

As profits soar, US construction workers see increase in death and injury on the job

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Deaths and injuries among workers in the booming construction industry in New York state in 2016 showed a striking parallel in both the rate and causes of death in the industry nationwide, according an annual report “Deadly Skyline,” published last month by the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH).

NYCOSH reports that construction deaths in the state of New York reached a 14-year high in 2016, with 71 workers killed on the job. This amounts to a nearly 30 per cent increase from 2015, when a total of 55 construction workers were killed on the job in the state.

As the WSWS has reported, there were 5,190 fatal workplace injuries recorded in the United States in 2016, an increase of seven percent from the 4,836 workers killed on the job in 2015.

Overall, construction workers in the US saw the highest number of deaths in any industry in 2015. That year, a total of 937 construction workers were killed on the job, marking the second straight year of fatality increases in construction, according to the most recent data available to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unreported incidents undoubtedly place the numbers even higher, as injury and deaths among migrant and undocumented workers who are forced to accept the most hazardous jobs routinely go unreported.

In the recent tally of fatalities for New York state, half died from falls, an entirely preventable cause of death that plagues many sectors of basic industry. This grisly toll in flesh and blood takes place in the face of revolutionary advances in the knowledge, technology and equipment which could make it possible to eliminate injury and death on the job entirely. Safety belts, harnesses, ropes, ladder ties and other equipment, as well as computer technology for monitoring and tracking safety procedures, could, if implemented

systematically, eliminate falls altogether.

Under the profit system, however, workers face constant pressure to take short cuts to boost productivity—pressure that inevitably leads to disabling and fatal incidents. Instead of improving safety and working conditions, recent advances in computer tracking of job sites are subordinated to the profit drive of giant corporations.

Furthermore, the majority of workers, employed by unregulated small contractors, are exposed to extreme hazards of falls, electrocutions and cave-ins. As an example, a master electrician in Detroit told the WSWS that he had been compelled by a small contractor to disconnect a live 480-volt transformer. One false move would have meant instant death by electrocution. In that sense, the reported deaths are not accidents, but rather the predictable results of unchecked cost-cutting and speed-up.

The release of the NYCOSH report came on the heels of the deaths of two young construction workers on the same day in New York City. On January 23, a 33-year-old electrician employed by U-Tek Elevator, Inc. died after a fall down the elevator shaft where he was installing an elevator car for a 12-story hotel project in Manhattan without a protective line to prevent such a fall. Hours later, 26-year-old John Davie fell to his death while working with his father on the renovation of a co-op building which lacked a valid work permit. Both of his parents witnessed the fall.

Despite the growing death toll, construction companies and some New York lawmakers are moving to get rid of the scaffolding law, a century-old regulation that requires construction companies and property owners to accept full liability for all accidents that occur on a construction site.

The move is part of the much-publicized drive by the

Trump administration to deregulate industry and cut funds from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which will only accelerate the loss of life. In campaign rhetoric, Trump argued that regulations cost jobs because they pinch profits, discouraging investment.

Many deaths in the construction industry already go unreported to begin with, due to a stripping away of federal and state regulations and the blatant violation of existing regulations by contractors. Funding cuts to OSHA over successive years have left it strapped for resources to inspect job sites and investigate accidents. The cuts have continued unabated under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

OSHA is a small agency, with a total of approximately 2,100 inspectors to protect the health and safety of 130 million workers employed at more than 8 million worksites around the country. That leaves one compliance officer for every 59,000 workers, or one inspector for every 3,810 work locations.

Predictably the OSHA standard to protect workers from falling is the most frequently violated regulation. Other standards which are most often violated include are those governing hazard communication, scaffolding, respiratory protection and control over hazardous energy.

Going hand in hand with federal and state government efforts to disembowel OSHA is the role of the AFL-CIO construction unions. As the various levels of government cut the regulatory agency, the unions hand off more and more of the responsibility for protecting worker safety. As an example of the pro-business outlook and role of the unions, the investigation of serious injuries and deaths and the collection and dissemination of fatality and injury statistics are done, not by the unions, but by OSHA, on an increasingly limited budget.

Very often OSHA's investigations of deaths and injuries can take months. The drawn-out process is used to prevent the families of the deceased and the injured from finding out what actually happened to their loved ones, and prevent them from placing responsibility for the violation of safety rules onto the employer. Furthermore, the fines imposed by the agency are outrageously low, and represent no serious deterrent to the violations which have caused the loss

of life.

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