

Few facts in horrific death of Canton, Ohio meat packing worker Samuel Martinez

By Shannon Jones
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Very little information has been released about the circumstances of the tragic death of Samuel Martinez, 62, a worker whose leg was ground in an augur at the Fresh Mark meatpacking plant in Canton, Ohio, Saturday. The Guatemala native was pronounced dead at the scene.

The death of Martinez is a particularly gruesome example of the terrible, daily toll of workplace death and injury in America. As in virtually all such cases, these deaths are dealt with in a perfunctory manner by the corporate media, which seeks to obscure the social roots of these tragedies.

According to an investigator for the coroner's office, Martinez' leg was caught in a waste augur. The company's response was to issue a perfunctory statement and insist it would cooperate with investigators. The *World Socialist Web Site* was not able to get through to the official management spokesperson for Fresh Mark.

A spokesperson for United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 17A, the union at Fresh Mark, told the WSWS that Martinez was only recently employed at the Canton facility and had children. He also had other relatives employed at the plant, with an extended family in Guatemala, who were being contacted about the death. A date for a memorial service has not yet been set.

The Local 17A official indicated that representatives for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) were investigating the accident and had ordered a shutdown of that part of the facility where the death took place. The official also said investigators were interested in the possible presence of cameras at the worksite that may have recorded the incident.

The Canton Police Department told the WSWS that its report on the accident has not yet been released.

The Fresh Mark plant has a history of unsafe conditions, including the 2011 electrocution of Guatemala native Marcos Perez-Velasquez, age 20. He had been employed at the plant for 18 months and had two brothers also working at the facility.

According to the company web site, Fresh Mark, doing business as Sugardale Foods, Sugardale Foods Service and Superior's Brand Meats, has been in business about 100 years and produces bacon, ham, hot dogs and deli meats. The company is privately held, with annual sales reportedly in excess of \$1 billion.

Nothing can be expected from the official investigation being carried out by OSHA in collaboration with Fresh Mark management and the UFCW. There is a long history of these charades aimed at blaming workers for their own deaths and exonerating management.

Meatpacking remains one of the most hazardous occupations in the US. According to a 2014 report in the *Guardian*, "Statistically, people who work at any meat-packing plant for five years have a nearly 50-50 chance of suffering a serious injury."

The industry relies heavily on super-exploited immigrant labor, held in check by the unions and supplemented by the terror of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Overall, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that injury and illness rates for the meat packing industry are 2.5 times higher than the national average. The number of injuries requiring work restrictions or involving days off from work is three times higher than for industry as a whole.

A report issued last month by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) criticized the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration for not doing enough to protect the health and safety of

meatpacking workers. Many incidents are going unreported to OSHA because of fear by workers of management retaliation.

Among the dangers faced by meatpacking workers, the report cites amputation, lacerations from cutting machines, exhaustion, fatigue and food-borne illness.

According to the statistics compiled by the GAO, meatpacking in 2015 had the eighth highest number of severe injury reports of all industries. There were some 481,000 workers employed in meatpacking last year at 5,282 meat and poultry plants throughout the country. However, OSHA carried out just 244 inspections last year and state safety inspectors carried out another 212. That means that a typical meatpacking plant could expect a safety inspection less than once every 10 years.

On top of that, the GAO documents the fact that widespread intimidation in the meatpacking plants, especially relating to immigrant workers, discourages the reporting of unsafe conditions.

According to the report, “Workers we interviewed in four states said they fear dismissal or other punishment if they complain to OSHA or their state OSH agency about their workplace concerns, such as sustaining injuries or being discouraged from using the bathroom. We reported in 2016 that meat and poultry worker vulnerability may hinder reporting of work-related illnesses and injuries, according to federal officials and worker advocacy groups. In particular, these officials and advocates said that some meat and poultry workers may be less likely to report or seek treatment for injuries and illnesses because of their vulnerable status as undocumented or foreign-born workers and because of their economic vulnerability.”

The GAO reported, “One worker we interviewed said that she experienced severe pain in her wrist and visited the on-site medical unit over the course of three months before they referred her to a doctor affiliated with the plant, during which time she continued to work. When the doctor did not find any problems on her X-ray, she went to a doctor unaffiliated with the plant, who found a bone fracture.”

Another major concern raised by the GAO was access of workers to proper medical treatment. The GAO noted that, “In a 2015 hazard alert letter to a poultry plant, OSHA noted that it appeared the plant used its first aid station to prevent injuries from

appearing on the plant’s OSHA log, such as by failing to refer workers to a physician for evaluation or treatment when appropriate. In addition, OSHA noted that a number of workers were fired after suffering MSDs, (Musculoskeletal Disorder) sometimes on the same day of the MSD occurrence, and further noted workers’ fears of being fired for visiting the first aid station.” However far from issuing a citation, OSHA “recommended voluntary improvements to the plant’s medical management practices.”

The report noted that state and federal regulators have no control over line speeds in meat processing plants, which is a major safety issue. The GAO reports, “High line speeds may exacerbate existing hazards that can cause musculoskeletal disorders (MSD). OSHA and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health officials told us that line speed—in connection with forceful exertions, awkward postures and other factors—affects the risk of MSDs.”

Under these conditions more tragedies like the death of Martinez are virtually inevitable. The WSWS will continue to expose the truth about these deadly conditions and encourages our readers to provide information or personal experiences.

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