

# Amid massive government-employer assault on workplace safety, US unions sow complacency on Workers Memorial Day

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The observance of Workers Memorial Day 2026 took place amid an escalating assault on workplace safety in the United States of breathtaking scope. Trump has vastly accelerated the dismantling of already inadequate safety regulations and enforcement mechanisms.

According to “Death on the Job,” the annual report issued by the AFL-CIO in conjunction with Workers Memorial Day, based on 2024 figures, an estimated 380 workers die each day from illness and traumatic injury.

The report notes that over the past year, job fatality rates increased in several sectors, including leisure and hospitality (from 2.3 to 2.4 deaths per 100,000 workers) and government (from 1.8 to 2.0). Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting remain the most dangerous industries (20.9 per 100,000), followed by mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (13.8 per 100,000).

At the same time, staffing at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has fallen to historic lows, with only five inspectors per 1 million workers. The fatality rate for young workers has nearly doubled since 2020. Environmental rules are being repealed wholesale, including limits on the emission of toxic chemicals, greenhouse gases and other pollutants.

Despite these conditions, the American trade union bureaucracy marked the day with largely boilerplate statements that neither accept responsibility for worsening conditions nor propose meaningful initiatives to defend workers’ lives, beyond appeals to employers, lobbying in Washington and electoral activity.

The AFL-CIO stated that its officials “will be in the streets and at worksites to peacefully engage our co-workers and neighbors on the issues at stake in the next election so we can ensure that everyone can vote and every vote is counted.” This only underscores the union bureaucracy’s efforts to subordinate workers’ lives to the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and corporate America no less than the Republicans.

Similarly, the American Postal Workers Union encouraged members to participate in symbolic actions such as moments of silence, candlelight vigils and AFL-CIO events.

Meanwhile, the past year has seen major workplace tragedies, including fires and explosions that have traumatized entire communities. These include deadly explosions at US Steel’s Clairton Works in Pennsylvania, a fireworks factory in Esparto, California, a munitions plant in Tennessee and the crash of a UPS

cargo jet in Louisville, Kentucky.

Recent deaths include:

- The death of 64-year-old autoworker Greg Knopf on March 16, 2026, at the Ford Sharonville Transmission Plant in Ohio, when a press machine activated during maintenance.
- Two workers killed on April 23 at a chemical facility in Institute, West Virginia, with dozens more injured.
- The death of April Flores following a forklift accident on April 4 at an H-E-B warehouse in San Antonio, Texas.
- A 53-year-old worker crushed by an excavator on February 6 at RJ Industrial Recycling in Flint, Michigan.
- The November 8, 2025 death of maintenance mechanic Nick Acker at a Detroit mail facility, where safety features were reportedly disabled, followed by the death of Russell Scruggs Jr. days later in Georgia.

It has also been more than one year since the death of Stellantis Dundee Engine worker Ronald Adams Sr., who was killed on April 7, 2025, when a gantry crane activated during repairs. Stellantis has not been held accountable, and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration has released no findings. The only detailed investigation was conducted by rank-and-file workers associated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Globally, the International Labour Organization estimates that 2.93 million workers die annually from work-related causes, including up to 380,500 from workplace injuries.

Recent international disasters underscore the global nature of the crisis. In March, an explosion and fire at a South Korean auto parts plant killed 14 workers and injured 60. In October of last year, industrial catastrophes within days of each other took place at the Tennessee munitions plant and textile sweatshop in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Each claimed at least 16 lives.

These deaths and injuries are not mere “accidents.” They are the inevitable product of a capitalist system that subordinates considerations of health, safety and societal well-being to the mad drive for profit. The official trade unions and state regulatory bodies that are supposed to protect workers, in fact, seek to cover up unsafe conditions and deflect worker anger to prevent any challenge to the interests of Wall Street.

