

Unexplained workplace death at Halifax Walmart shows oligarchy's indifference to workers' lives in Canada and beyond

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A Walmart store in Halifax, Nova Scotia, remains closed for renovations over two months after the unexplained death of a 19-year-old employee in October 2024. While the local authorities have declared the death not to be suspicious, the perfunctory character of the reporting on the case and silence surrounding what actually happened speak to the utter indifference of the capitalist oligarchy to the lives of the working class.

Police were called to the Mumford Road Walmart around 9:30 p.m. October 19 for a report of a “sudden death.” The body of 19-year-old Gursimran Kaur was found in a large oven in the store's bakery department.

Described as coming to Canada with big dreams, the young woman and her mother both worked at the store for the last two years after immigrating from India. On the evening of the 19th, Gursimran's mother unsuccessfully sought to find her in the store for an hour. Even more alarmingly, the young woman's phone was unreachable, which was highly unusual during the day.

Panic setting in, she began to ask around, only to have others suggest Gursimran was helping a customer in another part of the sizable superstore. Store management became involved, and according to the Maritime Sikh Society, which has been speaking for the family, it was her mother who found the young woman burned to death in the oven a few hours later. Customers and staff were escorted out and the store was closed.

A stop-work order was issued by the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration for the bakery area of the store and a piece of equipment therein. CBC News was informed by sources that the oven is a commercial model that is large enough for someone to step into and that it does not lock. Less than two weeks after the “stop work” order was imposed, it was lifted on October 28. The statement accompanying the lifting of the work order declared that “the oven was assessed and determined to have been operating as per the manufacturer's requirements.”

Walmart blandly announced soon afterwards that the oven would be removed from the store. “Removing the oven had always been part of the standard remodel program we are implementing across the country,” asserted company spokeswoman Amanda Moss in an email to CTV News.

On November 18, Halifax Regional Police (HRP) issued a brief statement on what they described as a “sudden death,” which a police investigation determined showed “no evidence of foul play.”

As the world's largest retailer by sales sought to return to business as usual, nobody saw fit to publicly question why the oven at the centre of the tragedy had been earmarked for removal prior to the 19-year-old's death. Nor was the dire safety implications of someone apparently working alone in an industrial bakery with a walk-in oven publicly addressed.

Whatever the specifics of the incident may turn out to be, its aftermath says a great deal about the mindset of the financial oligarchs who control Walmart and other multi-billion-dollar transnational corporations. The Walton family, which holds an estimated 45 percent of the company's stock, is reportedly the richest family in the United States with an estimated wealth of \$267 billion. Walmart is the 12th-largest company globally, with a market capitalization as of January 2025 of \$726 billion. For organizations like this, the death of a worker on the job prompts a shrug of the shoulders or even less.

The contrast of the response from workers locally and further afield could hardly be more glaring. The Maritime Sikh Society set up an online fundraiser for the family with the goal of \$50,000 being reached within 10 hours. New donations to the fund were closed as the total quickly reached almost \$200,000. Members of the society also helped apply for emergency visas to bring Gursimran's father and brother to Canada.

Const. Martin Cromwell, public information officer for Halifax Regional Police, said in a video statement that after reviewing video footage and conducting several interviews,

“We do not believe anyone else was involved in the circumstances surrounding the woman’s death.”

Cromwell stated that there are questions that may never have answers and he did not expect the police force to release any further updates. He also specifically advised people to be “mindful of the damage public speculation can cause.”

The Department of Labour has taken over responsibility for the investigation, saying it was unable to provide further details and that workplace accident and fatality investigations are complex and can take up to two years to complete.

Workplace fatality investigations in Canada invariably produce little if anything in the way of meaningful change. Piddling fines and finger-wagging at employers for failing to take basic steps to protect workers on the job are the usual results of these state-led examinations.

In 2022, the latest year for which data is available, workers’ compensation boards recorded 993 workplace deaths in Canada, or almost three per day. But experts accept that this figure is a vast undercount, with some suggesting that the real number could be 10 times higher. No centralized body in Canada collects statistics on work-related deaths, including those occurring on the job, during the daily commute, and as a result of injuries or exposures to hazards suffered while at work.

A recent example, out of the great many available, serves to illustrate how ineffectual workplace fatality investigations are.

In April 2024, a Nova Scotia provincial court judge fined The Brick furniture retail chain \$143,750 as a result of occupational health and safety violations that involved a fatality almost four years earlier at a Halifax-area store. On June 9, 2020, Martin David, a 47-year-old delivery driver, was found vomiting and semi-coherent on the floor of a darkened washroom in the store. After sustaining a fall while loading a delivery truck, David made his way to the washroom, where the lights had no switches but were controlled automatically. A co-worker found David lying in darkness because the timing of the lights had been reprogrammed two months prior in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to coincide with the store’s altered opening hours. For the warehouse workers who continued to work the earlier hours, the lighting policy’s lack of forethought compelled them to use the washroom either in the dark or with the use of the flashlight on their phones.

The co-worker who found David didn’t realize he was injured but assumed he had become ill. Two days later, Martin David died in hospital. Astonishingly, for 30 hours after he had been taken away from the store by ambulance, his family had no idea where he was. The company

neglected to inform them of the incident. The store’s management also neglected to follow up on the condition of their employee for almost a day and a half until a manager texted him to see if he was alright. Shockingly, it fell to Martin David’s father to inform the Labour Department that his son had suffered a brain injury at his workplace after calling to see if an investigation had begun. And apparently, at no time were the police involved.

Four charges were finally laid by the Labour Department under the province’s Occupational Health and Safety Act almost 18 months after David’s death. The charges included one for failing to ensure the washroom facility was suitably illuminated and two for failing to implement its policies around lighting and injury investigation.

As a result of the failure of store management to report the incident to the Department of Labour, no proper inspection of the scene was made. It took two days for the Labour Department to even become aware of the true nature of the incident and the store did not record any evidence.

The Brick pleaded not guilty to the charges. Even though an autopsy revealed that David had fractured the back of his skull, no link could be established beyond a reasonable doubt that the lack of lighting was the cause of the injury. Even though the judge accepted the company’s assertion that it was unaware of the real circumstances of the incident, it did not change the obligation of the company to maintain its own safety policies.

Being unable to prove that the Occupational Health and Safety violations caused David’s death, the maximum penalty for each charge is set at \$250,000. The finding of guilty on three charges and the imposition of a fine less than 20 percent of the maximum penalty of \$750,000 is an insult to the value of human life.

In the case of Gursimran Kaur, the complete lack of answers from the police, and the swiftness and finality with which the investigation was surrendered to the Department of Labour suggests that, like David’s, so many other worker deaths across the country, the resolution will be nothing more than a perfunctory application of grossly inadequate laws.



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