

Many questions remain in death of Detroit Fiat-Chrysler worker

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Ten days after the death of skilled trades worker Donald Megge at the Fiat-Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly plant in Detroit a host of questions remain unanswered.

Megge, 53, died May 5 in an industrial accident at the factory's wastewater treatment facility. His body was found at about 6:30 in the morning. Megge had apparently been crushed to death while working alone performing maintenance on a wastewater filter press.

The victim was a millwright and wastewater operator with many years' experience. Megge is survived by his wife Susan, three children and three grandchildren.

Since the initial reports of the accident, there has been no further information forthcoming from either the United Auto Workers (UAW), Chrysler or government safety officials. A call by the *World Socialist Web Site* to UAW Solidarity House headquarters in Detroit was not returned.

Workers can place no confidence in the UAW to expose the truth behind this tragedy. The UAW has no independence from Fiat-Chrysler. The Joint Health and Safety Committee is one of the alphabet soup of labor-management committees that are funded by the employers to defend their interests. Such committees provide cozy jobs for union bureaucrats and are notorious for pressuring workers not to report injuries or file safety grievances.

Interviews of workers at Jefferson North Assembly and other auto plants paint a picture of how management and the UAW sacrifice the health and safety of workers to corporate profit.

A General Motors powerhouse worker told the WSWs there are many potential dangers associated with the wastewater filter press, where highly pressurized water is forced through filters to remove sludge particles.

Jefferson workers described numerous accidents and injuries at the plant due to unsafe conditions and constant pressure to get out production. The same week Megge died, another Jefferson worker reportedly died of a heart

attack and a third suffered a stroke. A fourth worker had to be treated for an injury suffered during a fall.

The *World Socialist Web Site* issues a warning: unless the circumstances of the latest death are fully investigated and exposed, further tragedies will follow. The circumstances of Megge's death raise a number of questions:

- Why was Megge alone at the time of the accident? Is it common practice for skilled tradesmen to work alone while making repairs? If so, when did this practice start and is it a product of cost-cutting measures by management?
- Was the accident related to combining positions, cross training of skilled trades classifications or other rollbacks in working conditions accepted by the UAW?
- How long had the wastewater filter press been in service? How old is the wastewater treatment facility and what is its general condition?
- Does the UAW have a record of safety complaints or grievances related to conditions in the wastewater treatment plant?
- Has an autopsy been conducted? Are the results available?
- Were workers adequately trained on dangers of the filtration press? Were safety measures, including lockout precautions, enforced?

A Jefferson North worker with three years told the WSWs that in the days following the accident she saw skilled tradesmen working in pairs. "That was a red flag to me. That makes me think they should always be working in twos. The work is fairly dangerous. It seems like they are out to save money at the cost of employees' lives."

"There is a lot of speculation that it is being covered up. That we won't get the full story."

She also said the grueling pace under the Alternative Work Schedule (AWS), based on staggered 10-hour

shifts, takes a toll on workers' health. "There is no way to get adequate rest. It breaks your body down. They want quality, but it gets to the point where you can't function. Your focus is not there."

The worker was highly critical of the medical facilities at the Jefferson North plant. "They are not for us, they are for Chrysler. If you are hurt, they won't tell you what is wrong. They will give you a bio-freeze and send you back to work. It gets to the point where you don't want to go to medical."

A Fiat-Chrysler tool and die maker said under the cross training of skilled trades implemented in the 2011 UAW national contract, workers were getting far less than adequate instruction. "I have been to some of those training classes for 40 hours. You need at least 100 hours to comprehend what is going on."

He said that was still far short of the 4,000 hours of classroom and 4,000 hours of on-the-job training required to become a journeyman. "They are supposed to work under the supervision of a journeyman, but the journeyman can't always inspect their work."

He said it was unusual to work alone. "We have a buddy system. Unless I have someone with me I don't go into the basement alone. If I get hit on the head I don't want them to be asking five hours later where I am."

Another Jefferson worker explained that management put an enormous premium on production. "When machine breakdowns happen, maintenance will come and put a band-aid on it just to keep the line moving instead of closing production down to fix what has to be fixed."

"There are a lot of people hurt because nothing is properly fixed. There should be a thorough investigation (into the death of Megge.) But truth be said, they will keep it hush-hush. Management doesn't care about us workers and the union doesn't care about us either."

Another Fiat-Chrysler skilled trades worker echoed these sentiments. "They don't want to shut down for anything. They will have you try to repair the line while it is moving."

"When you say company and union you must put in an equal sign between them. They are the same. They are going to have a rude awakening in September when we can opt out of paying union dues (under Michigan's so-called right-to-work law). I would say 80 percent will opt out."

Workers should recall the 1999 explosion at the power plant at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan. Three of the six workers killed in the blast had filed safety complaints prior to the explosion including about the

specific boiler that exploded. With the 78-year-old power plant being phased out and replaced, one worker warned before the explosion, "I knew it'd be running on bubble gum and bobby pins" until its closure. "I knew they'd only fix what they had to fix to keep it running."

Even before an investigation had been conducted the UAW rushed to the defense of Ford, with then UAW Vice President for Ford Ron Gettelfinger claiming the power plant was one of the best run plants in the Ford system. "It was a safe facility, there's no question about that," Gettelfinger told the *Detroit News*. Since grievances are filed through the UAW, union officials were fully aware of the deadly conditions in the deteriorating facility and did nothing about it. Instead they defended management, not the workers.

Workers can place no faith in the phony investigation being carried out by the UAW and Fiat-Chrysler. Both entities are determined to protect the company's interests. As for federal and state safety agencies—which have been cut to the bone by Democrats and Republicans alike—they have largely outsourced any responsibility to pro-company joint committees.

The health and safety of the workforce cannot be left to the devices of management and their stooges in the UAW leadership. The UAW is one of the largest shareholders in the company and has repeatedly demonstrated—through sanctioning the hated two-tier wage system, the AWS and countless other attacks on workers—that it functions as a tool of management.

This situation calls for an independent investigation under the control of the rank-and-file to uncover the truth about the death of Megge and protect the lives of workers. This can only be done through the election of a rank-and-file committee, consisting of the most militant and self-sacrificing workers, to organize workers independently of and in opposition to the company, the UAW and the big business politicians.



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