Ramp worker Oscar Robayo crushed to death in workplace accident involving passenger jet at Montréal Trudeau Airport

A WSWS reporting team
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Oscar Robayo, a 39-year-old ground handling worker, was killed while performing a routine pushback operation at Montréal-Trudeau International Airport (YUL) Monday night. His death is the tragic product of systematic deregulation of airport operations by the federal government and rampant profiteering throughout the air travel sector.

Robayo, a ramp agent employed by the contracted ground handling firm Samsic Assistance Canada, was crushed to death by the nose gear of a reversing French Bee Airbus A350-900, a massive wide-body jet with a maximum takeoff weight of 280 metric tons. Making the incident even more horrific was the fact that the passenger plane was full during the accident, and many passengers saw it on their monitors via the aircraft's undercarriage camera.

A worker who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* described a disastrous combination of cutting corners, broken equipment and a general high-pressure working environment overseen by the globally operating subcontractor Samsic that led to Robayo's death. The "pushback" procedure involves a tractor manoeuvring an aircraft into position at its port prior to departure.

While modern pushback tractors are equipped with rear-view cameras to mitigate blind spots, the worker said that cameras on Samsic's equipment are frequently broken or left deactivated.

Under pressure from management to quickly move forward the delayed flight, the driver lacking the standard safety gear had to physically look back while reversing, workers told the WSWS, and in the process reportedly lost sight of the area in front of the vehicle. Robayo--positioned in a blind spot due to the lack of an extension cable to allow him to communicate with the aircraft's pilot from a safe distance and facing the aircraft engines--was run over. The tractor driver reportedly did not realize the plane had hit a human being until he felt the aircraft's tire hit a "bump."

The worker said that basic procedures to perform the pushback process safely were not followed by Samsic. Ground crew are required to maintain communication with the pilot during the pushback procedure, necessitating the use of either an extended or short cable. The worker explained,

> 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 Transportation Safety Board of Canada and Quebec's provincial CNESST have launched investigations into Robayo's death.

Samsic Assistance Canada, which is part of a French-based global conglomerate providing "business services" that employs well over 100,000 people in 27 countries, has begun a campaign of gaslighting and cover up to insulate itself from liability. Internal accounts indicate that management attempted to frame the death as a medical episode, suggesting to investigators that Robayo suffered from "low blood sugar" or "high blood pressure," causing him to faint or trip.

The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), the union Robayo belonged to, issued customary condolences about the "tragic accident," without any mention of the cost-cutting and other measures that endanger workers' lives. The statement made no suggestion that the union would conduct its own investigation, saying only that it wished all those affected "strength and comfort as they navigate this difficult time."

Government deregulation facilitates corporate profiteering at the expense of airline and airport workers

Monday's tragedy was an inevitable consequence of sustained and systematic pressures placed upon ground crews in order to cut costs and increase profits. While the Canadian government formally owns the country's large international airports, including in Montreal, it leases them to airport operators, who in turn subcontract airport operations, like ground handling work, to a wide range of private providers who compete for contracts in a ruthless race to the bottom in wages, conditions and safety provisions.

The flight in question, BF5761 bound for Paris Orly in France, was operating under immense schedule compression. The aircraft had been stranded in Montreal over the preceding weekend due to unresolved technical issues, and the delayed pushback did not commence until approximately 7:30 p.m. EDT, an hour and a half past its revised departure time.

In the highly leveraged airline industry, particularly among low-cost carriers like French Bee, aircraft utilization rates are a key driver of profitability. Especially when operations are delayed, the margin for error quickly dwindles as operators are pressured to recover lost time by cutting corners on safety.

Robayo's employer, Samsic Assistance Canada, was installed following a ruthless "contract flip" in early 2023. Contract flips are politically managed and financially engineered events designed to slash labor costs whereby airports issue licenses to new contractors to provide specific services in a competitive bidding process that usually ensures the victory of the lowest bidder. They introduce profound instability by dissolving established safety hierarchies and stripping away institutional memory regarding specific operational hazards.

The IAM admitted that the period following the 2023 flip was "devastating." Yet the union bureaucracy moved quickly to stabilize the environment for the company, pushing through a new collective agreement in November 2024. At the time, the IAM lauded this development as a "victorious turn of events."

Oscar Robayo was hired shortly after in March 2025.

The fact of the matter is that the "contract flip," sanctioned by the IAM's collective agreement with Samsic about a year-and-a-half later, is but one example of a much broader process across airports in Canada and the United States. Subcontracting and the repeated changing of hands of contracts to perform various airport operations and support services are the legal framework for a sustained onslaught on workers' rights and conditions to boost corporate profits.

The comments of Samsic Assistance Canada president Stefano Sciotti following the award of a licence to his company to begin operations at Montreal airport for the first time in 2023 make this point clear.

