

Senate confirms Trump nominees to head US safety agencies as worker protections face the axe

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The Senate confirmation of Trump's appointments for the two top occupational safety posts in the United States on October 7, one week into the government shutdown, presages a deepening assault on workplace safety.

David Keeling, a former executive at Amazon and UPS, was confirmed as the Assistant Secretary of Labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) along with veteran Republican operative Wayne Palmer as the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Mine Safety and Health (MSHA). The two were approved in a bloc, along with 22 other nominees, in a single party-line vote, with 51 Republicans voting in favor and 47 Democrats against.

As head of safety at both UPS and Amazon Keeling blocked the implementation of basic safety measures, such as the installation of air conditioning on delivery trucks, which contributed to thousands of illnesses and even deaths. Amazon in particular is notorious for its high rate of on-the-job injuries, more than double that of other warehouse workers.

For his part Wayne Palmer has no training in mine safety. Immediately prior to his confirmation, Palmer served as Executive Vice President of the Essential Minerals Association (EMA), a trade group representing mining and mineral-extraction companies. There, he pushed for "streamlined permitting" and the rollback of "burdensome regulations."

During his previous tenure at MSHA during the first Trump administration, Palmer oversaw a sharp decline in inspections and enforcement actions. His reinstatement now signals the administration's intention to align the agency even more closely with the coal, metal, and mineral conglomerates. In 2018, his first full year in office, US mine deaths nearly doubled according to a *Newsweek* report.

Under Trump, funding for OSHA, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the Chemical Safety Board (CSB), and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has been slashed. During the ongoing government shutdown, all consultations and preventive inspections have ceased. OSHA operates with a skeleton crew of unpaid staff responding only to reports of imminent danger, fatalities, catastrophes, and select serious complaints.

Over successive Democratic and Republican administrations the power of OSHA has been further constricted, with OSHA acting in many cases as a facilitator of joint labor management coverups of unsafe conditions. This was exposed by the investigation launched by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees into the death of Stellantis Dundee Engine worker Ronald Adam's Sr. Six months after his death on April 7, 2025, the investigation by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration remains open.

Now, the Trump administration, following the Project 2025 blueprint, opposes any national safety standards, insisting that such "floors" be treated as negotiable in unionized workplaces.

Just two days after the confirmation vote, on October 9, outside Bucksnort, Tennessee an explosion at munitions company Accurate Energetic Systems killed 16 people.

Since that tragedy the toll of death and injury in Americas' industrial slaughterhouse has continued unabated. These include,

- October 13, Perrysburg, Ohio: Sy Doan, age 28, died from multiple blunt force injuries to the chest with compressive asphyxia while working for First Solar energy.
- October 15, Gibson County, Texas: two contractors working at a home were overcome by gas. Dylan Coston, age 24, died and his partner, Faith Brown, age 24 was treated at the hospital and recovered.
- October 18 Moundville, Alabama: a contract worker working at Westervelt Lumber died under circumstances that have not been reported.
- October 18, Houston, Texas, Texas: Steven Marks, a 58-year-old letter carrier for the United States Postal Service (USPS), was killed while working his route after being struck by an alleged drunk driver
- October 19 New York City: Ander Bustamante, 26, a window washer, fell to his death while working on the side of a building.
- October 22 Jeffrey City, Wyoming: A 56-year-old employee of Lost Soldier Oil and Gas died while apparently seeking to turn off a valve after noticing a rupture in the gas flow line.

- October 23 New York City: a construction worker died after falling more than 100 feet into a hole at Hudson Yards.
- October 23, Marion, Texas: a contracted line worker was electrocuted while working 175 feet off the ground on high voltage equipment.
- October 24 in Everett, Massachusetts: Larriston Lake, age 44 and Paul Ledwell, age 37, were killed when a large crane collapsed on the waterfront where they were working.

