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# Workers react to death of Montreal Airport ramp worker Oscar Robayo

**Our reporter**
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Thirty-nine-year-old ramp worker Oscar Robayo was killed while performing a routine pushback of a passenger jet at Montreal Trudeau Airport (YUL) on August 24. Testimonies from several workers to the *World Socialist Web Site* show that Oscar was crushed by the landing gear of the plane because his employer, Samsic Assistance Canada, failed to provide him with an extension cable that would have allowed him to stand a safe distance from the aircraft.

The competition between subcontractors providing ground handling and other services at Canada’s airports is ruthless. Highly exploited workers face gruelling schedules to ensure flights leave on time, and dangerous conditions due to broken equipment and the systematic violation of safety procedures.

This system of profit maximization for operators like the multinational Samsic, which employs well over 100,000 people in 27 countries, is overseen by the federal Liberal government. In 2021, the Liberals entrenched the decades-old system of contract flipping, which allows airport operators to sever contracts at will and award a new contract to the lowest bidder, with a cosmetic reform of section 47.3 of the Canada Labour Code.

A Samsic worker in Montreal told the WSWS:

> I would like to say a good 90 percent of our equipment is broken in some way (missing windows, doors, seatbelts), the brakes don’t work, the steering wheels are either rough or too loose and all of our equipment constantly needs charging.

Asked whether he had witnessed accidents on the job like the one that killed Oscar, he responded, “No other accidents during pushbacks, just close calls of the same manner that Oscar passed.” He added,

> Third-party contracting is terrible, we are constantly overworked and in a rush to push planes out. Safety is often ignored and the company tries to cut corners whenever they can. We have been complaining for months and used to joke that it would take someone to die for things to change … working at the airport is only dangerous when SOPs (standard operating procedures) are not followed and they rarely are at YUL with the third-party companies.

Samsic established a presence in Montreal through a 2023 contract flip described by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) union at the time as “devastating” for workplace safety and worker rights. Yet by November 2024, the union struck a collective agreement with Samsic that included a provision exempting new hires from union protections for the first three months of their employment. By August 2025, the IAM was lauding its close working relationship with Samsic management at a “meet and greet” held to celebrate Samsic’s takeover of TSAS, a rival subcontractor at the airport.

Following Oscar’s death, the IAM issued a short message of condolence but raised no safety concerns and proposed no action by workers to put an end to the dangerous conditions they confront on a daily basis.

Asked to comment on the IAM’s role, the Samsic worker said,

> Actually, I haven’t received any official response from IAM—no message, email, memo, nothing. Since I started, they haven’t done anything for us. We only have one union representative, and he’s trying to help us, but not much has changed since we got involved with them.
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> The company has never respected the employees or the union’s responses or their representative who works with us. They don’t follow the collective bargaining agreement, and it seems to me that no one at Samsic understands the agreement because they argue with the representative every week about the rules.

Both the federal Transportation Safety Board and the provincial authorities in Quebec have announced official investigations into Robayo’s death.

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*The solidarity message posted below from A.J., a striking National Steel Car worker from Hamilton, Ontario, draws on his own experience to warn Montreal Airport workers not to expect any justice through these channels. In less than two years, from late 2020 to*

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*2022, three workers died inside the plant due to the company's enforcement of a highly exploitative piecework system, which continues to operate to this day. Not a single company official has ever been held to account. Over 1,200 National Steel Car workers are currently in the fifth week of their strike to demand an end to piecework.*

I would just like to extend my personal condolences on losing your co-worker. When something like that happens, it forces a person to re-evaluate what they are doing to put food on the table and keep the lights on. Once the initial shock wears off, anger over what happened sets in and serious questions tend to get asked. This is natural, because what happened to Oscar was needless. He was doing the basic functions of his job that he'd done a million times before, but was not given the proper equipment to do the job safely.

I'll bet when you have meetings, or any Samsic company announcement after this incident, they claim to put "safety above everything else"...

