Sharpen Your Safety Awareness Fatality File

Caterpillar worker’s grisly foundry death blamed on training and work conditions.

Just nine days into his new job at Caterpillar’s foundry in Mapleton, Illinois, Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old father of three, fell into an 11ft-deep pot of molten iron and was incinerated.

Now workers at the plant are blaming lack of training, poor safety protections and grueling working conditions for his death and are threatening strike action at the world’s largest construction equipment manufacturer.

General view of construction site of the Tesla Gigafactory in Austin, Texas in October 2021.

Dierkes’ death in June was the subject of a report issued by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Osha) earlier this month. The report determined that “if required safety guards or fall protection had been installed, the 39-year-old employee’s ninth day on the job might not have been their last”.

Osha said workers at Caterpillar’s foundry were “routinely exposed” to unprotected fall hazards and has proposed a fine of $145,027. The decision does not go far enough for Jessica Sutter, Dierkes’ fiancee.

Sutter criticized Caterpillar for putting her fiancee in a dangerous position without adequate safety protections.

“As far as Caterpillar, I feel that they are murderers. It’s a slaughterhouse. No one should have to lose their life like this,” she said. “They do not have any compassion for human decency at all, they are a company of no humanity.”

Dierkes was working as a melt deck operator and fell into a melter while trying to obtain a sample.

A former employer described the work conditions as a melt deck operator.

“When he died, they only had us off work for two days and then told everyone to come back. The air literally still smelled like his burning body,” a worker said. “There were no guard rails, no harness procedures and nothing to ensure you wouldn’t fall into the massive holes filled with iron. As he was collecting a sample of iron with the spoon, he fell in and churned up.”

“It’s hard to breathe because of the heat, and you’re always drenched in sweat. They have heat advisory days in the summer where security passes out bottles of water. But it doesn’t really matter how much water you drink up there, you’re losing so much sweat you almost always feel cruddy when leaving work and your ears and nose are filled with black soot every single day, and that obviously gets in your lungs.”`