

28-year-old Caterpillar worker dies within seconds from thermal burns at Illinois foundry

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Caterpillar workers: We'd like to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end of this report to share your experience about any workplace or safety issues at your facility. Comments will be published anonymously.

A 28-year-old worker and father, Daulton Simmers, died from thermal burns when molten metal fell on him on June 6 at Caterpillar's foundry in Mapleton, Illinois.

This is at least the third death reported in less than three years at the facility. The most well-known incident took place almost exactly two years ago when 39-year-old Steven Dierkes suffered a horrific death from thermal annihilation after he fell into an iron crucible after just a few days on the job at the foundry.

In December 2021, a 50-year-old contractor, Scott Adams, died after falling through a hole at the site.

In the latest case, emergency personnel were called at 5 p.m. on Thursday evening when a fire and a fatality was reported. On Friday, the Peoria County Coroner put out a statement: "Autopsy on the gentleman in the fire, Daulton Simmers, 28, of West Peoria demonstrates that he unfortunately suffered severe thermal burns throughout his entire body and likely died within a matter of seconds from onset of the incident. The cause of the fire in the incident remains under investigation by the Peoria County sheriff's department, and OSHA."

Simmers was transferring molten metal from a furnace to a pot, according to a statement released by Peoria Sheriff Chris Watkins to local news media Friday morning. "The metal spilled and he was consumed by fire and molten metal," WEEK-TV reported Watkins as stating.

In a perfunctory statement, Caterpillar's public relations spokesperson said, "We are deeply saddened by the death of a colleague at our Mapleton, Illinois, facility on June 6, and are working with authorities as the incident is investigated. We will have counselors onsite for our facility employees, and our thoughts are with the affected family, friends and colleagues."

United Auto Workers officials, for their part, have released no statement about Daulton Simmers' death as of this writing.

Following the death of Steven Dierkes in 2022, Caterpillar was given a wrist-slap fine of a mere \$145,027 by the US Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), a pittance compared to the company's more than \$50 billion in revenue in 2021. OSHA acknowledged then: "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."

The horrific death of Daulton Simmers, like Steven Dierkes before him, continues to demonstrate that factories and workplaces in America regularly function as industrial slaughterhouses, with necessary safety precautions ignored in the pursuit of corporate profit.

In 2022 there were over 5,486 fatal workplace injuries, a 5.7 percent

increase from 2021, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Over 50,000 workers die from chemical exposures each year and 190,000 suffer from workplace illnesses that cause cancers as well as diseases in multiple organs, according to OSHA.

The death toll of more than 1.1 million in the US from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—with countless more suffering from Long COVID—is perhaps the most glaring demonstration of the ruling class' contempt for workers' lives. The UAW apparatus has played a critical role keeping workers on the job without adequate protections, producing immense profits for the companies.

Last year, the UAW bureaucracy imposed a sellout deal on thousands of rank-and-file Caterpillar workers as it maintained an information blackout during their contract fight. The deal was opposed by the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RFC), which not only demanded significantly higher pay, but also improved safety conditions in response to unsafe working conditions.

The founding statement of the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee stated, "Management's disregard for safety, their relentless pursuit of profit and 'shareholder value' above all else, has already resulted in the conditions which enabled the tragic and needless death of Steven Dierkes last year."

"Life was just starting to look up for him for once, and now it's over"

A close friend of Daulton's spoke about his life and tragic death with the WSWS. "He was quiet, collected, an observer and thinker. We grew up on the south end of Havana which is the poor end of a poor town. He only cared about a few things which were being with his friends, settling down and having a family, and taking care of them.

"There were a lot of people making bad choices and using drugs back then around us, even in his family, but he never participated. He was disciplined and had a singular goal. To make a family. Eventually he did, and after a few low-paying jobs he got on at Caterpillar and it was supposed to be a new chapter to his life and he could get his family a better life. Now that dream is destroyed and he will never get to see his baby grow up, and to be honest, that's all he really cared about. He was just a simple, reliable and dedicated guy.

"He had just started at CAT. He was still a supplemental worker. He was just a guy who was dealt the poor end of the stick, worked hard to get himself and his family out of it, and looked like he was finally gaining some ground on that, and it was snatched from him.

"Life was just starting to look up for him for once, and now it's over.

