.

The reaction of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy to the death of Ronald Adams Sr. has been to protect management, conceal the truth from his family and co-workers and join the company in threatening workers who speak out with retaliation.

The only force that can stop this is the independent

intervention of the working class. That was the theme of the powerful July 27 hearing by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) on the death of Ronald Adams Sr. It brought together Adams’ family, Dundee co-workers and rank-and-file workers from other sectors.

Participants unanimously passed a resolution demanding an end to the “cover-up of the ongoing industrial slaughter taking place in factories, warehouses, construction sites, and processing plants. Those responsible—from corporate executives to union officials and government regulators—must be held accountable for their role in these preventable deaths.”

The resolution called for the continuation and expansion of the independent rank-and-file investigation into the death of Adams, the extension of this investigation to include the deaths of other victims, an end to the bipartisan assault on workplace safety and social programs, and the building of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the pro-corporate unions, to enforce safe working conditions and expose dangerous practices.

The resolution concluded:

We, therefore, call on all workers—in the United States and internationally—to join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and take up the fight for a national and international movement to end the sacrifice of workers’ lives and limbs on the altar of profit. The time has come to organize, to resist and to reclaim the right to live and work in safety and dignity.

The WSWS calls on all workers to come forward and join the investigation into the death of Ronald Adams and other workplace fatalities. Fill out the form below to get involved.



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