The same insatiable capitalist drive for profit behind the rising toll of workplace deaths in the US is driving the assault on workplace conditions internationally. This is evidenced by such recent tragedies as the fire at the Dhaka, Bangladesh garment factory that killed 16 and the explosion this week at the Endeavor Mine in Australia.

Signaling a bi-partisan consensus for undermining safety protections, no fundamental opposition was raised against Keeling or Palmer by senators from either big-business party. Keeling testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee on June 5, 2025, following his February 11 nomination by President Trump. No such hearing was held for Palmer, the MSHA nominee.

At the hearing, Keeling read a prepared statement touching on his personal background, including the death of an uncle he never met in a farming accident at age 17. He also referenced his experience as a Teamster and his 37 years as a “UPSer.”

Keeling touted his brief stint as a union employee while in college and his corporate ascent to portray himself as a bridge between workers and management. Echoing the corporatist language of the trade union bureaucracy he declared, “I came to understand that nothing is more beneficial than collaboration between employers and employees.” Adding, “The best source of safety improvements originates with the people who perform the job every day.”

Keeling’s record speaks clearly. As an executive at UPS and Amazon, he was associated with companies fined millions of dollars by OSHA and opposed basic worker protections such as proposed heat safety standards. OSHA currently maintains National Emphasis Programs for “Outdoor and Indoor Heat-Related Hazards” and “Warehousing and Distribution Center Operations,” both set to expire next year. No senator asked whether Keeling would renew them.

During Keeling’s tenure at UPS the company opposed stricter workplace rules on heat safety, including installing air conditioning in UPS vehicles. At least two UPS drivers died due to heat-related causes in recent years including Jose Cruz Rodriguez Jr. in 2021 and Esteban David Chavez Jr. in 2022.

This did not stop the Teamsters bureaucracy from endorsing Trump’s appointment of Keeling as OSHA head.

During the hearing Keeling outlined three goals for OSHA, which he claimed was “at a crossroads” and “at risk of losing its position of leadership in the global health and safety space” due to reliance on “outdated systems and processes.” His three objectives were: “Regulatory Oversight and Rulemaking;”

promising to “greatly accelerate modernization” through “technology and predictive analytics;” “Cooperation and Collaboration,” calling for closer ties between companies, unions, and OSHA. He claimed he would use data “to engage at-risk employers and employees through proactive risk mitigation” before tragedies occur.

During questioning, senators touched only three subjects: workplace violence in healthcare, a proposed emergency response standard for first responders and the classification of mental stress and trauma as occupational hazards. Keeling’s responses were noncommittal and conciliatory.

Wayne Palmer’s confirmation as MSHA chief received even less attention. Palmer previously served as Acting Assistant Secretary of Labor for MSHA during the first Trump administration, following the resignation of Obama appointee Joe Main. Palmer has no professional background in mining or safety engineering.

Even before the confirmation of Keeling and Palmer, Trump’s executive order “Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation” halted all new rulemaking by mandating the repeal of ten regulations before issuing any new one. Moves are also underway to weaken the “general duty clause,” OSHA’s principal enforcement tool and the statutory foundation of its existing rules. Likewise, a stricter rule limiting the exposure of miners to cancer causing silica has been paused.

How Keeling will implement “technology and predictive analytics” remains unclear. Artificial intelligence could be a valuable tool, but only with comprehensive and accurate data. OSHA under Keeling is widely expected to scrap requirements that employers report injury and illness data through the agency’s Injury Tracking Application (ITA). Combined with the dismantling of data collection by NIOSH, CSB, and BLS, the use of “predictive analytics” will yield a distorted and incomplete picture, serving primarily to conceal workplace dangers rather than expose them.

The confirmation of Keeling and Palmer—both longtime servants of corporate America—under conditions of mass workplace deaths, growing deregulation, and an ongoing shutdown underscores the contempt of both capitalist parties for the lives and safety of workers. The defense of the most basic protections on the job cannot be entrusted to the agencies of the capitalist state but must be organized independently by the working class itself through rank-and-file committees and the fight for socialism.



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