

Workers on the job amid deadly US heat wave exposes government and corporate indifference

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Tell us what conditions are like at your workplace during the heatwave by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

A continuing massive heat wave across the central and eastern United States has placed more than 185 million people under heat alerts, disrupted public events and strained the power grid, while workers in factories, rail yards, postal facilities, warehouses and construction sites continue to labor in dangerous conditions.

Reuters reported Friday that heat indexes could reach as high as 115 degrees Fahrenheit in parts of the US. Trump's so-called 'Great American State Fair' event in Washington D.C.'s National Mall was temporarily closed after temperatures reached 101 degrees. Philadelphia canceled its Salute to Independence Parade after tying a temperature record set in 1901.

The heat wave is part of a broader climate shift driven by fossil-fuel emissions. The Fifth National Climate Assessment states that across the United States, the frequency, intensity and duration of extreme heat have increased, with people in every region experiencing warming temperatures and longer-lasting heat waves. The Environmental Protection Agency likewise notes that US heat waves have already become hotter, more frequent, larger and longer-lasting in recent decades.

These changes are already visible in the country's major cities. Climate Central found that summer temperatures rose in 97 percent of 243 major US cities between 1970 and 2025, and that nearly every city analyzed now experiences more hotter-than-normal summer days than in the early 1970s, by 22 additional days on average.

This demonstrates the urgent necessity for measures both to halt climate change and to protect the population from the consequences already unfolding. Instead,

nothing remotely adequate has been done. Governments have allowed the climate crisis to deepen while leaving workers and the poor to face its consequences through emergency advisories, temporary shelters, voluntary workplace guidance and underfunded public services.

The death toll from the current US heat wave has not yet been fully established, and official figures often lag behind the reality by weeks or months. But the danger is clear. In Europe, Reuters reported Friday that at least 3,700 excess deaths were recorded during the recent heat wave in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, including 2,025 in France alone. Health authorities warned that the toll may rise as more complete data becomes available.

Reports from workers show that dangerous conditions are widespread across industries. "I can't take the heat like I used to," a CSX railroad worker told the WSW. "The young guys can withstand it better. The company used to get us electrolyte drinks, and when it would get like tomorrow the manager would sometimes bring out fruit midday. All that is no more."

He said management has recently complained about workers leaving trucks idling because of high fuel prices. "We don't care," he said. "We told them we're not shutting them off. There needs to be a place for guys to escape the heat. The last thing you want to do with someone overheated is put them in a hot truck and wait for the air conditioner to cool off. They need to get in a cool area immediately."

The same worker contrasted these conditions with the treatment of railroad executives. "Yesterday they brought out the fancy business train and had the CEO of CSX and the Secretary of Transportation get on it at Alexandria station [in the Washington, DC area]," he said.

A factory worker at a Missouri product manufacturing plant described regular heat-related collapses near a

boiling-water pressure test area. “People drop and get put in ambulances on the daily,” the worker said. “Specifically around the water bath, where they do a pressure test with boiling water on the cans. Around summer time, you will see ambulances there. They mostly put women around there. At least in the hot times. Any other time it’s just a boring job that is hot. A can that fails, you put on a thick glove and fish it out. But combined with this oppressive heat, the humidity and heat drops people regularly.”

The union bureaucracy is helping management continue to operate facilities in sweltering, dangerous heat. At a General Motors facility, screenshots of internal Q&As with local United Auto Workers officials show workers asking whether they should file OSHA complaints over heat in the plant. In one post, dated July 2 and titled “any merit whining to OSHA over temperatures,” a worker wrote: “There [are] always problems with people getting dizzy, weak, and while I hesitate to believe rumors the ones stating we have people fainting due to heat seem reasonable given the past couple days.”

The response from a local official was: “the company meets all of the OSHA requirements, i spoke with the lead safety rep yesterday and there have been no medical runs for heat exhaustion.”

The same conditions exist in other workplaces. WSB-TV reported Thursday that extreme heat is making work especially difficult at the Smyrna, Georgia post office, where the facility has been facing air conditioning problems. Customers described the building as “really hot,” and an employee, speaking anonymously for fear of retaliation, called the conditions unbearable. USPS said work was being performed on the HVAC system and that portable air conditioners and cooling fans had been placed throughout the facility.

The federal government has no completed heat-specific workplace standard. OSHA’s own standards page says employers are currently covered by the General Duty Clause, related standards and state standards where applicable. This still leaves workers dependent on after-the-fact enforcement rather than a clear binding national heat rule.

Such a rule was first proposed more than a half century ago, when the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) issued criteria for a recommended occupational heat standard in 1972. OSHA appointed a heat stress advisory committee in 1973, which recommended a standard the following year. Yet OSHA did not begin its current rulemaking until October 2021,

did not publish a proposed rule until August 2024, and still has not finalized it. OSHA’s public hearing ended in July 2025, and the post-hearing comment period closed in October 2025. The rule still has not taken effect.

Local governments have responded to the heat wave by opening cooling centers, extending pool hours, issuing alerts and dispatching outreach teams. In New York City, officials announced additional cooling centers, extended outdoor pool hours, mobile cooling vans, cooling stations for outdoor workers, LinkNYC directions to nearby cooling centers and outreach to more than 75,000 businesses.

These measures leave the most basic question unanswered: whether people can actually cool their homes, leave them safely, or stop working in dangerous conditions. New York Focus reported that the state’s HEAP Cooling Assistance Benefit, which provides air conditioners or fans to eligible low-income households, ran out of money in the first week of June, before summer officially began. The program is expected to spend about \$15 million on cooling assistance this fiscal year, compared with nearly \$300 million for heating assistance, and the number of households expected to receive cooling aid has fallen from more than 23,000 in 2024 to 18,500 this year.

The heat wave exposes a social order in which every basic protection—cool homes, safe workplaces, reliable power, medical care, functioning public infrastructure—is subordinated to corporate profit and government austerity. Workers cannot wait for employers, union officials or federal regulators who have delayed for decades. The urgent measures needed to protect life must be imposed by workers themselves, through independent organization in every workplace.



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