

The Death Toll Behind Corporate America's Record Profits

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Featured image: Ivan Bridgewater (Source: [Facebook / WSWS](#))

On Saturday, December 9, Ivan Bridgewater III, a 41-year-old electrician, was killed in an industrial accident at Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville. The company has denied initial police reports that the skilled worker was electrocuted and the incident is under investigation by Kentucky authorities.

Bridgewater, who lived in nearby Seymour, Indiana, leaves behind his wife of five years, Megan, their two-year-old son and other family members. In a Facebook post Monday, the worker's father, Ivan Bridgewater II, wrote,

"I am preparing to leave in a few hours, to go north from Florida, and bury my son in Seymour, Indiana... He was a kind and gentle soul, and I was very proud of him."

In his first post, the father wrote,

"Parents should never outlive their children. The pain is too great to bear."

The sudden death of a worker in the United States is an all too common occurrence. Little more than a week before, on December 1, 31-year-old contract worker Yesenia Espinoza was struck by a falling 24-inch pipe and killed while working on a construction project at an ExxonMobil refinery in Beaumont, Texas, 84 miles northeast of Houston. Two small children now have no mother. As in so many cases, family and friends have set up a GoFundMe page to pay for funeral expenses and help support the children.

Nearly 5,000 US workers die in workplace accidents every year. In addition, an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 workers die annually from occupational diseases. Taken together, on any given day, 150 workers die in America from hazardous working conditions.

This is the reality behind the dizzying stock market rise, the multi-billion-dollar fortunes of CEOs like Amazon's Jeff Bezos, and the boasts of the Trump administration and the media of a booming economy and "full employment."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) will release its Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries with figures for 2016 later this month. Its most recent report found a total of 4,836 fatal workplace injuries in 2015, up from 4,821 in 2014 and the highest number since 2008.

In addition, the BLS reported, there were nearly 3.7 million non-fatal work-related injuries and illnesses in 2016. These, however, are notoriously underreported. The true toll, according to the AFL-CIO, is estimated at 7.4 million to 11.1 million injuries and illnesses each year.

The highest death tolls in 2015 were in construction (937); transportation and warehousing (765); and agriculture, fishing and forestry (570). Fatalities among immigrant workers rose to 903, the highest number since 2007. The death toll among self-employed contractors was 829, accounting for 17 percent of all workplace fatalities. Among workers 65 and older, increasingly forced by economic conditions to labor past traditional retirement age, the toll was 650.

These bare indices of industrial carnage are only a pale reflection of the miserable conditions facing workers in the final years of the Obama administration.

These figures do not include deaths resulting from addiction to pain-killing medicines, largely due to workplace injuries, lack of access to treatment, lack of health insurance and the anxiety and depression caused by job loss and low wages.

A recent study by the *Akron Beacon Journal* on the overdose deaths of 12,723 Ohioans between 2010 and 2016 noted:

“Multiple studies in the past 60 years have linked jobs that require little education and lots of physical labor to shorter life spans. But in Ohio over the past seven years, it’s wanting relief from their agony—often by seeking or sharing pain pills—that has likely sent hundreds of laborers to an early grave.”

The occupations with the highest levels of opioid deaths, the newspaper reported, were construction and manufacturing, where employment fell 11 percent and 36 percent, respectively, between 2000 and 2015, and wages plummeted 16 percent between 2006 and 2010.

The tragic death on October 20 of 21-year-old Jacoby Hennings, a temporary part-time employee at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping plant just outside of Detroit, has brought to light the growing phenomenon of workplace suicides, particularly in the auto industry, with its rising proportion of temporary employees who work for half the wages of senior full-time workers and are without any job protection.

The trade unions are fully complicit in the spread of such barbaric working conditions. Any worker in a United Auto Workers (UAW) plant will tell you that the union reps function as an arm of management, cracking the whip to enforce speedup and compel workers to accept hazardous conditions. Two-tier wages, the swelling ranks of super-exploited part-time and temporary workers, forced overtime and 10-hour shifts—none of this would have been possible without the collaboration of the corporatist unions.

While the Republicans promote “self-policing” by corporations, the Democrats rely on the

unions to suppress working class opposition to the bosses.

Unions such as the UAW and United Steelworkers have established health and safety “partnerships” with the employers and federal and state agencies, leading to fewer factory inspections and even lower fines. Based on the lie that the corporatist unions represent the workers’ interests, these schemes have been used to conceal health and safety violations and whitewash the companies.

Even prior to the Trump administration, federal and state occupational safety agencies did little more than issue wrist-slap fines to companies guilty of criminal negligence or worse. In Michigan, for example, out of 322 cases since 2004 where someone died and the state agency found violations, the median total penalty was only \$2,800. State law makes it virtually impossible for survivors to file civil suits against employers, workers compensation laws make it difficult for relatives to collect benefits, and spouses are cut off when they remarry. Families are lucky to get funeral costs.

The Trump administration, which is preparing a \$1.5 trillion tax giveaway to the rich, has appointed industry frontmen to lead occupational safety and environmental agencies, repealed rules requiring employers to keep accurate injury records, and enacted an executive order requiring that for every new workplace rule, two existing safeguards be eliminated.

In August, the web site of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) removed its running list of workers killed on the job from near the top of its home page. It now hides fatality reports on an internal page on its web site, and only reports deaths for which it has issued a citation—meaning the deaths of hundreds of workers go unreported.

Anger over unsafe working conditions led to a near walkout by Fiat Chrysler workers on December 2 at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, after workers fell ill from unexplained fumes. A walkout was prevented by UAW officials, who backed management’s threats to discipline workers if they took any action. The incident was not even covered by the local media, while the UAW and corporate management denied that it ever happened.

The daily sacrifice of workers’ lives and limbs for corporate profit hardly rates a mention by the media or either of the two big business parties. The Democratic Party is preoccupied with the concerns of upper-middle class women in the #MeToo movement and promotes the filthy, absurd fiction of “white male privilege.”

The grim reality in factories and workplaces, ignored by the official opinion-makers, is fueling immense social discontent, which will, sooner rather than later, erupt into massive class struggles. These struggles must be informed with the conscious aim of putting an end to the source of the industrial slaughterhouse—capitalism.

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