California company receives probation and fine for two workers suffocated in 2020 nitrogen leak

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California Ranch Foods, a Vernon-based food processing plant and subsidiary of Golden West Food Group, pleaded guilty last month to two misdemeanor counts over the workplace deaths of two employees, paying just over $6 million in a criminal plea agreement. The charges stem from a December 1, 2020 nitrogen leak in a chilled storage room that suffocated 56-year-old Baldemar Gonsales of Los Angeles and 54-year-old Maria Osyguss of Hemet.

The Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, working from Cal/OSHA's investigation, finalized the agreement in July. The deal reduces the charges from felony to misdemeanor, grants the company three years' probation and allows it to continue operations uninterrupted.

In addition to a $1 million criminal fine, the company will donate $4 million to local food banks, pay $50,000 to Cal/OSHA, and spend $1.6 million on "enhanced safety measures." These sums, which appear large on paper, amount to a minor operational expense for Golden West Food Group, whose annual revenue is estimated at $452 million, according to Buzzfile.

The criminal penalty joins a previously settled $35 million civil lawsuit with the families of the victims.

A preventable workplace death

On the morning of the incident, Gonsales entered the chilled room after a malfunction released liquid nitrogen, displacing oxygen. He collapsed almost instantly. An hour later Osyguss, unaware of the danger, entered and suffered the same fate. Neither had any means of escape. The room's alarm system — their only potential warning — had been left to rust over and failed to sound.

Michael Bright, director of Cal/OSHA's Bureau of Investigations, described the company's conduct as "gross negligence." Investigators found multiple egregious violations: no functioning oxygen monitors, no ventilation adequate to handle a leak, no outside-readable gas sensors, no emergency breathing equipment, no proper worker training in handling pressurized gas, and no maintenance of the alarm system.

The company has since "retrofitted" its systems to comply with safety codes, in a frank admission that these measures could and should have been in place before two people lost their lives.

Cal/OSHA chief Debra Lee declared that "when employers fail to safeguard workers… the state will hold them to account." In reality, the plea agreement is not accountability but a shield for the company.

Regulators as accomplices

The government's role in this tragedy cannot be understated. For years, the Cal/OSHA has been unable to conduct consistent, thorough inspections. A recent audit by the California State Auditor revealed that the agency is in a state of advanced decay. Staffing shortages, outdated procedures and an inspection rate far below the minimum needed to ensure worker safety are the result of a conscious political program.

The state administration of Democrat Gavin Newsom has starved Cal/OSHA of resources while relying on the trade union bureaucracy to smother worker opposition.

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This is the California expression of a nationwide policy, pursued under both Democrats and Republicans, to dismantle regulatory protections for the benefit of corporate profit.

At the federal level, Trump's Labor Secretary Lori Chavez-DeRemer announced in July the most sweeping deregulatory assault yet: eliminating ten regulations for every new one and slashing OSHA's budget by nearly 8 percent. This means 223 fewer staff, 30 percent fewer inspections and a green light to corporate America to cut costs at the expense of workers' lives.

The outcome will be both predictable and quantifiable: the cuts will drive fatalities beyond the more than 5,000 recorded workplace deaths each year in the United States—a figure that grossly understates the true toll once occupational diseases and long-term exposures are included.

A pattern of industrial slaughter

The California Ranch Foods case follows a long line of preventable workplace deaths caused by cost-cutting, safety neglect and nonexistent oversight. In only four months this year, a string of horrific workplace deaths have offered a harrowing glimpse of the real situation.

These included Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. , steelworker Michael Dewaine Townsend, construction worker Ryan Starnes, trench-collapse victim Ronald Baquera Jr., steel plant worker Tuah Kollie, and South Korean contractor Kim Jung Won, who was crushed at LG Energy Solutions.

In Vernon itself, a company town dedicated to unchecked industrial exploitation, Guatemalan immigrant Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj was sucked into a meat grinder. In Nebraska, Dylan D. Danielson and his two young children were killed in a biofuel plant explosion.

Most recently, the massive blast at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works outside Pittsburgh claimed the lives of Timothy Quinn and another worker whose name has not yet been released, and critically injured five more.

Each of these deaths, like those of Gonsales and Osyguss, was entirely preventable. That they occurred was the direct consequence of employers ignoring safety protocols, regulators failing to enforce existing laws and the profit system treating human lives as disposable.

The plea deal's millions in fines and donations are presented as justice. They are no such thing. For a corporation with nine-figure revenues, such penalties are the cost of doing business. They will be written off against taxes and absorbed without affecting executive bonuses or shareholder returns.

The only force capable of halting this slaughter is the working class itself, organized independently of both the corporate-controlled political parties and the union apparatus. This means building rank-and-file committees in every workplace— democratic bodies controlled by workers, not union officials—with the power to halt production when unsafe conditions arise, demand full transparency on hazards and hold management criminally accountable for endangering lives.

Such committees must coordinate across industries and state lines, linking food processing workers with steelworkers, autoworkers, construction crews, logistics workers and educators, to mount a united struggle against the bipartisan war on safety and living standards.

Investigations must be launched in the manner of the WSWS investigation into Ronald Adams, Sr.'s death. In a recent public meeting, a resolution was passed unanimously calling 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.

The fight for workplace safety cannot be separated from the fight against the capitalist profit system. It is the logic of profit, not "incompetence" or "oversight," that led California Ranch Foods to operate a death trap for years.

The memory of Baldemar Gonsales and Maria Osyguss must serve as a rallying cry. Workers everywhere must reject the official narrative that justice has been done. True justice will only come when the working class takes power into its own hands, reorganizing society on the basis of human need, not private profit.

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