

CASE STUDY 7

Cesar Augusto Valenzuela Airport Baggage Handler, Los Angeles A strike over safety in 2012, a death on the job in 2014

In the pre-dawn hours of February 21st 2014, Cesar Augusto Valenzuela, 51, was driving a luggage cart on a service road at Los Angeles International Airport, commonly known as LAX.

What happened next is still unclear, but Valenzuela was apparently thrown from the cart he was driving and struck by another vehicle. He did not survive the collision.

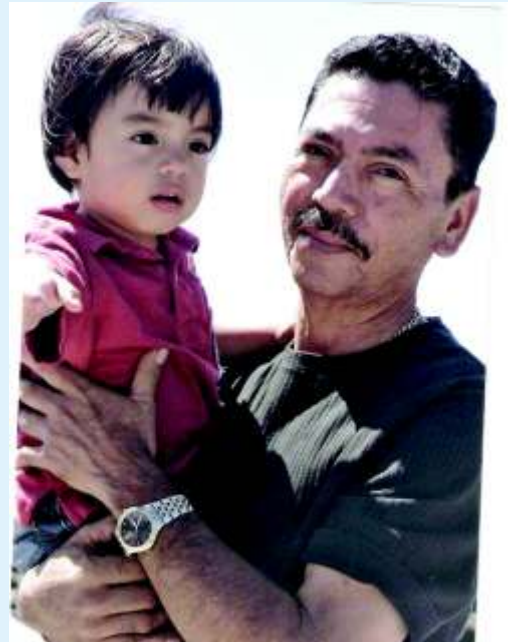
The circumstances surrounding Valenzuela's death are under investigation by California OSHA. Family members, friends and co-workers held a vigil in Valenzuela's honor on February 25th.²⁸

His widow, Ulvita Ramirez told KCAL-TV that her husband had been in good health at the time of the incident. But after 17 years as an airport worker, she said, Valenzuela had grown concerned about safety conditions on the job.

Valenzuela worked for Menzies Aviation USA Inc., a company that contracts baggage handling and other services to major airlines. In 2013, Menzies was fined nearly \$95,000 by Cal/OSHA for serious safety violations, including failure to meet standards for operation of power vehicles.²⁹

Workers at the company have been advocating for safer working conditions for several years. More than 100 workers went on strike in 2012 due to "concerns about the serious health and safety risks they faced on the job," reports United Service Workers West, a division of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).³⁰

Valenzuela's death was not the first fatality at Menzies Aviation's LAX operations. In 2006, a worker was killed at the airport after being struck by a warehouse transport vehicle.



Cesar Augusto Valenzuela died on a service road at LAX Airport in February, 2014.

²⁸ "Family, Friends Gather To Honor LAX Worker Who Died After Falling From Luggage Tug," KCAL-TV, February 25, 2014

²⁹ "Cal/OSHA Issues Citations Resulting in Fines of \$94,550 against Airline Contractor Menzies Aviation, Says SEIU United Service Workers West," SEIU United Service Workers West, June 20, 2013

³⁰ Ibid.

Following this most recent incident, California legislators called for an investigation into safety conditions in the airline industry. "This is a horrible tragedy and we must find out if this could have been prevented," said state Sen. Ted Lieu, whose district includes LAX. "But we need to have hearings on airports statewide to see if there is a systematic problem."³¹

"Course Correction," a study published in November 2013 by the University of California, Berkeley Center for Labor Research found that a decades-long trend of outsourcing airline industry jobs to third-party contractors -- such as Menzies Aviation -- has caused a steady erosion in wages and working standards for airport workers. According to the report's executive summary:

The transformation of self-sustaining middle-class airline careers to low-wage outsourced jobs not only hurts workers and their communities, but also may negatively affect the safety, security, and efficiency of airports.

Workers rallied at LAX on March 6, protesting "lax enforcement of safety standards" by airport contractors, reported EFE, the Spanish language news agency.³²

Transportation incidents, such as the event that claimed the life of Cesar Valenzuela, accounted for 41 percent of all workplace deaths in 2012, the most recent year for which data is available.³³

³¹ "Legislators want hearings into worker safety at California airports," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14 2014

³² "Trabajador hispano muerto en aeropuerto de Los Ángeles recibe homenaje," *El Nuevo Herald*, March 9, 2014

³³ "National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2012, Preliminary Results," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Aug. 22, 2013.