

Transportation Labor Calls for Worker Protections Against Extreme Temperatures

Extreme temperatures, largely resulting from global climate change, have become an unfortunate new normal for transportation workers. In fact, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reported that 2023 was the warmest year ever recorded.¹ It has become increasingly clear in recent years that extreme temperatures are not going away. Now more than ever, we must rise to meet this challenge, especially as some states like Texas have attempted to do away with mandatory water breaks and other protections for outdoor workers. All workers should be guaranteed necessary protections to mitigate the risks of exposure to extreme temperatures as we continue to confront the consequences of climate change.

As the nation's largest transportation labor federation, the impact of extreme temperatures is notable across every industry that we represent. In the building trades, workers are exposed to harsh weather conditions on construction sites and other outdoor job sites. Just last year, a 35-year-old lineworker died from heat exhaustion while working on power lines to restore electricity to East Texas residents.² In the aviation sector, unregulated cabin temperatures negatively impact passengers and crew. Extreme temperatures have caused crewmembers to fall ill, required planes to divert to different airports, and have caused severe delays if passengers must be deplaned. There have also been incidents when passengers become aggravated and even hostile due to extreme heat or cold, creating a dangerous environment for passengers and crew alike. Many, though not all of these incidents occur during lengthy delays on the tarmac. Moreover, ground service and ramp workers are routinely subjected to extreme temperatures emphasizing the critical need for adequate heat protection measures.

In the railroad industry, rail workers not only toil outside in extreme heat but also keep trains running during extreme winter weather and must take precautions to prevent cold stress effects on the body such as trench foot, frostbite, and hypothermia. Transit workers, who keep buses and passenger trains moving during record-hot summers and freezing winter weather, must also be mindful of the dangers of extreme temperatures. Longshore workers labor outside at ports across the country and our nation's dedicated seafarers and merchant mariners endure all kinds of weather while they are on vessels out at sea, often for months at a time. Manufacturing workers endure extreme temperatures in facilities producing essential products for our nation's infrastructure, such as steel, chemicals, tires, and many more. Amidst such harsh conditions, their productivity, and more importantly, their well-being are significantly compromised, underscoring the urgent need for improved standards.

Letter carriers are also impacted by extreme temperatures, with many city letter carriers required to deliver mail on foot despite harsh weather conditions. Furthermore, US Postal Service (USPS) mail trucks do not have air conditioning, meaning that postal workers delivering mail via truck are often required to do so in stifling temperatures. Sadly, a 66-year-old letter carrier died after collapsing on his mail route in North Texas last year.

¹ <https://library.wmo.int/idurl/4/68835>

² www.ketk.com/news/local-news/35-year-old-lineman-dies-after-working-to-restore-power-in-east-texas/

The undeniable reality is that too many workers are dying on the job as a result of extreme heat.³ Workers, especially those in the transportation sector, require essential provisions to cope with extreme temperatures. This includes ensuring adequate rest breaks and access to hydration to prevent dehydration and heat-related illnesses. Additionally, providing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), properly ventilated and temperature-controlled work environments, and comprehensive training on recognizing and addressing signs of dehydration, heatstroke, and other heat-related conditions are paramount for their safety and well-being. Therefore, we strongly urge the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to implement a federal heat protection standard encompassing these crucial measures to safeguard the health of workers exposed to extreme temperatures. We further urge the FAA to regulate cabin air temperatures and establish temperature monitoring and reporting programs to ensure both passengers and crew are able to fly in appropriate temperatures. Finally, we call on Congress to pass the Sunción Valdivia Heat Stress Injury, Illness, and Fatality Prevention Act (H.R. 4897 / S. 2501). In addition, we call on Congress to pass the Protecting America's Workers Act (H.R. 2998), which would ensure that an OSHA heat protection standard applied equally to public and private sector employers nationwide.

The labor movement stands united in our support for policies that mitigate the effects of extreme temperatures on the transportation workforce, support good middle-class jobs, and ensure safe transportation that brings equitable benefits to communities across the country.

Policy Statement No. S24-05

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/21/business/worker-safety-heat-protections-osha/index.html>