

Vernon, California: The company town where Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj was killed

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On July 13, 19-year-old Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj died in Vernon, California, after falling into a meat grinder while cleaning it. His death is only one of the latest in America's industrial slaughterhouse, where more than 5,000 people die in workplace accidents every year.

The “city” of Vernon shows, in an extreme form, the domination of every aspect of society by the capitalist ruling elite. The city's 1,800 businesses each employ between 50 to 55,000 workers, but Vernon has only 222 residents.

Vernon's private employers have a combined \$4.5 billion private employer payroll.

With so few residents, mostly renters in city-owned housing, Vernon operates as a de facto company town, subordinating community health, worker safety and governance to corporate profit.

Founded in 1905 under the auspices of businessman John B. Leonis and landowners Thomas and James Furlong, Vernon was designed from the ground up to be a city that prioritizes industrial interests above all else. They ran the city as a ruling triumvirate, with a vision they called “*Exclusively Industrial*.”

What began as an intentional process of land acquisition and residential displacement soon transformed Vernon into a five-square-mile industrial enclave southeast of Downtown Los Angeles.

By 1919, the city had solidified its identity as a manufacturing hub, initially centered around meatpacking and later diversifying into aerospace, textiles, food processing and other industries.

Anti-democratic political engineering

Vernon's grotesque social and economic conditions result from decades of deliberate anti-democratic political engineering. By 1929 Vernon had 300 plants and 20,000 workers—but only 140 registered voters, effectively eliminating political opposition.

For decades, Vernon operated as a fiefdom controlled by the Leonis and Furlong families. Elections were uncontested,

dominated by city employees and relatives living in city-owned homes. Outsiders seeking office were evicted.

Vernon's tiny population, confined to roughly 78 to 100 housing units with only 7 percent home ownership, is sharply segregated from the tens of thousands who labor in hazardous industries. Most residents work in office or managerial positions. Historically, city-owned housing ensured residents' loyalty to the industrial-political regime, with the first private residential development emerging only in 2015 as a token reform.

This corrupt regime was exposed in 2009 when then-Mayor Leonora Malburg was convicted of voter fraud. Officials flagrantly misappropriated funds; some earned over \$600,000 annually through “quintuple-dipping.”

In 2011, the California State Assembly nearly disincorporated Vernon over corruption. A last-minute deal spared it, with \$60 million in concessions, but the industrial stranglehold endures.

Brayan Canu Joj's death

Brayan's death in a meat grinder reflects a nationwide epidemic of workplace fatalities, especially in meatpacking and food processing. These so-called “accidents” are industrial killings, avoidable deaths in a system that prioritizes profit over life. Labor abuses abound: wage theft, unpaid overtime, denied breaks and intimidation of workers who speak out.

While federal regulatory bodies are being systematically dismantled under Trump, California's labor regulations are also undermined by chronic underfunding. The Labor Commissioner's Office takes an average of two years to resolve claims—six times longer than the legal limit—effectively enabling abusive employers.

Child labor violations are soaring, with investigations revealing children working with sharp knives in Southern California poultry plants. Trivial penalties of only a few thousand dollars per violation is written off as just a cost of doing business.

Since 2015, child labor violations have risen 283 percent,

exposing the rollback of conditions to the 19th century under the guise of “business flexibility.” Vernon’s industries epitomize this brutal calculus of expendable labor.

The myth of an immigrant-friendly Vernon

Vernon touts itself as immigrant-friendly, publicly refusing to assist ICE and partnering with immigrant rights groups. But this façade conceals deep complicity in exploiting undocumented workers.

But federal raids continue across Southern California, terrorizing immigrant workers into silence. Immigrant workers, forming the backbone of Vernon’s industrial labor force, live in fear, their legal precarity exploited to suppress resistance and maximize profits.

Today, the city council is composed of five Latino politicians—four women and one man—including Mayor Leticia Lopez. They are all Vernon residents. Far from representing a break with Vernon’s legacy of exploitation, this composition exposes the reactionary character of identity politics.

Cal/OSHA ineffective

Cal/OSHA data exposes a systemic failure to protect Vernon workers. Several major employers have been fined for grave safety violations, only to see penalties slashed:

- D&D Services Inc. (West Coast Rendering) was fined \$175,550 for 36 violations, including dangerous machinery hazards, reduced to \$53,655.

- Overhill Farms faced \$124,590 in fines for inadequate safety training and machine guarding.

- Jobsource North America had 7 violations totaling \$109,290.

- Kay Metal, exposing workers to lead, was fined \$101,315, later halved.

These infractions, a mere glimpse of the real numbers, involve life-threatening machinery dangers and toxic exposures.

A 2025 State Auditor report found Cal/OSHA failed to conduct on-site inspections in 25 percent of serious injury cases, relying instead on ineffective warning letters. Inspectors reportedly avoid issuing major penalties unless fatalities occur.

Environmental dangers

Vernon’s industrial legacy includes severe environmental harm. The infamous Exide Battery recycling plant leaked lead and arsenic for decades, contaminating thousands of homes. Cleanup costs now exceed \$176 million, paid by taxpayers.

Ongoing industrial pollution continues to harm nearby low-income communities, causing elevated asthma and cardiovascular disease rates—clear evidence of environmental racism and systemic neglect.

A warning to all workers

Vernon is a concentrated expression of the dictatorship wielded by the capitalist ruling elite. It must be opposed by the independent mobilization of the working class, fighting for workers’ control over safety and other social decisions affecting the lives of millions.

Last weekend, a powerful resolution was passed unanimously at an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) hearing in Detroit investigating the death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr., who was crushed to death in April while performing maintenance.

The resolution declared:

“**[We] [c]all** for 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.

“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 same fight must be waged in Vernon and everywhere.



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