He went to heaven for sure. Not a fair shake by a long shot. Loving, family oriented, and would help anyone if they needed it. The guy was a walking self-sacrifice basically.”

A GoFundMe has been set up by Simmers’ family and friends. There has also been an enormous outpouring of support on social media for Simmers and anger at the conditions facing workers at Caterpillar and at the Mapleton foundry.

“Nobody in management gives a crap about safety”

A former worker at Caterpillar’s Mapleton facility told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “These deaths happen because nobody in management gives a crap about safety there. Workers will continue to die there until the foundry is shut down. It is literally cheaper for CAT to let workers die and pay the minimal OSHA fine for it than it is for them to implement any sort of safety measure there that might hinder production.

“Three employees died in two years, and they haven’t paid fines on the other deaths yet because they’re still fighting it in court. So three workers are dead and there are zero repercussions. And they still break production records every quarter.”

The supplemental worker added about the conditions he faced: “You have no rights there. If you bring up safety concerns citing the exact OSHA guidelines the only thing that will happen is you’ll get a talking to from somebody in management and they’ll say they’re working on it and then nothing happens.

“I was threatened regularly for refusing to do unsafe work. I had brought up a safety concern in my department back in July. We had ladders leading up to platforms on top of machines that we’d use to get up on top and clean. I brought up that the ladders were flimsy and not very structurally sound and they were barely high enough to get us to the platform to conduct our work.

“I filled out continuous improvement cards citing the exact OSHA guidelines for elevated platforms and ladders, and brought it up to engineers and my supervisor. The following week my friend fell off one of those ladders and broke his leg in three places.

“Those ladders have not been fixed and there have been no efforts made to improve the safety there. Last year in August before my previous supervisor was fired, during a heat advisory day, we were told by our supervisor that if we went to medical for heat exhaustion we’d be fired.

“I have nine years working in different factories, doing maintenance work, and steel fabrication work in central Illinois. I know my way around a factory, I know a thing or two about safety guidelines. I’ve worked nuclear circuit outages as a boilermaker as well. The blatant disregard for safety by Caterpillar towards their employees is egregiously irresponsible.”

“More whitewash, smoke, and mirrors to come, no doubt.”

Another veteran worker and member of the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee stated, “It happened after I left work. All I know at this point is what little, very little, is in the news. The local stations were just calling it a fire, which no doubt there was one, but no mention of an iron spill. Thus they called it an ‘incident.’ They’re notorious for not asking unpleasant questions of the largest and wealthiest employer in the area.

“We were told not to report today or this weekend. Can’t have us

around when the coroner’s asking questions, you know? Now, we have another fatality in melting. To my knowledge, no criminal charges have even been mentioned, let alone filed, regarding the last fatality in melting, which OSHA pointedly called a result of negligence. More whitewash, smoke and mirrors to come, no doubt.

He added of Dalton’s death and the poor safety conditions: “There are an astonishing number of people with only a few months experience training someone just off the street, including some of the most inherently dangerous jobs in the building. Management has repeatedly denied it, but you can go anywhere in the facility and see it.”

In line with the Peoria sheriff’s description of the incident, he said the death could have happened while workers were “transferring the iron, possibly from the furnace to a holder, or to be poured into a mold in a ‘ladle.’ The ladle itself is huge, tall as a man or two, and suspended from an overhead gantry crane. If it moves too fast and stops suddenly—the iron is nearly as fluid as water, remember—the ladle will swing on its cables and the iron will slosh over the sides. Or the ladle may have struck or glanced off something while moving. Think of carrying a full bucket of water anywhere in your house. Stop too quickly or bump into something, and you’ve got a wet leg.

“The weight of the iron would have been crushing in addition to nearly vaporizing anything it lands on. ‘Thermal annihilation’ as the coroner’s report put it last time,” he added, speaking of Steven Dierkes’ death.

Commenting on the death, Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice president and the labor editor of the WWSWS, said, “The death of Simmers is a crime of capitalism. Every 96 minutes a worker is killed in America.

“While billions are being spent for war and for the profits of companies like Caterpillar that grow rich off the war economy, the lives of workers are treated like disposable parts.

“I urge Caterpillar workers and all industries to form rank-and-file committees at their plants to fight for safety and better working conditions. The billions and trillions spent on war and enriching Wall Street must be transferred to meet the needs and safety of the working class in the United States and internationally.”

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