

“He was a great lead and a great friend”: Montreal airport worker denounces systematic safety violations following Oscar Robayo’s death

A WSWS reporting team
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Are you an airline or airport worker? If you have additional information on the conditions that contributed to the death of Oscar Robayo and threaten the safety of other workers fill out the form at the end of this article.

Oscar Robayo, a 39-year-old ground handling worker, was crushed to death during a routine pushback operation at Montreal-Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport (YUL) Monday night. The horrific episode, which dozens of passengers on board the aircraft witnessed first-hand via their seat monitors, is the result of systematic government deregulation and corporate profiteering across Canada’s airports.

A Montreal Airport worker, who worked alongside Robayo, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak out about the fatal incident. He was especially incensed by the attempts of Samsic Assistance, Robayo’s employer and a globally operating provider of “business services,” to place the blame on the victim by alleging that Robayo “tripped.”

The worker insisted that Robayo should never have been standing so close to the plane but was forced to do so because of the violation of safety procedures by the company, a practice that has become routine. As the worker explained, while referring to photos:

This is the front of the plane; we call this the nose gear. This is the part of the plane involved in the incident. And that bar is the tow bar for the wheel. The person was standing right next to the nose gear.

The person in that position handles communication with the pilot. In our hierarchy, you have the Agent, the Lead, the Supervisor, and the Duty Manager. The Agent’s job is to listen to the Lead, who assigns positions to every employee. In this case, we had two wing-walkers—one on the left wing and one on the right. We have someone pushing the plane, which is usually the Lead.

Then we have someone we call “Ops.” His job is to communicate with the pilot. Some airlines specify that they want a specific Ops person; others allow anyone qualified

to do it. In this case, it was my colleague, Oscar. Oscar was a certified headset operator because he was normally a Lead. He handles the communication during the pushback so the pilot knows where to park the plane and how to align it so the plane is facing the correct direction for departure. He was well-trained for that.

Ground crew must maintain communication with aircraft pilots at all times during a pushback, which is done via a cable connection. The worker continued:

In this incident, the issue involved the cables. Normally, you have the headset and a short cable, and you have an extension cable. If you don’t have the extension cable, you have to stand very close to the nose gear.

Depending on the aircraft model, it’s on the side, straight ahead, or above, but it’s always around the front wheel. There is a safety pin there that allows us to control the wheels—meaning we can steer the nose wheels left or right so the pilot doesn’t have to. The person needs to stay there, but at a safe distance from the wheel. I checked the memos from Samsic; they never specify exactly what that “safe distance” is.

Ground crews are routinely forced to risk significant injury and death due to the lack of extension cables. The worker stated:

For this incident, Oscar didn’t have the extension cable, so he had to be very, very close to the airplane. The headset is basically the headphones that allow him to ask the pilot, “Where would you like me to position you?” Normally, the person on the headset stands on the right side, far from the wheel. That’s why you have the extension cable—so you can stand further away.

If you don't have an extension, we have a proper procedure for that. The procedure says you inform the pilot that you don't have the proper linked headset and that you cannot walk next to the plane. You stay in the pushback tractor until the push is done. You ask the pilot where he wants to be positioned.

In the airport, there are numbered lines on the ground—one, two, three, four. The pilot will say, "Push me back to line four."

The person on the headset then tells the pushback driver, "The pilot said take him to number four." If the correct cable isn't available, the headset operator tells the pilot: "Communication will be cut until we reach line number four."

While having this conversation, the airplane is stationary. The safety lights under the plane are not flashing because the plane isn't in motion. He stands next to the wheel only while the plane is stationary to establish the plan. He tells the pilot, "The right link cable is not available. Tell me which line you want me to stop at. When we reach that line, I will reconnect the headset and talk you through the procedure for starting the engines and removing the pins."

We have a ground checklist. Once the plane reaches the line, the headset operator reconnects and says, "I'm back. Let's start the procedure of disconnecting everything." We disconnect the safety pin that controls the wheels and remove the tow bar. Then they start the engines: "Start engine number one... start engine two. Once everything is good, we unplug the headset, close the port, and show the pilot that the pin and tow bar are off."

Commenting on further procedural failings that occurred Monday, the worker noted:

During the push, there are two wing-walkers (one on each side), the communication person, and the pushback driver. The wing-walkers' job is to make an "X" with their arms to stop the operation immediately if they see anything wrong. In this incident, that procedure was not followed. Maybe it was a lack of training.

Look at how the pushback tractor is positioned. The face of the tractor is toward the plane to make it easier to pull out. However, this flight was at a "remote port"—meaning there is no gate or jet bridge. There is no built-in power or AC. It's just an open area with equipment. At a normal gate, the driver just pushes the plane back. But at a remote gate, you often have to reverse or move back and forth to align the plane correctly...

The headset cable was short, so the operator had to be close. Oscar likely told the team he needed the longer cable. The supervisor supposedly went to get it. But as I know Samsic, they cut a lot of corners. They pressure you. They'll say, "Just do it, finish it, we want to go home." They probably pressured him to use the shorter cable.

The supervisor is supposed to oversee three different flights, watching landings and departures. I don't believe he was there during this. If the pushback started, it means approval was given. But it shouldn't have started without the proper equipment. As I said, the procedure is: stop the move, get the information from the pilot, transmit it to the driver, and either ride in the tractor or walk to the spot after the plane has moved. That didn't happen.

Beyond the missing extension cables, broken cameras and violation of safety procedures by the employer evidenced in Robayo's death, workers report being forced to use belt loaders with broken safety rails and transport containers with missing wheels or safety pins. Due to staffing shortages, Samsic frequently pressures uncertified employees to drive vehicles on the tarmac—a violation of airport regulations that carries a 15-day suspension for the driver, but notably, no penalty for the company employing them. Our reporters also heard reports of workers being forced to operate tractors with failing brakes while towing thousands of pounds of cargo, creating a constant risk of lethal collisions.

He added on working conditions:

You aren't unionized until after three months. Before that, they can fire you for any reason. Even after you are in the union, the company finds ways around it. If you report something, they might change your hours to something you hate, or they'll dig up a minor mistake from the past—like accidentally doing minor damage on a plane—and use it as a reason to fire you.

As for the union, I've never seen a rep coming around asking about safety. The employees have a number to text them, but that's it. The offices are usually empty.

In conclusion, the worker paid tribute to Oscar Robayo:

I worked with him a lot on Porter flights, wide body planes and in the baggage room. He was a Lead for about two years. He was a very smart guy—organized, calm and never reckless. He always asked for permission and reported everything. He was very relaxed, friendly and good under pressure. He was a great lead and a great friend.



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