

“We are not robots, we are people!”

Autoworkers want answers about injury of veteran worker at Ford Flat Rock Assembly in Michigan

By Shannon Jones
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At about 1:00 am in the morning on Friday, May 4 a veteran Ford worker suffered severe leg injuries while working on the production line at the Ford Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit. According to information collected by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, Lynn Hagood, age 55, had her legs crushed after falling into a pit on the trim and final assembly line.

Plant officials tried to restart production and extend the shift to make up for downtime following the accident, but workers, stunned by the accident, refused to continue working.

The injury of Hagood is the latest in a series of deadly or near deadly incidents at auto and auto parts factories in recent years, highlighting the dangerous conditions workers face on the job due to the incessant cost cutting and the erosion of safety protections overseen by the United Auto Workers.

Virtually nothing has been made public by management or the UAW in relation to the incident at Flat Rock Assembly. Inquiries by the *Autoworker Newsletter* to both Ford corporate offices and UAW Local 3000 have gone unanswered.

The most recent accident follows the announcement of a cost cutting drive by Ford aimed at boosting its bottom line. The company recently announced an end to small car production in the US as it aims for \$25.5 billion in cost reductions by 2022. It also follows reported net first quarter profits of \$1.7 billion.

Ford is attempting to squeeze more production out of every worker. In particular, it is seeking to drive out older, better paid, “legacy” workers to bring in more temporary part time workers (TPTs) at lower wages and with few if any benefits.

The stonewalling by the UAW and management at Flat Rock Assembly follows a long pattern of cover-up over

safety issues.

In another tragic case, on December 9, 2017, Ivan Bridgewater, a 41-year-old electrician, was killed in an accident at Ford’s Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville. He was found unresponsive in the loading dock area. He was originally thought to have been electrocuted, but the coroner’s report showed crushing injuries to the head, ribs and clavicle. Five months later, there are still few hard facts about the circumstances surrounding his death. He left behind his wife Megan and a young son.

Just last week, two workers were injured in a massive explosion at an auto parts plant in Eaton Rapids, Michigan with a history of safety violations. The facility, Meridian Magnesium, has been closed, forcing Ford to halt production of the Ford F-150 pickup and spreading layoffs throughout the industry.

In October 2017, 44-year-old Melissa Stephens died of injuries suffered at auto parts maker Autoneum North America in Jeffersonville, Indiana. Just one year earlier, the same machine severely injured another worker, when the machine’s metal rollers clamped on her fingers, yet no safety measures were implemented.

Regina Allen Elsea, aged 20, was killed on June 18, 2016 in an accident at the Ajin USA plant in Cusseta, Alabama. The young bride-to-be was crushed when she entered a robotic station to clear a sensor default.

Catherine White, a 51-year-old worker at Carlex Glass America in Nashville, Tennessee, died in January 2016 when crushed by a shuttle used to move auto glass.

In February 2016, Terry Bodenbender, an electrician at the General Motors Foundry in Defiance, Ohio, died in a fall while troubleshooting a crane.

Wanda Holbrook, who worked at auto parts maker Ventra Ionia Mains in Michigan, died in July 2015 when she was trapped by robotic machinery, crushing her skull. Her

husband has filed a wrongful death lawsuit. The death was reportedly very similar to a previous fatality involving a 22-year-old Volkswagen worker in Germany.

In May 2015, Donald Megge, a 53-year-old millwright, died while cleaning a waste filter press at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly plant in Detroit. Typically, neither the UAW nor management offered details of the circumstances surrounding his death. The very next day at the plant, Lee Duncan, a worker repairing a vehicle conveyer line, was struck and killed by a vehicle, according to the federal Occupation Safety and Health Administration. State safety inspectors had initially refused to investigate the accident, telling the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* at the time that Duncan had died of "natural causes." His death was not reported by the local news media, management or the UAW.

A full and independent investigation needs to be organized into the injury of Lynn Hagood at Flat Rock and all unexplained on-the-job deaths and injuries so that future tragedies can be avoided. Such an inquiry must be independent of the UAW-Ford joint committee on health and safety as well as the Michigan Occupation Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), which have repeatedly stonewalled any serious investigation of workplace injury and death. Only rank-and-file factory committees, directly representative of workers, can be entrusted with a full and open inquiry.

An 11-year veteran Ford worker from Louisville, Kentucky contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* said she was familiar with the death of Ivan Bridgewater. "I haven't heard anything more about it," she remarked. "They try to keep everything hush, hush. All they care about is production.

"My plant is not safe. Conditions are always being covered up. People are losing their lives, and it seems like it is no big deal. Too many things happen. You talk about it one or two days, then nothing more is heard.

"I don't understand it with all the money this company is making. We are not robots, we are people!"

She supported the idea of workers forming rank-and-file factory committees to investigate accidents and enforce safety conditions on the shop floor.

"I would like for someone to take responsibility to make sure people are properly trained. Safety issues need to be addressed. Safety is #1 before anything else.

"There is a lot of confusion and lies. They don't want you to talk about it. It is good to have an organization that would be just for you."

Many questions are raised by the injury to Hagood at Flat Rock Assembly:

* Was Hagood properly trained on the equipment she was

operating?

* What other safety incidents had taken place at this particular work location?

* Did understaffing contribute to the accident?

* Was Hagood forced onto the assembly line as part of a drive to get rid of "legacy" workers?

No serious investigation will be conducted by management or the corporatist, anti-working class organization known as the UAW. For its part, MIOSHA has entered into a partnership with Ford and the UAW aimed at eliminating any genuine oversight.

A short-term supplemental (STS) worker at Flat Rock Assembly told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that she was concerned that Hagood had not received proper training for her job assignment. "I don't feel I get adequate training. You are supposed to get three days training for a new job, but I have only had that twice in the two years I have been here, and I have worked 17 different jobs. You never even get a full day, a couple of hours at the most.

"There are days I have had to work 10 hours straight by myself. You are exhausted having to keep up with the pace of the line and trying to perform your job properly."

She noted that there were hundreds of temporary TPT and STS workers being hired by Ford who have no vacations or personal days and few if any benefits. "They want cheap labor," she said. "We don't get profit sharing, and we are doing the same or more than full-time employees. We are not allowed to miss days, and I haven't even received the raise I was supposed to receive."

Constance, a retiree from the Fiat Chrysler Warren Stamping north of Detroit is a reader of the *Autoworker Newsletter*. Commenting on the situation at Flat Rock Assembly, she noted, "The factory is a dangerous place, but they don't take the time to teach a person how to do the job. All they care about is production. I always through the UAW was in bed with management. If they could help it, you would never know anyone was killed."

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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