

The price of a worker's life in America: OSHA fines Caterpillar \$145,027 for “willful” safety violation that led to Steven Dierkes' death

Marcus Day
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What is the price of a worker's life in 21st century America? Not much, in the eyes of the corporate elite and their political representatives.

Global heavy equipment maker Caterpillar, Inc. willfully ignored basic safety measures that could have prevented the death of 39-year-old worker Steven Dierkes in June, according to a report released Wednesday by the US Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

On June 2, Dierkes, who had only started work at the Mapleton, Illinois, foundry nine days earlier, was taking a sample of molten iron from a vat kept at more than 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit when he fell in, instantly incinerating him. Peoria County Coroner Jamie Harwood stated in his report a few days later that the cause of death was “thermal annihilation,” noting that it took his team several hours to “sort through the metal fragments and find his remains.”

According to his obituary, Dierkes was a “hard-working teddy bear of a man with calloused hands and a tender heart.” He left behind his “best friend and life partner, Jessica Sutter,” as well three young daughters, ranging in age from four to 12.

In a news release accompanying the OSHA report, officials made clear Caterpillar's culpability in Dierkes' death in unusually direct terms for the agency.

“A worker's life could have been spared if Caterpillar had made sure required safety protections were in place, a fact that only adds to this tragedy,” said OSHA Regional Administrator Bill Donovan in Chicago. OSHA Area Director Christine Zortman in Peoria added, “Caterpillar's failure to meet its legal responsibilities to ensure the safety and health of workers leaves this worker's family, friends

and co-workers to grieve needlessly.”

The company failed to protect employees by installing a guardrail or other restraints above not just one, but three iron melters, according to OSHA. Across three shifts, workers faced a life-threatening hazard when taking temperature readings, button samples, thermal cups, or adding alloy bags to the melters.

Despite the flagrant character of the violation, and the fact that Dierkes was the second fatality at the foundry in six months, OSHA fined Caterpillar just \$145,027, a microscopic pittance for a company that took in \$50 billion in revenue in 2021.

For comparison, the \$145,027 fine—the agency's maximum amount for a willful violation!—is less than .003 percent of the company's \$4.5 billion in operating profit last year. It is also less than half the price of a medium-sized Caterpillar bulldozer, and equivalent to less than two days' pay for CEO Jim Umpleby III, who received \$24 million in compensation in 2021.

In other words, for Caterpillar, the fine is the unremarkable cost of doing business, no more noticeable than a minor accounting error.

Caterpillar issued a predictably hollow and perfunctory statement in response to the OSHA report, admitting no wrongdoing and claiming that the “safety of our employees, contractors and visitors is our top priority at all Caterpillar locations around the world.”

A Caterpillar worker at the Mapleton Foundry told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “A man was ‘thermally annihilated’ for 145,000k? A Cat vice president could cut a personal check for that. Human life is getting pretty cheap.”

Indeed. Amid inflation that continues at nearly the highest level in decades, the cost of everything is surging but that of a worker's life.

The reality is that the ruling class views workers as

disposable commodities, who can be replaced as needed. As tragic and horrific as Dierkes' death is, it is but one of many preventable industrial fatalities which take place with gruesome regularity.

- On September 20, a massive fire at the BP-Husky oil refinery in Ohio led to the death of two brothers who worked at the plant, Ben and Max Morrisey. Workers at the facility had long complained that layoffs and exhausting work schedules were undermining safety.

- On August 29, a 25-year-old worker at Ford Chicago, Sam Hager, died after reportedly suffering a seizure on the assembly line, with Ford's medical personnel taking over 20 minutes to arrive.

- On August 12, Travis Baker, a 49-year-old father of four, died after falling and hitting his head at the Stellantis Belvidere Assembly Plant in northern Illinois.

- On July 29, Casen Garcia, 22 years old and the father of a 14-month-old son at the time, died in the rendering basement of the Tyson Joslin meatpacking plant in western Illinois.

As obscenely inadequate as Caterpillar's OSHA fine is, it is a virtual certainty that the company will seek to appeal the citation and negotiate it down, as is routinely done by corporations. "Regarding the serious safety incident that occurred, we will continue to engage with OSHA to seek an appropriate resolution to its review," Caterpillar's statement added.

Even fines that are uncontested are often simply never paid. Over a three-year period, OSHA wrote off close to \$100 million in penalties, considering them "uncollectable," according to an analysis by Bloomberg Law in March 2021. The report found that roughly 20 percent of employers who had been fined never paid.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) union, for its part, has said nothing about the OSHA report faulting the company for Dierkes' death, with neither the UAW International headquarters nor Local 974 in Illinois, which covers the bulk of Caterpillar workers in the Peoria area, commenting on the finding.

The silence is hardly surprising. For more than 40 years, the UAW bureaucracy has integrated itself ever deeper into the structures of corporate management, while facilitating a historic assault on workers' wages and working conditions.

Caterpillar workers suffered perhaps the most significant betrayal by the UAW apparatus in the 1990s. Twice that decade, the UAW shut down strikes by Cat workers without a contract, disarming workers in the face of Caterpillar's ruthless strikebreaking. Despite immense self-sacrifice by the workers and repeated rejections of the company's terms, Caterpillar, with the assistance of the UAW bureaucracy, ultimately succeeded in forcing through an agreement in

1998 initiating the wage tier system, slashing pay for new hires.

The decades-long assault on workers' wages and benefits has coincided with a protracted deterioration in working conditions. The present-day reality is that the union officialdom forces workers to continue laboring in unsafe workplaces on a daily basis, so as not to disrupt the flow of profits. When workers raise safety concerns, more often than not they are threatened or victimized.

Most damningly, the UAW bureaucracy has kept workers on the job throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, working with the companies to conceal the spread of the virus while countless workers were infected and died, and many more suffering the debilitating effects of Long COVID.

But the industrial slaughterhouse conditions throughout factories, warehouses and other workplaces are pushing workers to the breaking point, generating immense opposition.

The *World Socialist Web Site's* initial report of Dierkes' horrific death sparked an outpouring of shock and anger among workers. Numerous current and former employees contacted the WSWS to denounce unsafe conditions and their general mistreatment by management, while at the same time condemning the indifference of the UAW bureaucracy to their concerns.

The most conscious opposition to dangerous working conditions has emerged in the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president. Lehman, a second-tier worker at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, has centered his campaign on the call to abolish the corrupt UAW apparatus and transfer power to workers on the shop floor, through the formation of rank-and-file committees.

Such committees, Lehman has insisted, must oversee line speed, workplace conditions and safety. "A key function of these committees will be to exchange information and organize collective action, including the shutdown of production if workers deem that conditions are unsafe," Lehman wrote in a statement on October 6. "The rights of workers, including the right to a safe and healthy workplace, must take precedence over the profit interests of big business."



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