

Detroit area worker killed in auto parts plant

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An auto parts worker, 42-years-old, was killed when a five-ton piece of equipment fell on him at the Mollertech LLC plant in Shelby Township, Michigan last Thursday. The worker's name has not been released at the request of his family.

Shelby Township fire and police units responded to a 911 call from the plant. They attempted to rescue the worker, but he was pronounced dead on the scene. There were no other reported injuries. Fire Chief James Swinkowski stated about the incident, "It's still under investigation, so we're not sure if there was a failure in the process somewhere that led to the accident."

The worker was killed while reportedly working on an overhead crane when a five-ton die fell on him, trapping him underneath. The cause of the incident has yet to be released by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA).

The Mollertech plant, located about 30 miles north of Detroit, produces injection molded parts and accessories, such as dashboards, for car and truck interiors. It opened in 1998 and is a non-union company that employs approximately 140 people. The plant is owned by the MollerGroup GmbH, based in Bielefeld, Germany, and supplies parts for Chrysler, BMW, Toyota, Honda and Volkswagen.

The plant is part of a larger industrial park only a few miles away from Chrysler's Sterling Heights assembly plant. It was one of many mold-making companies in the Shelby area.

The WSWs reporting team went to the plant to investigate the incident but supervisors did everything to intimidate workers and prevent them from speaking to reporters. The general manager who came out of the plant said the worker's death was "simply a tragedy" and not caused by unsafe working conditions or cost cutting measures. He said OSHA was doing an investigation into the accident.

Our reporters were able to speak to a veteran Chrysler

stamping plant worker who had heard about the accident. He said, "It was five tons, equal to a car and a half. What I am thinking is he was underneath [the die] and the brakes came out on the crane. It could have been a malfunction of the machinery. Whenever there was a malfunction at our shop, we stopped the crane immediately."

Mollertech's actual record of industrial incidents is unclear. A search of OSHA's database only reveals a single inspection—unannounced—opened October 2006. There, the company was cited for four "serious" violations and ten counts of "other" violations. Initially fined \$3,600 for all the "serious" violations, the penalty was reduced to \$1,800 after litigation. No fines were levied for the other violations.

The company was involved in a lawsuit filed in 2003 involving a former employee, Paul Bennett. Bennett, who had Crohn's disease, which causes bowel inflammation, requested that he be worked no more than forty hours a week on the orders of his physician and under the American with Disabilities Act. Mollertech fired him for this request. In the ensuing lawsuit, Mollertech contended that Bennett's request to limit his workweek to only forty hours was "unreasonable and unrelated to his disability."

Injuries in the auto industry in general are commonplace. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Workers in the automobile and light duty motor vehicle manufacturing industry experience higher rates of injury and illness than do workers in most other industries." These are all a result of the heat, fumes, noise and repetitive motion that are commonplace in the industry. In 2011, the incidence rate of injuries in automobile manufacturing was nearly 40 percent higher than the incidence rate of private industry as a whole.

Conditions in the auto parts plants, which supply Chrysler, General Motors, Ford and other automakers,

are even worse, with many smaller companies dependent on back-breaking conditions because they cannot afford the massive outlay for state-of-the-art manufacturing equipment. These companies are under intense pressure from the Detroit automakers to cut costs and meet just in time delivery schedules.

This has gotten much worse since the restructuring of the auto industry by the Obama administration in 2009, which led to the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, the shutdown of dozens of factories and the slashing of wages, particularly for new hires. Having cleared out the “overcapacity” problem, the factories are running at full tilt, scheduling workers for 10-12 hour shifts, eliminating break time and increasing the speed of the assembly line. If these are the conditions in the assembly plants, what workers in the auto parts industry face is much worse.

The undermining of safety is also a result of the cuts to OSHA under the Obama administration. In 2011, the White House revealed plans to sharply cut regulations on corporations as part of general efforts to eliminate constraints on the profit margins of major companies. This has meant that the auto industry has operated with virtual impunity in imposing demands and unsafe conditions on its workers, particularly for the auto parts workers.

The United Auto Workers has played the decisive role in the abandonment of basic safety. Starting in the 1980s, the UAW isolated and betrayed a series of strikes by parts workers attempting to maintain the parity with the auto assembly workers. One of the most bitter experiences was the betrayal of the 450 members of UAW Local 14 at AP Parts in Toledo, Ohio in 1984-85, which exploded after the company slashed wages from \$12 to \$6 an hour. The months long strike only ended after the UAW imposed a concessions contract on the workers and lowered wages for new hires.

The betrayal of the strikes—which was done deliberately by the UAW in order to lower the costs of the Detroit automakers—led to an explosion of non-union auto parts plants throughout the US. The effect was that by 2000, auto parts workers earned 31 percent less than an assembly worker at a Big Three plant and that the conditions of work in the parts industry were reduced to sweatshop-like conditions.



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