

In wake of recent workplace accidents US autoworkers speak out on safety conditions

By Shannon Jones
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The recent injury of a veteran worker at the Ford Flat Rock Assembly plant outside of Detroit has put a spotlight on deteriorating safety conditions in the auto plants as the auto companies cut costs, with the assistance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, and ramp up production to meet Wall Street's profit demands.

Early on May 4, a 55-year-old Ford worker was injured on the assembly line at Flat Rock Assembly. According to reports, Lynn Hagood fell into a pit on the final assembly line and had her legs pinned by machinery. Only the quick action of workers, who stopped the line, prevented a worse tragedy.

Hagood had not worked on the assembly line in years and was assigned to her new job with only very limited training. When the plant manager attempted to restart production immediately after the accident, workers refused and insisted they be sent home for the night.

Two days earlier an explosion and fire at an auto part plants in Eaton Rapids, Michigan, injured two workers. The blast and fire destroyed the building and had the potential to cause widespread death and injury. The company, Meridian Magnesium Products, had previously been cited for numerous safety violations, including several incidents where workers suffered serious burns.

On May 10, a sixty-year-old welder at the Caterpillar mining machinery plant in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, died from injuries he received May 10 when a heavy metal slab came loose and fell on him. Steven Wade was well liked by co-workers and was the second worker killed at the facility since it was taken over by Caterpillar in 2010.

A worker at the GM Lake Orion Assembly plant, north of Detroit, commented on the injury of Hagood. "That doesn't surprise me. There is no set amount of

time for training. It's up to management and the team leaders. That's ridiculous. What that lady was doing was very dangerous."

She continued, "This is the worst plant I have ever worked at as far as people being pitted against people. A lot of the jobs are way overloaded."

A former autoworker with considerable knowledge of the Detroit auto industry told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, "Workers are not considered as human beings any more. They are a line item in the companies' business plan."

He noted that the 2015 contract between the UAW and the Detroit-based auto companies removed all limits on the hiring of Temporary Part Time (TPT) workers, contingent workers with no set hours and few if any benefits. "At least 23 percent of the workers in the Detroit Three are flex workers." Noting that Hagood was a 30-year tier-one worker, he added, they are systematically trying to get the tier-one workers out."

Ford recently announced it would stop production of passenger sedans in the United States as it moves to focus on its more profitable pick up trucks and SUVs. Wall Street is putting enormous pressure on Ford to increase profit margins, particularly as it faces fierce competition from other carmakers in the development of autonomous vehicles. Adding to the pressure, auto sales appear to be in a decline, as most major carmakers, including Ford, saw decreases in year-over-year sales in April.

A TPT worker at the Ford Flat Rock Assembly spoke about conditions facing contingent workers. "You are working more than anyone else in the plant. I almost feel like a slave. You can't refuse a job, or you are out of there."

She said management would never stop the line for

repairs. "It's always, 'we'll fix it on the weekend.'" She continued, "The UAW doesn't do anything for you."

She commented on the still unexplained death of Jacoby Hennings, a young TPT worker at the nearby Ford Woodhaven Stamping Plant, who UAW officials and police say shot himself on October 20, 2017, after an hour-long meeting with UAW officials in the plant chairman's office.

"I understand where he was coming from. It is awful. They talk down to you as if you don't matter. And here I am risking my life. There are probably 500 TPTs in this plant. They could not run the plant if we did not show up for work. It is deplorable."

Since the injury of Hagood the UAW has maintained a studied silence on safety conditions at Flat Rock Assembly. As in previous deaths and injuries of autoworkers, such as the December 2017 death of electrician Ivan Bridgewater III at the Kentucky Truck Assembly Plant in Louisville, workers can expect no serious investigation on the part of federal safety inspectors or the UAW-Ford safety committee.

A veteran worker at the Ford Avon Lake, Ohio, assembly plant spoke about conditions at his facility. "Somebody was just hit by a lift. It was a very disturbing day. There have been other accidents. We need more safety training. Right now, you just get two hours."

"If you get accept a new job there is supposed to be someone with you all the time. The three days of training is out the window. There have been a lot of changes here, not for the good."

He deplored the role of the UAW in forcing through the concessions contract in 2015 that maintained the two-tier wage system and opened the plants to a flood of TPT workers. "The last contract was a sham. Eight years is a long time for the 'in progression' workers to get up to top scale. Then there is inflation. Plus, they have no pension. I feel bad for the kids. A lot of them left other jobs to come here."

He expressed concern that the UAW and management would attempt to pit the younger workers against older workers in the 2019 contract. Speaking of younger workers, he asked, "What are they going to care for retiree pensions?"

A "legacy" tier-one worker from the Dearborn Assembly Plant at the Ford Rouge complex west of

Detroit, said he was not surprised by the indifference evinced by Ford management to the injuries suffered by workers at Flat Rock Assembly. "Cash comes first," he said. "I've seen a person pass out on the line." And with a note of disgust, he added, "They just pull them to the side and keep the line running."

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly Plant with 22 years at the company told the *Autoworker Newsletter* she was currently off on injury leave. "I was in so much pain, they admitted me to the hospital. Chrysler didn't want to accept responsibility.

"If we get an injury, they always try to claim it is due to your age, not to the job."

She opposed the way the UAW attempted to divide the older and younger workers. "I know there are a lot of underhanded deals going on. They have four tiers in the plant. They all make different amounts and they are trying to get rid of us tier-one workers."

She continued, "Chrysler is making too much money for us not to make what we deserve."

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