Sciotti enthused that the company only began its North American operations following 2020, presumably by taking advantage of the mass layoffs in the air travel sector during the COVID-19 pandemic to rehire jobless workers on miserable terms.

"Samsic Assistance's revenue in 2022 has been 3 times the revenue in 2021, and an additional increase by 100 percent is planned to take place in 2023. North America will be representing about 20 percent of Samsic Assistance revenues in 2023," he said.

The process allowing private investors to cash in with massive profits and payouts at the expense of airport workers and the entire travelling public has been upheld by successive federal governments.

In 2021, the Liberal government carried out a reform to the Canada Labour Code (CLC) which entrenched competitive tendering for airport services. The Liberals changed section 47.3 of the CLC to nominally guarantee workers equal renumeration from a successor company after a contract changes hands from another provider. However, the reform to the CLC did not require new operators to respect workers' seniority rights, vacation provisions, job classifications and other collective bargaining rights.

In other words, the government touted by the unions in the Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor as a "worker-friendly" and "progressive" government, gave subcontractors the latitude to lay off higher seniority workers with better pay and conditions, or simply rehire them as "new hires" under different job titles on worse terms and lower pay.

Prime Minister Mark Carney's Liberals are in the process of preparing a further attack on air travel industry workers with plans to privatize Canada's major airports outright. First announced as a proposal in last November's federal budget, the government's spring economic update declared that it is "assessing opportunities to unlock the full value of airports in support of investments in Canada's long-term growth, including through alternative models of ownership."

Carney asserted in a speech that the aim would be to free up "the capital that is tied up in those airports" so that it "can be redeployed potentially in other ventures that will grow our economy, grow the Quebec economy, grow the Canadian economy."

Rank-and-file workers must take control of workplace safety and end the airline industry's subordination to capitalist profit

Every worker should know that when Carney talks about "growing the economy," the former central banker means boosting the accounts and stock portfolios of Canada's financial oligarchy and expanding the country's war and military-related industries.

His government is committed to spending 5 percent of the GDP on war and related infrastructure by 2035 as part of Ottawa's preparations to aggressively participate in a rapidly escalating global war involving the major powers for control over resources, cheap labour and markets.

Under these conditions, the tasks of revealing what really caused Oscar Robayo's death and putting an end to these conditions can only be addressed by the independent active intervention of workers themselves.

The official narrative is already aiming to pin the blame on Robayo himself, suggesting that he simply "tripped." Nor was he the victim of what IAM spokesperson Peter Tsoukalas called "just a tragic accident."

Robayo's death is certainly tragic, above all for those who knew him personally. But the conditions at Montreal airport and across the airline industry created by governments committed to business deregulation and ruthless attacks on worker rights mean that it is only a matter of time before another victim's name is added to the list of workplace deaths.

Oscar Robayo's death is part of a continuous wave of killings inflicted upon airport and aviation workers by the capitalist profit system.

A far from exhaustive list underlining the global character of this process includes:

• The January 2006 death of 64-year-old mechanic Donald Gene Buchanan, who was ingested by the engine of a Continental Airlines Boeing 737 at El Paso International Airport during a maintenance engine run-up.

• In December 2015, Air India technician Ravi Subramanian was pulled into the engine of an Airbus A319 during pushback at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji airport, after what officials described as a fatal communication breakdown between ground crew and the cockpit.

• In late 2022, an Envoy Air E175 ingested and killed a Piedmont Airlines ramp worker in Alabama.

• On March 22, 2024, an Air Canada Express Bombardier CRJ900LR collided with a fire truck in Queens, NY, killing both pilots.

• And in January 2026, 28-year-old John Brandon Lacayanga, a worker for the Dubai National Air Travel Agency (dnata), was found dead beneath the cargo pallet he had been towing at San Francisco International Airport. His parents' wrongful-death lawsuit alleges he was assigned inadequate and unsafe equipment and that airport roadways were poorly maintained.

The outpouring of anger among workers at YUL—evidenced by a wave of sick days and refusals to work overtime following Robayo's death—reflects a growing sentiment of opposition among workers. But this anger must now find conscious organized expression.

The only way to prevent further deaths is if safety measures are seized from the hands of corporate boards and their "partners" in the trade union bureaucracy and implemented by the workers themselves. Moreover, the principle that air travel and related services must be subordinated to ruthless corporate profiteering must be abolished. Air travel, like all other necessities of modern life, belongs under workers' control as a democratically run utility for all.

This requires the formation of independent rank-and-file safety committees as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees with the unconditional power to halt any flight or maneuver that threatens a worker's life.

According to all reports, Oscar Robayo was a smart, calm and meticulous professional who didn't take shortcuts. He was killed because his employer, backed by the federal government and IAM's stamp of approval for subcontracting, did.