

# Indianapolis GM workers face abysmal working conditions

Andre Damon  
21 August 2010

The Indianapolis General Motors stamping plant, where workers are being told to accept a 50 percent wage cut, is a run down and hazardous workplace, where sweltering heat, overwork, and the constant threat of injury are all part of the job.

“It’s a hellhole,” said Carla, a worker at the plant. In the summer, temperatures at the plant reach up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Workers often pass out from heat exhaustion, and certain parts of the plant have no air circulation whatsoever.

Yet despite the abysmal conditions, the United Auto Workers and GM are determined to force workers to accept 50 percent wage cuts. GM is seeking to sell the plant to JD Norman, which would mean cutting base wages to \$15.50 per hour, from nearly \$30. The sale will only worsen conditions, as JD Norman is determined to overhaul operations to extract maximum profits.

Workers showed their opposition to the GM/UAW proposal at an August 15 meeting, where they shouted down UAW International officials and drove them out of the hall, forcing the UAW to cancel a vote on the concessions they hoped to hold the next day.

The heat is compounded by lack of drinking water. Several years ago, GM replaced the plant’s water fountains with five-gallon containers containing water that workers say is undrinkable. “There are things growing in there,” said Angela, another worker. The plant is infested with cockroaches, which congregate by the water containers. “You can’t go a day without stepping on a cockroach,” said Carla.

The plant recently added bottled water and ice, which workers have to leave the assembly line in order to get. However, management even keeps the water bottles

locked up unless the outside heat index reaches 90 degrees. “Often they’ll only bring it out for the first shift, and close it back up for the second and third,” said Jennifer, an auto worker.

“I’ve been in the plant at 2 am in the morning and the temperature is 102 degrees; but the outside temperature is under 90, so the bottled water stays locked up,” said Mark, another worker.

Plants are notoriously overheated, particularly ones as vast as the one in Indianapolis. “For employers, it’s not economically feasible to cool these facilities,” said Marquita Walker, an assistant professor of labor studies at Indiana University.

When told about conditions of the plant, Dr. Walker said she had never heard about a US factory that does not provide water for its workers. “That’s just crazy; that’s just insane; those are slave conditions. Workers have to be hydrated.”

Because of the sweltering heat and lack of water, it is not unknown for workers to pass out on the production line. “When someone passes out because of the heat, they shut down the line for five minutes, take them up to medical, and then the line starts back up,” said Angela.

The sprawling 2.1 million square foot plant used to employ 5,600 workers, but is now down to 650. It was built in 1930, and has been retooled countless times. Only a portion of the plant’s capacity is used. Machinery and whole areas of the plant have been left to rust.

“The plant’s roof leaks,” said Angela. “In the winter, the snow comes through the roof.” This creates pools of water on the floor, mixed with oil. “When you’re driving a forklift through the plant and hit a pool of water, it’s easy to just hydroplane.”

The plant’s oily floors create an even greater hazard.

The plant processes parts that must be coated in oil, and when they are transported, they drip oil onto the entire floor. “We have an outside contractor who is supposed to take care of the floors, but it doesn’t ever get done,” said Angela.

Within the last few weeks, one of the workers lost a finger when a heavy die fell on his hand. “He just pulled his hand out; he figured he’d lost his finger already, and he didn’t want to make the operator lift the die again,” said one worker.

Stories abound of auto workers losing limbs, falling, and getting cut. Angela related one horrific incident. Several years ago a worker lost his finger, which was never found. Afterwards, the cleanup team picked up a pair of gloves, which were sent to be washed and redistributed to workers. About a week later, another worker tried to put on a pair of gloves and found a human finger inside.

Workers have virtually no mechanism for forcing management to address safety problems. “Our grievance procedure has dissolved. We don’t even write grievances any more,” said Carla. The only way for workers to protest a safety violation is to say that they will not do the job. However, this is no guarantee that the problem will be fixed.

“If you report a minor problem, they might fix it,” said Angela. “But if you report something that will hold up production, they’ll say ok, no problem, go back to your toolbox, and they’ll have someone else do it.”

“Safety used to be the overriding priority in auto plants,” said Jenn. “But this is not the case any more. All they care about is shaving an extra minute off of production times.”

The sweltering heat and constant pressure to speed up work takes an immense toll on the human body. Among the worst affected are temporary workers, who lack the most elementary benefits necessary to deal with their taxing work.

One worker has been a “vacation temp” for three years, making \$15.60 per hour. When she fell sick recently, she could not even get the medical leave that she had put off for two years.

Her leg went totally numb because of a work-related nerve injury. When she went to get treated, doctors told her that her blood pressure was so high it was a wonder she had not had a stroke already. However, because she missed work to get treated, management told her she

was fired.

These disastrous conditions are one product of the decades of betrayals carried out by the UAW, which now does nothing to protect even the most immediate and life-threatening safety concerns. On the contrary, the UAW is working actively to increase the exploitation of these same workers.

Amid all this, GM, the UAW, and JD Norman continue to put pressure onto workers to accept their proposed contract. GM has called in about 30 additional temporary workers to take drug tests next week, and workers suspect this is to “pad the vote” and skew the results toward accepting the contract.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**