

Worker dies from extreme heat at Georgia auto parts plant

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Teresa Weaver Pickard, a 42 year-old worker, died May 29 after working on a project weld line in the LaGrange, Georgia plant owned by auto parts maker Sewon America. Despite having collapsed and complaining of chest pain, Pickard sat for three hours before an ambulance was called and died on the way to the hospital. Several other workers reportedly lost consciousness last week because of the high temperatures in the plant.

The Korean-based company opened the factory in 2009 to provide metal stamped chassis and body components for the nearby KIA Motors Manufacturing in West Point, Georgia. The factory, which also supplies the Hyundai factory in Montgomery, Alabama, expanded its workforce to 850 workers last year and invested an additional \$10 million.

A Sewon employee who wished to remain anonymous told the *LaGrange Citizen* that the plant's air conditioner was not functioning properly and that areas, including the employee break room, were unbearably hot. "I heard that [Pickard] complained of chest pain several times before she was sent to the break room," he said.

The worker also reported that the air conditioning in the break room where Pickard was sent was not turned on and that management keeps the air conditioning off in the break room to discourage employee "loitering." "It's so hot in the break room that the candy in the vending machines melted."

The employee added that Sewon management is very reluctant to call 911 about any issue. He said that another employee was recently fired for punching a manager who grabbed him, but the authorities were not called about this incident, either.

"I think [the managers] seek to create an adversarial relationship with employees," he said. "If they had hot

pokers, they'd stab you with them... I really believe they have contempt for their workers," he said, adding, "It's a really hostile environment. It's similar to a third-world sweat shop."

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) announced it has opened an investigation into conditions at the plant, which runs on two twelve-hour shifts, seven days per week.

Three years ago, *LaGrange Daily News* reported that a man fell 50 feet to his death at a Sewon construction site. In December 2012, two workers were seriously injured at the plant when a crane hit the basket lift they were in while doing maintenance work.

The newspaper reported that OSHA fined Sewon \$135,900 for a variety of safety violations three years ago. "There is no reason to leave employees unprotected," said Andre Richards, director of OSHA's Atlanta-West Office, according to an OSHA press release regarding the safety violations. "Management is aware of the deficiencies in their safety and health program and needs to take action."

The LaGrange plant is located in Georgia near the Alabama border, about 70 miles west of Atlanta. Official unemployment in the region ranges from 9 to 11 percent and regional poverty rates are very high. In Randolph County, Alabama, more than 17 percent of families live at or below the federal poverty line, while more than one-fifth of families in LaGrange live at or below the federal poverty line. A little over 22 percent of the regional workforce is underemployed.

In 2009, when Sewon advertised for applicants, managers reported that in the first three days more than 3,000 people had applied for an expected 600 \$10-per-hour jobs. Only 300 people were to be hired that year.

According to her obituary posted by the Clark Memorial Funeral Service, "Teresa attended and

graduated from Wadley High School in 1989. Afterwards she attended Southern Union State Community College where she studied nursing. Teresa worked at Plantation Patterns for 18 years. She had many skills, during her time there she held the positions of team leader, supervisor, manager, and scheduler. She worked at Plantation until its closing. Afterwards, Teresa continued her education through online courses and eventually earned an Associate in Science. She then became employed with Sewon America Manufacturing, Inc., in LaGrange, Georgia.”

Exploiting the ready availability of low wage labor, many European and Asian-based auto companies, like Korean-based Kia and Hyundai, expanded the number of their factories, known as “transplants,” in the US southern states beginning in the early 1980s. In many cases, like the BMW factory in Spartanburg, South Carolina, the companies have used the US as a cheap labor platform, not only for US sales, but for export to the world market.

Given its long record of betraying workers at the so-called Detroit Big Three companies, General Motors, Chrysler and Ford, the United Auto Workers union has been incapable of organizing any of these plants. In recent years, the UAW has appealed to the executives of the foreign-owned companies to recognize the union arguing that the “21st Century UAW” has long dispensed with any “adversarial relationship” and is fully committed to guaranteeing the profitability and competitiveness of the auto bosses.

As part of the Obama Administration’s 2009 restructuring of Chrysler and GM, the UAW agreed to sharp reductions in wages and benefits, and the abandonment of long-time protections against speed up and long work hours in order to bring the labor costs of the Detroit-based factories down to the level of the non-union transplants in the South.

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 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 the

assembly plants, 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 automakers to cut costs and meet just-in-time delivery schedules.

A new study by the Motor & Equipment Manufacturers Association found that the auto parts industry directly employs more than 734,000 workers in all 50 states, while contributing nearly \$355 billion to the GDP. Like the workers at Sewon, the majority are compelled to work for poverty wages in sweatshop conditions.



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