The lack of seriousness with which the American labor bureaucracy views the question of workplace safety was perhaps

best highlighted by the short shrift paid by UAW President Shawn Fain, who posted a short statement on X on the occasion of Workers Memorial Day. Following a year of fires, explosions and workplace carnage, the only actual incident he referenced was the recent death of Ford worker Gregg Knopf. He said nothing about the continued stonewalling and cover-up by MIOSHA and Stellantis of the circumstances of the death of Dundee Engine worker Ronald Adams Sr.

The reason for this is clear. The UAW is part and parcel of the cover-up of Adams' death. Last year, the UAW bureaucracy used the occasion of Workers Memorial Day to issue a joint video with Stellantis executives praising their joint efforts to protect workers' lives. This insulting video, which made no mention of Adams, was released the same day as the 63-year-old skilled tradesman was buried in Detroit.

Far from fighting for strengthening safety, the UAW actively collaborates with management to cover up safety violations and to ensure that management is not held accountable when deaths and injuries occur. This is because the union apparatus is joined at the hip with Stellantis and other automakers through the UAW-Stellantis safety committees and a host of other similar corporatist programs that essentially funnel company cash into UAW coffers.

The official UAW Health and Safety Department provides cushy, largely no-show jobs for UAW officials and hangers-on, including junkets to the union's luxurious Black Lake resort in northern Michigan.

Fain complained that labor laws are "weak," blandly noting that "the job safety laws in this country are not as protective of the working class as they should be" and pointed to the attempts of Trump to further dismantle OSHA, such as weakening the general duty clause legally requiring employers to maintain a workplace free of hazards.

The statement vastly understates the scope of the attack on worker safety. Since taking office Trump has initiated a frontal assault on safety protections. Workplace inspections fell by 20 percent in the first six months of 2025 compared to the prior year. Trump's proposals would slash OSHA funding by 8 percent, eliminate 223 staff positions—primarily compliance officers—and project a 30 percent reduction in inspections.

The lack of enforcement undermines the impact of the laws that are on the books. Penalties even for violations leading to deaths are derisory and legal enforcement through inspections and audits is little to nonexistent. Further, injuries are chronically underreported by employers who frequently withhold information to avoid citations.

Even the actual tracking of official statistics is undermined by the patchwork of state, federal and local oversight and reporting in the US, largely the product of corporate lobbying. While the federal OSHA implemented a Severe Injury Dashboard in 2024, which compiles all the reports from 2015 to the present, there are major limitations. The data only covers just over half the US population, which works in the 28 states covered by federal OSHA programs. Injuries to workers in the 22 "state plan" states, which administer the OSHA program at the state government level, do not appear in the data, unless covered by federal OSHA, like United States Postal Service workers. Federal OSHA does not

cover state and municipal workers, so those workers are not represented in the data.

After reporting that the UAW has filed various lawsuits in opposition to rule changes, Fain offers this advice to workers on how to protect themselves: "One route would be to lobby your Local, State, and Federal elected officials to author, co-sign, or support legislation that would protect a worker's right to a safe workplace." He continues with the cynical suggestion, "You can also demand stronger contract language at your respective worksites."

While the unions promote the election of a Democratic House and Senate majority in the 2026 mid-term elections, in reality, the limited gains in health and safety codified in the establishment of OSHA in 1971 have been steadily eroded under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, leaving only a shell.

The basic social rights of the working class, such as workplace safety, can only be defended and advanced through the independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the parties of the ruling class and their defenders in the trade union bureaucracy. Over the past year, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has taken the initiative in defense of workers' safety by conducting independent investigations into the deaths of Ronald Adams Sr. and postal workers Nick Acker and Russell Scruggs Jr.

The IWA-RFC calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees in every factory, warehouse and workplace to counterpose the will of shop-floor workers to the dictates of management and the union apparatus. This includes fighting for workers' control over line speed, safety conditions and production, enforced through collective strike action against any unsafe conditions.

The fight for health and safety is bound up with the fight to put an end to a global social system based on the exploitation of wage labor for private profit. This requires the building of a socialist and internationalist leadership in the working class.



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