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Killing workers for profit: Why Workers' Memorial Day is necessary

written by Stephen Millies
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Hundreds joined the 2021 Workers' Memorial Day march held in New Brunswick, N.J., on April 25. Some carried coffin-shaped signs with the names of workers who lost their lives in the past year.

Starting in 1930, Union Carbide hired 5,000 people to build the Hawks Nest Tunnel In West Virginia. It became a deathtrap for the workers, most of whom were Black.

Cutting through three miles of sandstone, [at least 764 workers died](#) from the silica dust that tore through their lungs like pieces of glass. The death toll may have reached 2,000.

No safety measures were taken. Workers were covered with the deadly silica dust. Black employees who were ill were [forced to go to work at gunpoint](#).

After being promised high wages, employees worked between 10 and 15 hours a day for 25 cents an hour.

Because of segregated cemeteries, many of the Black victims were buried on a farm. Others were buried in an old slave cemetery or alongside roads.

Fifty years later, 15,000 people were killed on Dec. 2, 1984, when a Union Carbide pesticide plant exploded in Bhopal, India. At least [30 tons of toxins were released](#) that created an open-air gas chamber.

None of these crimes prevented Union Carbide, now owned by Dow Chemical, from raking in [over \\$1 billion in profits](#) in 2018.

It's only the class struggle of poor and working people that forced corporations to adopt any safety measures. Typical was an early rule book of the Pennsylvania Railroad, most of whose tracks are now owned by the Norfolk Southern.

It told employees that if they got injured or killed, it was their problem, not the company's. In 1909, one out of every 210 railroad brakemen in the United States were killed on the job. ("The Economic History of the United States" by Ernest Bogart.)

The response of the Interstate Commerce Commission was to stop collecting such statistics. It wasn't until 1911 that the first workers' compensation law in the U.S. was passed in Wisconsin.

Despite these laws, workers continue to be killed and maimed on the job. In U.S. coal mines alone, [100,000 miners were killed](#) during the 20th century.

The billion-dollar art collection of mine owner Henry Clay Frick — whose paintings are displayed in his former mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side — is covered in blood.

OSHA was won by struggle

The AFL-CIO commemorates Workers' Memorial Day every year on April 28. This was the date the Occupational Safety and Health Administration was born in 1971.

The president who signed the OSHA bill — Richard "Watergate" Nixon — was no friend of working people anywhere. He and his fellow war criminal Henry Kissinger killed millions in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Children were burned alive there by napalm, much of it made by Dow Chemical.

Nixon and then-California Gov. Ronald Reagan tried to break the grape boycott called by the United Farm Workers Union led by Cesar Chavez.

But the U.S. labor movement was much stronger then. Driving it forward were hundreds of thousands of Black workers concentrated in the big plants in Detroit and dozens of other cities.

Capitalists counterattacked. Malcolm Wallop's successful 1976 U.S. Senate



campaign in Wyoming featured a TV ad attacking OSHA for mandating bathroom facilities on farms and ranches.

Wallop thought it was a joke that farm workers be provided with sanitary bathrooms and some dignity. Homeless people needing bathrooms aren't given any dignity by capitalism.

New Jersey Senator Harrison Williams, who co-sponsored the OSHA act, was sent to prison. He was framed during the FBI's ABSCAM investigation that was named after the racist term "Arab scam."

[According to Tip O'Neill](#), who was then speaker of the House of Representatives, the FBI also tried to ensnare him and Senator Ted Kennedy.

Deindustrialization — closing thousands of factories — weakened the working class. General Motors shut down nine of its 10 plants in Flint, Mich. That set the stage for the state government to poison the city's children with lead in their drinking water.

Global capitalism kills more workers. One-hundred-forty-six workers were killed in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire in New York City.

Eight times as many people were killed in the 2013 [collapse of Rana Plaza](#), housing five garment sweatshops in Dhaka, Bangladesh. At least 1,132 workers were killed there, with over 2,500 workers injured.

Safety is a human right

In Britain, where the Industrial Revolution was born, the struggle for safety went hand-in-hand with reducing the work day of 12 hours or longer.

Frederick Engels — Karl Marx's co-worker in developing scientific socialism or communism — heard factory owners in Manchester “joke” about workers losing their fingers from accidents.

Even some wealthy individuals were appalled by the number of workers killed on the job. Sir Humphry Davy helped invent a safety lamp for coal miners.

Yet the new lamp actually [led to more deaths](#). Mine owners used it to drive miners even deeper into the earth.

It was the decades-long struggle of workers that forced parliament to pass the “factory acts.” These laws reduced the working hours in cotton textile mills and other industries.

But there were no safety laws for the enslaved Africans who picked the cotton. They worked from “no see” in the morning to “no see” at night.

James Watt's first steam engine was financed by slave owners, according to “Capitalism and Slavery” by Eric Williams. Justice demands reparations for these crimes.

A small number of safety inspectors, led by Leonard Horner, enforced the factory acts. Horner was [described by Marx](#) as having “rendered undying service to the English working class.”

British bosses kept the number of inspectors to a minimum. That's also how U.S. capitalists curbed OSHA.

[According to Debbie Berkowitz](#), a former OSHA advisor who is now with the National Employment Law Project, it would take 160 years for OSHA to inspect every workplace. The same political windbags in Congress that attack defunding the police have defunded OSHA for 50 years.

Thousands of essential workers died from COVID-19 because of a lack of safety protection. Employees at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City were given Hefty bags as personal protective equipment. Meatpacking workers were placed two feet from each other.

The fight for safety at work is a struggle against the same capitalist class whose cops kill 1,100 people annually in the U.S. We have to organize to stop the murders on the job and by the police.

