

Fiat-Chrysler worker crushed to death at Detroit assembly plant

Shannon Jones
6 May 2015

A 53-year-old skilled trades worker, Donald Megge, died early Tuesday morning in an industrial accident at Fiat-Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly plant on the eastside of Detroit. The tragedy occurred at the plant's wastewater treatment facility near the Detroit River.

According to a statement issued by United Auto Workers International Vice President Norwood Jewell, Megge, who lived in Sterling Heights, Michigan, died while working alone performing "routine maintenance" on a wastewater filter press. A millwright and a wastewater operator, Megge started work at 5:30 am and was found dead at 6:30. He worked at Chrysler for 18 years.

Detroit Fire Captain Gerod Funderburg reported that the worker was "caught in a machine press suspended a little bit above the ground." He said Megge was already dead when emergency responders arrived.

An investigation is reportedly underway by state and federal health and safety officials as well as by the UAW and Fiat-Chrysler. The UAW did not return a call placed by this reporter to seek further details.

In case after case the UAW has jumped to the defense of the auto companies and sought to suppress workers' concerns over safety issues. In the February 1999 boiler explosion at the Ford Rouge complex, which killed six workers, three of the six had filed safety grievances warning of potential dangers, including with the boiler that exploded. From the start, however, the UAW defended management, claiming that the aging power plant was one of the safest in Ford's system.

The Jefferson North facility builds the Jeep Grand Cherokee and the Dodge Durango sports utility vehicles. It employs about 4,600 workers. Built in 1992, the factory is the last assembly plant left that is entirely within the city limits of Detroit. Workers produce some 300,000 vehicles per year.

In August 2013 the five millionth Jeep rolled off the assembly line. With a gross profit on each vehicle estimated between \$4,000 to \$5,000, workers at the factory have produced \$20-\$25 billion in profits for the company during the plant's more than two decades of operations.

Wastewater treatment plants are among the most hazardous places to work. Not only do workers face the risks associated with heavy machinery, they also work with toxic wastes and other dangerous materials.

According to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, the Jefferson North facility utilizes nearly 700,000 gallons of water each day. Wastewater is generated in cooling towers, paint operations from cleaning, paint coating, parts washing and other processes.

A city of Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant operator told the *World Socialist Web Site* that industrial companies recycle water for manufacturing uses or treat their waste before releasing it into the sewers and interceptors. "There are hydraulic presses used in wastewater treatment. There is high water flow, air pressure and electricity rolled into one."

He added, "Wastewater treatment is just as dangerous as mining, steel and construction."

The tragedy at Jefferson Assembly takes place under conditions of ruthless speedup and cost cutting by all the major automakers. Chrysler made \$663 million before taxes on its North American operations in the first quarter of 2015 and is expecting an overall profit this year of \$1.2 billion.

While auto profits have soared, the conditions of auto workers are under relentless attack. At the Jefferson North plant there is widespread anger over the Alternative Work Schedule (AWS), imposed as part of the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry by the

Obama administration. Workers are forced to labor exhausting 10-hour staggered shifts without payment of overtime after eight hours or weekends and without a paid lunch break.

Half of the workforce at the Jefferson plant is comprised of lower paid second-tier workers, who make little more than half the pay of senior workers. At these wages they cannot afford the vehicles they build. Overall, 43 percent of Chrysler workers are second-tier, the highest percentage among the US-based automakers. Tier-one workers, meanwhile, have not seen a raise in 10 years.

In the 2015 contract negotiations, the automakers have raised the demand for the creation of a third tier of super-exploited workers, at a pay rate even below tier two. United Auto Workers President Dennis Williams indicated that he was open to the idea if it would “grow the business,” i.e. boost the profits and the value of shares held by wealthy investors—and the UAW—and create new dues-paying members.

The UAW and Chrysler have undermined safety by combining skilled trades job classifications and using less trained workers to perform jobs normally done by journeymen. In the 2011 Chrysler contract all skilled trades workers were lumped into three work groups and five classifications. No lines of demarcation exist within the work groups.

A veteran Chrysler skilled trade worker told the WSWS, “They have been combining skilled trades classifications for three years. They have been turning millwrights into tin knockers and welders and vice versa. It all has an impact on safety. Normally you are supposed to have 4,000 hours of classroom and 4,000 hours of on-the-job training to get your journeyman license. Instead they are giving them 40 hours of class and putting them on the floor.”

One Jefferson worker told the WSWS, “I see injuries every day. Chrysler says it promotes safety, but it goes both ways.”

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 4,585 fatal work injuries reported in 2013. At least 3.8 million were injured. Another 50,000 workers die each year nationwide from long-term exposure to hazardous substances such as asbestos, silica and benzene.

The BLS reports that 236 workers died after being caught in or compressed by equipment or objects or

caught in running equipment or machinery. There were 133 workplace deaths in Michigan alone, including 25 workers killed in machine-related accidents.

According to a recent report issued by the AFL-CIO, although the number of US workers and workplaces has doubled since 1970, the same year Congress enacted the federal Occupation Safety and Health Act, the number of inspectors and enforcement officials has fallen far behind. It would take 140 years for federal and state inspectors to visit every US workplace.

Instead the federal government, including the Obama administration, has outsourced safety enforcement to joint management-labor committees, which sacrifice the lives and limbs of workers on the altar of corporate profit.

Employers are rarely charged in connection with workplace deaths. Since 1970 there have been 390,000 US workplace fatalities, but only 88 prosecutions. If convicted in connection with a workplace death, employers face only a misdemeanor charge, with a maximum six-month jail sentence. Indeed, since the creation of OSHA, only a handful of corporate criminals have faced prison time.

The death of Megge is the latest in a series of industrial fatalities in the Detroit area. On April 18, a worker at the US Steel’s Great Lakes Steel Cold Mill shipping facility outside Detroit died after being hit by a truck. Heather Warren, age 41, of Inkster died when a semi-trailer backed over her. She had worked at US Steel’s Ecorse mill for three years and worked as a shift supervisor, doing office work and shipping, her sister Sheryl Warren told the local media. Directing trucks “was not part of her regular job. I don’t even think she was trained for this,” the sister said.

In order to protect the steel giant, authorities have charged the driver of the truck with manslaughter.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact