

Worker crushed to death at Palermo's Pizza in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Robert Cherone, a 45-year-old worker of Elkhorn, Wisconsin, was crushed to death by a robotic machine during his early morning shift at Palermo's Pizza's West Milwaukee manufacturing facility. First responders found him trapped in the machinery and pronounced him dead at the scene. The incident is being investigated by the West Milwaukee Police Department, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office.

Palermo Villa Inc., the plant's corporate owner, issued the standard corporate script, offering perfunctory condolences along with vague promises of "support" for the family and "counseling" for employees.

This is the latest in an endless wave of workplace deaths. The statistics are staggering. In Wisconsin alone, 112 workers were killed on the job in 2023, according to the AFL-CIO. About one-fifth of those deaths resulted from "contact with objects and equipment"—the category in which Cherone's death falls. Nationally, more than 5,000 workers die on the job each year, and millions more suffer injury or illness.

Each case is treated as an isolated mishap, but together they reveal a systemic crisis. Workplaces are organized not for human well-being but for the maximization of profit, which inevitably means cutting corners.

Palermo's Pizza has a long history of unsafe conditions. In May 2013, a 21-year-old Burmese immigrant lost three fingers in an industrial dough mixer that unexpectedly started while he was cleaning it. OSHA found that Palermo's had failed to implement even the most basic lockout/tagout procedures—Machines were not de-energized during

maintenance. For this gruesome, life-changing injury, Palermo's faced just \$13,500 in fines, the equivalent of pocket change for the company.

Around the same time, OSHA also investigated Palermo's industrial refrigeration system, which used a large quantity of anhydrous ammonia as a coolant. The plant stores approximately 30,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia on site in a densely populated Milwaukee neighborhood. OSHA found serious deficiencies in Palermo's Process Safety Management of this system. In a news release, OSHA cited Palermo's for eight violations, seven categorized as "serious" and one as "other than serious," all related to the ammonia system. These included inadequate employee training on emergency procedures, poor maintenance and operating practices and insufficient emergency planning for a leak or explosion.

Workers at Palermo's have long described the plant as unsafe, due to line speeds, exhausting hours and contemptuous management. In June 2012, employees struck, citing 70- to 90-hour workweeks and injuries such as severed fingers and repetitive trauma. Former worker Cesar Hernandez recalled how a malfunctioning sealing machine, left unrepairs to avoid slowing production, nearly amputated his finger. According to *The Nation* magazine, when he raised concerns, a supervisor mocked him, quipping, "Here, we do things as my balls say. Whoever doesn't like it can leave."

In May 2012, roughly three-quarters of Palermo's workers signed union cards in an effort to form the Palermo's Workers Union, demanding higher pay, safer conditions and an end to forced overtime. Many earned as little as \$7.25 an hour. The very next day, management announced that 89 workers identified in an ICE audit had 10 days—cut down from the usual 28—to prove work authorization or be fired. On June 1,

dozens struck in protest, demanding union recognition. Palermo immediately hired replacements and within a week fired 75 of the strikers.

The Obama administration, despite community protests, allowed the purge to proceed. ICE briefly suspended the audit but did not reverse the firings. In November 2012, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Palermo's had not broken the law in dismissing the immigrant strikers. A December settlement reinstated only nine workers, even as the company admitted to threats and coercion during the strike. The vast majority of fired workers never got their jobs back.

The unions' role was to contain the struggle. The AFL-CIO and United Steelworkers launched an official boycott campaign and pursued legal appeals but avoided mobilizing broader industrial action. By early 2013, the AFL-CIO had raised only about \$3,500 online for the strikers, even while hundreds of thousands of dollars in dues flowed to union officials. As the WSWS observed at the time, the unions "systematically isolated and betrayed" the Palermo's workers, channeling their fight into sterile legal proceedings and appeals to Democratic politicians while allowing the strike to be broken.

Cherone's death, more than a decade later, is the direct product of these conditions and the growing attacks on workers, which under the second Trump administration are only intensifying. Automation has been introduced into the plant to cut labor costs and accelerate production.

In a rational system, such technology could eliminate drudgery and free human beings from the most dangerous tasks. Under capitalism, however, it becomes an instrument of death, used to intensify exploitation and drive speed-ups.

Companies slash costs wherever they can, turning machines into death traps through neglected maintenance and delayed upgrades. Workers are forced into dangerous proximity with hazardous equipment. This contradiction underscores the irrationality of the for-profit system under which workers live.

Earlier this year, Ronald Adams, a 63-year-old machine repairman, was crushed to death on April 7, 2025, at Stellantis' Dundee Engine Complex in southeast Michigan. Adams died in a unionized facility under the watch of the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Yet the UAW colluded with management to cover up the circumstances of his death.

Today's unions are controlled by bureaucrats who operate as appendages of management, functioning to contain and defuse opposition rather than to defend lives. Whether in a nonunion shop like Palermo's or a unionized auto plant, workers confront the same underlying danger.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) launched an investigation into the death of Adams to uncover what happened and to hold those responsible accountable. The IWA-RFC did more to fight for Adams' justice than the entire UAW apparatus, despite its vast sums of money and resources.

Cherone's death and Adams' death are not accidents but crimes of a social order that values profit above life. Appeals to OSHA, to corporate consciences, or to union bureaucracies will not prevent future tragedies. The defense of life, dignity and safety requires the independent organization of workers and the building of rank-and-file committees to uncover the cause of Cherone's death and fight to ensure it never happens again.



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