Former Samsic ramp supervisor exposes deadly conditions behind Montreal airport worker Oscar Robayo's death

Our reporter
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Oscar Robayo, a 39-year-old ground handling worker performing a routine pushback operation at Montréal-Trudeau International Airport (YUL), was crushed to death by the front wheel of an Airbus A350-900 on Monday, August 24.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, based on testimony from Oscar's co-workers, Samsic Assistance Canada, the subcontractor employing him, systematically disregarded basic safety procedures. He was forced to perform the pushback without an extension cable, meaning he had to walk close to the plane's nose gear that ultimately crushed him.

We described the incident as "the tragic product of systematic deregulation of airport operations by the federal government and rampant profiteering throughout the air travel sector." The initial report and interview published on the WSWS were followed by a touching tribute in memory of Oscar, who has been consistently described by those who knew him as a kind, caring and reliable co-worker.

A former Samsic employee has come forward to provide further testimony on the death trap workers have confronted at the airport since the subcontractor won a contract for the first time in 2023. He published a powerful video on YouTube denouncing the company's imposition of unsafe equipment and a toxic workplace culture. The whistleblower identified the primary culprit for Robayo's death as a corporate regime that pressured employees to cut corners and disregard safety protocols, while managers stubbornly refused to replace broken equipment.

Chillingly, the former ramp supervisor at Samsic stated in his 15-minute video, "I will tell you exactly what happened because when I read this story, I didn't even need to ask my friends that work at the airport currently or that still work for that company to know what exactly happened. I already knew when I heard the story. I already knew what happened."

The worker went through the transition from ATS to Samsic in 2023 which occurred through a so-called "contract flip." This process, based on competitive tendering facilitated by the Canada Labour Code, allows companies with virtually no experience to underbid established providers by hiring workers on inferior conditions. While ATS was a traditional ground handling contractor, Samsic is a French-based multinational with billions of dollars in revenue and over 100,000 employees in "business services" as diverse as airport services, HR, security and cleaning.

Summing up his experience working with ATS, the worker said, "Now, the thing with ATS was it was a company just like all contracted companies. You're short on equipment. Yes, you know, we might have a lack of belt loaders. We might have a lack of things, but there's one thing that ATS did not lack on, and that was safety…

"Every time we went to go push back a plane, we had to read these cards. That was like a checklist for us before we pushed out the plane to make sure that it was safe, that we had all the necessary equipment to push out this plane safely, you know."

This all changed with Samsic. The worker continued:

> They took over. … But the thing that's crazy is they never focused on safety. They were all about get your plane out on time. Get it out. Get it out. Get it out. And during the beginning stages of Samsic, a lot of us old ATS employees try to fight and implement safety with these cards. You know, hey, let's get a checklist going because the

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previous company used to do this and you know, used to have a checklist before we pushed out these planes. … They told us that it was too expensive to get all the employees cuz Samsic was a big company. It was too expensive to laminate all the cards for the company. Come on. What a joke...

Nothing's more important than safety. Nothing's more important than coming into work, clocking in, and going out the same way that you clocked in. Nothing is more important than that.

Referring to the immediate cause of the accident highlighted by the WSWS's initial report—the absence of a proper extension cable allowing workers to maintain a safe distance from the nose gear—the worker explained, "You walk with the headset without an extension, and you're head-to-head basically with the nose gear. If you trip, if you slip on snow, if you slip on the rain and you fall, you're going to get ran over by that nose gear."

After viewing the video, a WSWS reporter reached out to the worker and obtained the report filed to Canada's Labour Program, a federal agency ostensibly tasked with upholding workplace safety, as far back as May 2024. The report documented many of the same issues raised by current Samsic employees following Oscar's death and paints a picture of an extremely dangerous workplace environment on a daily basis.

Underscoring the type of work environment established by Samsic with the connivance of the federal government and Montreal Airport, the report began with the words, "Hello, I would like to remain anonymous because I do not want to be at risk of losing my job."

The report notified the governmental body responsible for the enforcement of the Canada Labour Code of unsafe equipment, with photos of jerry-rigged tractors, and an exposed electrical cable that nearly caused a fire. The report also alleged that complaints filed by workers to HR were divulged to the deputy manager through a personal relationship, jobs were handed to people in personal relationships with managers without open competition, and managers racially abused workers.

The worker wrote to the government agency, "The equipment at Samsic is deemed unsafe as I have tried to report this to managers but it goes ignored and say they need the equipment and to leave it alone… When you drive some gas tractors, the passenger door has no door handle so they tie a string. And you're supposed to hold it so it don't fly open."

Both the video and report highlight the failure of the government's regulatory bodies to enforce their own laws. "Transport Canada ... allowed these guys to still stay there at the airport. Even with all the safety regulations that these guys broke, they allowed this company to still stay at the airport," said the worker.

As the WSWS will show in further reporting to be published on this question, the deregulation of airports and subcontracting of airport operations are part of a longstanding drive by the capitalist class against the Canadian and global working class since the 1980s and 1990s to boost corporate profits at the expense of working conditions and workers' living standards. The gap between those who live off the profits made on the backs and lives of workers like Oscar Robayo and the workers who risk their lives on a daily basis just to make ends meet is starker than ever.

The information emerging in the wake of last week's tragedy in Montreal demonstrates the urgency of airport workers taking matters into their own hands by establishing rank-and-file committees to oversee workplace safety and put an end to the race to the bottom in working conditions. At Montreal Airport, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers placed their stamp of approval on Samsic's ruthless methods of exploitation when they concluded a collective agreement with the multinational in November 2024, which included a provision that workers only get union protection after three months.

We urge all workers to come forward with information about the conditions that led to Oscar Robayo's death. It is high time to join the fight to build a rank-and-file alternative as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to the corporatist gang-up of the government, corporate executives and union bureaucrats that produces deadly conditions across the air travel industry in Canada, the US and around the world.

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