

US Department of Labor reports 5,070 US workers killed on the job in 2024

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The US Department of Labor's latest annual report on worker deaths found 5,070 preventable workplace fatalities in 2024. The Trump administration's continued dismantling of already underfunded workplace safety agencies will add to the toll of workers' lives and limbs sacrificed for corporate profit.

A recent article in *DCReport* by Jordan Barab, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor under Obama, criticizes the administration's proposed FY 2026 budget for federal worker safety agencies. Barab notes, "The job safety budget is just \$3.68 per worker," adding, "If budgets are the monetary expression of an organization's values, Trump's message to workers is: Drop dead."

But policies of both the Republican and Democratic parties have reduced regulatory oversight and worker protections, diminishing workers' health and safety in the name of austerity.

The proposed cuts include:

- An 8 percent overall reduction to OSHA (from FY 2025 levels)
- A 12.3 percent staffing decline (223 positions), primarily through attrition
- A nearly 10 percent cut to federal enforcement, resulting in an estimated 30 percent drop in inspections. OSHA would conduct about 25,000 inspections—less than half the Reagan-era average
- Elimination of the Chemical Safety Board and a 10 percent cut to the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), along with significant reductions to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

Friedrich Engels identified the roots of this preventable suffering in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845): the "premature death" of workers arises not from accident, but from the social organization of production under capitalism.

Investigations by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and reporting by

the *World Socialist Web Site* demonstrate that workplace deaths are not isolated tragedies. They are the political and economic outcome of a system that places profit above life, reinforced by corporate-backed unions and political institutions.

Official figures significantly understate the true scale of the crisis. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports thousands of traumatic fatalities annually, but deaths from occupational disease multiply that toll many times over. Behind the statistics are cost-cutting, regulatory rollbacks, production speedups and the suppression of safety concerns.

Across industries, the same conditions recur: understaffing, intensified production, bypassed safety systems, inadequate emergency response, and the complicity of union officials and regulators.

The death of 63-year-old Stellantis machine repairman Ronald Adams Sr. at the Dundee Engine Complex illustrates this pattern. Investigations revealed routine bypassing of lockout/tagout procedures and unanswered questions about how an overhead gantry crushed Adams while he was servicing equipment.

The silence that followed from management, the UAW and government agencies was typical. The union's role in quickly restoring production and accepting unsafe conditions reflected its integration into corporate management.

At the US Postal Service, a series of deaths—including maintenance mechanic Nick Acker, mail handler Russell Scruggs Jr. and veteran worker Lucy Diaz—exposed the consequences of short staffing, inadequate medical response, and weakened safety enforcement.

Investigations pointed to disabled safety features, ignored lockout/tagout procedures and delayed emergency response. Union officials deferred to management-led inquiries that minimized responsibility.

The US Steel Clairton Coke Works explosion in

Pennsylvania, which killed Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee, was likewise preventable. Investigations pointed to aging infrastructure, chronic maintenance failures and ignored worker warnings—conditions driven by cost-cutting and tolerated by pro-management union structures.

An October explosion at Accurate Energetic Systems' Tennessee munitions plant that killed 16 workers revealed long-standing safety violations and regulatory neglect. The incident quickly faded from media coverage.

The November 4, 2025 crash of a UPS MD-11 cargo jet, caused by engine pylon failure, killed 14 people and exposed aging equipment, inadequate maintenance, regulatory failure and corporate resistance to oversight.

These incidents reflect a broader pattern. Deteriorating conditions have produced deaths and serious injuries across manufacturing, logistics and transportation, driven by cost-cutting, speedup, automation pressures and weakened enforcement.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, workplace deaths were rising. A 2019 BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) report recorded more than 5,300 fatalities. The real toll is far higher when occupational disease and long-term health effects are included. The AFL-CIO estimates that 135,000 workers died from occupational illness in 2023.

The role of the trade union bureaucracies and state agencies

Trade union bureaucracies play a central role in suppressing workers' safety concerns. The UAW's conduct following the 2023 contract struggle—its limited "stand-up" strike and eventual concessions—helped pave the way for staffing cuts, speedup and rising injury rates.

Postal unions have similarly deferred to management and OSHA investigations rather than conducting independent inquiries, resulting in delays, evidence loss and cover-ups.

Underfunded and politically constrained agencies often fail to act decisively. Michigan's MIOSHA has delayed investigations into high-profile deaths such as that of Ronald Adams Sr., while a weakened federal OSHA provides minimal oversight, allowing companies to shape the narrative after fatal incidents. This reflects decades of bipartisan efforts to roll back regulatory protections.

The IWA-RFC (International Workers Alliance of Rank-

and-File Committees) calls for workers to organize independently and establish democratic rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace.

Such committees can conduct independent investigations and preserve evidence—maintenance records, lockout/tagout logs, grievances, witness statements and photographs—before it is altered or removed.

They also restore workers' authority over safety, including the right to halt unsafe operations, demand trained medical staff and emergency equipment and enforce proper safety procedures.

By coordinating across workplaces and countries, rank-and-file committees can break isolation, build solidarity and counter efforts to divide workers.

Protecting workers' lives cannot be reduced to technical reforms alone. Workplace deaths reflect a broader crisis marked by automation-driven intensification, privatization, austerity and deregulation—policies that prioritize profit over human life.

The fight for safety must be linked to a broader political struggle against the system that produces these conditions. Rank-and-file committees are the foundation of this movement—democratic, international and independent.

Workers should take the following steps:

- Convene workplace meetings to elect rank-and-file safety committees
- Collect and preserve evidence, including maintenance records and witness testimony
- Demand immediate safety measures, including medical staffing, emergency access and strict lockout/tagout enforcement
- Publicize findings through independent channels and worker networks
- Coordinate regionally and internationally through the IWA-RFC

Workers must refuse to remain silent. By organizing independently and asserting control over workplace conditions, they can transform workplaces from sites of injury and death into institutions that protect life and meet human needs. The struggle against workplace fatalities is inseparable from the broader fight for international socialism.



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