Let's face the facts here. These are weasel words used to placate workers into doing dangerous things and put their lives on the line for a few extra bucks of profit. Safety rules are there but never enforced. You work with broken-down equipment, properly complain, but things never get fixed in a timely manner. The legal framework for addressing these issues is there, but is never actually utilized as you're told it will be. On and on it goes.

I'm sure you have talked to your immediate co-workers and union reps about this. I'm sure you've been told by your union that the legal system is where the employer will be held to account for Oscar Robayo's death and the accumulated safety issues that led up to his death.

But I can tell you from experience that your union, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), and the legal system they rely on, will not properly address the issue. We had three gruesome deaths occur at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario between September 2020 and June of 2022. In all of the cases, a lack of safety equipment, or the improper use of safety equipment was the root cause. All of that was based on how the company either didn't follow literal Ministry of Labour orders, or flaunted safety rules they themselves said they followed. The root cause of that was very basic ... they didn't want to spend the money on safety equipment. It was better for them to just continue and hope nothing went wrong because nothing had gone wrong up to that point.

Let's put aside the fact that no amount of money can replace a person, or someone's husband, or father. But for essentially killing three people, National Steel Car paid a grand total of $650,000. On some production lines, that's about one day of revenue. Basically, pocket change for the owner, Greg Aziz.

We are members of the United Steelworkers. Our union local (Local 7135) and the larger bureaucracy above it decided during the proceedings to plead with the provincial legislature, and rely on the Westray Mine Law (Bill C-45) that nominally has a provision enabling judges to send business owners to jail for killing a worker if they are convicted. The law sounds great, but is rarely if ever enacted and certainly wasn't in our case. And it won't be in yours.

In the third death at our plant, Quoc Le, the amount of the charge was $240,000 and that was after National Steel Car's lawyers and the Crown cooked up a deal. The Crown prosecutor had the audacity to claim the amount reflected "demonstrated remorse" by National Steel Car!!! Even the presiding judge openly questioned if the amount would actually deter National Steel Car.

This is why you have to start to organize yourselves independently from your own union to effect change. Your union is tied, not only to the system of profit, but to the legal system that assists in protecting the profit of your employer. Unfortunately for you, they have a vested interest in ensuring your employer stays profitable while keeping their dues coming in. This is why they act so powerless when a serious incident occurs because to actually deal with the issue would upset the "apple cart" they also rely on.

This is why we decided to build our rank-and-file committee at National Steel Car and this is why you should also build a rank-and-file committee in your workplace. In this type of instance, you should not put any faith in your union or the legal apparatus your union tells you will save you and justice will be served. What happened at National Steel Car, or what recently happened at Algoma Steel in Sault Ste. Marie, where the company got a wrist-slap fine of $250,000 after pleading guilty to one charge in the death of a 21-year-old worker, tells the story, as well.

These are not "accidents." They are, more or less, industrial murders based on putting profit over the well-being of workers on the job.

It's also important to understand that you are not alone and not really as isolated as you may think you are. We work in a rail car factory in Hamilton. You work in an airport in Montreal. These seem like two completely separate industries that have little to nothing to do with each other. But, clearly, regardless of industry, or language, we face the same day-to-day issues with just coming home at the end of the day with our limbs still intact.

This is another trait of the current organized labour set up. The deliberate siloing of workers in different industries and no real discussion between them on issues of day-to-day life in the workplace, including the all important income/wealth inequality issues. There's a reason for that, too. The union bureaucrats do not want workers talking amongst themselves lest they get the idea they might be able to break away from their grip and form independent organizations for themselves and put our demands front and centre instead of the ones they claim we need.

The working class needs organization, or better, reorganization with an updated form that reflects the international character of production. The old forms no longer work because of a national orientation and their belief that the system of private profit, and the legal framework around it, can be reformed to the workers' benefit. Unfortunately for them, this is a fairy tale. For you, unfortunately, it's a real nightmare you have to come to grips with. Losing your friend and co-worker in such a gruesome fashion is a testament to that.

You're at the very beginning stages of this and things can be confusing. But it's better to start organizing in a rank-and-file committee now, so you can take action independently of the IAM bureaucrats when they betray you, [rather] than after. We can also say that your fight is our fight. In fact, it's the entire working class's fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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