UAW, Fiat Chrysler maintain silence on death of skilled trades worker

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More than three weeks after the death of skilled trades worker Donald Megge at the Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly plant in Detroit the circumstances of this tragedy remain unclear.

According to a report on the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) web site, the 53-year-old father of three was cleaning sludge from a filter press machine in the wastewater treatment facility when the device recycled, crushing him between the plates. Megge was apparently working alone at the time of the accident. The wastewater treatment plant is housed in a separate building from the assembly operations.

The company, the United Auto Workers and MIOSHA reportedly are carrying out an investigation, but no facts have been released except for those cited above. Nothing can be expected of the inquiry being carried out by the UAW. The joint UAW-Fiat Chrysler safety committee is a front for management and will undoubtedly exonerate the company. These joint committees, funded by the companies, provide cushy jobs for union bureaucrats but do nothing to protect workers.

A powerhouse worker at General Motors contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* said he was familiar with the filter press. “One of the things that happens with the filter press is the sludge builds up when they run water through it and the sludge has to be cleaned out. Tubs are then used to haul the sludge away.

“You have to do maintenance daily. Typically, when you work by yourself, little things may fall through the cracks. A lot of the time you are put under the gun for time. There is pressure to get that sludge cleaned out and get the filter back in operation. There are a million things that could go wrong.”

He said he was skeptical of the official investigation now under way. “Normally, they can make it look like operator error, whether it is or is not,” he said.

“As far as the UAW, I don’t trust them a hell of a lot. When the Ford power plant exploded in 1999 the first words out of [then UAW vice president] Ron Gettelfinger’s mouth were to defend Ford. This is the union saying the company is not at fault.

“It all comes down to money. If it costs money, it will come down to ‘operator error.’ I have never had much confidence in their negotiations. I have been lied to by a lot of people.”

A young worker at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant said, “After the death of the skilled trades worker, the foreman—we call him ‘The Bull’—called a meeting to read a statement from the company vice president. It was only a general statement and there was no empathy. All they said was there is an ongoing investigation and there are no further details.

“You never see the union steward. The union guys are always at clubs, parties or the bars with management. They do whatever the company wants.”

The Jefferson North plant builds the Jeep Cherokee and Dodge Durango, employing some 4,600 workers. The facility operates under the Alternative Work Schedule, with three crews working alternating 10-hour shifts without payment of overtime after eight hours. A large part of the workforce is comprised of younger, second-tier workers, making a little over half of standard base wages.

The auto companies continue to reap the benefit of lower wages and grueling speed-up, with Fiat Chrysler’s US division posting a record $2.58 billion first quarter profit, a large portion of it coming from a one time change in tax status. First quarter revenue in the US rose 10 percent to $20.88 billion. FCA’s worldwide sales rose 6 percent.

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A young second-tier worker at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit spoke about the upcoming contract negotiations between the UAW and the Detroit automakers. “We produce 600 trucks per shift. Workers want the money back that we lost in wages and cost of living. We talked about that last night in the plant.

“All of the tier ones have house notes to pay and they haven’t had a raise in 10 years. We can’t live on the tier-two wages, especially if you have kids to raise.”

She spoke about the neglect of health and safety by management. “Inside the plant they make you wait a long time just to get relief to go to the bathroom. There is grease on the floor and they won’t clean it up if you ask them to. Warren Truck is one of the oldest buildings Chrysler owns. When it rains there are leaks in the roof. We are working with electrical equipment like power guns and there is water dripping and puddles on the floor.

“They don’t want to close the plant to fix it because it would cost them money to stop the line. This is the only plant that makes the full-size pickups in the United States.”

She spoke about the impact of the passage of Right-to-Work legislation by the Michigan legislature. The law bans the collection of union dues as a condition of employment.

“With the Right-to-Work law a lot of workers are going to stop paying dues. Why should we? We need a union, but one that is not on the side of the company. I heard from the older workers that they rig the votes to get contracts passed. They make you revote until you accept something.

“If workers stop paying union dues they will be blackballed. Already if you are not up to date on your dues they won’t let you vote on the contract. Before contract votes, the company has a practice of firing workers for wearing the wrong shoes or clothing. The union has already made it clear they won’t try to get your job back until after the contract—and that’s only if you are paying dues.

“Everyone knows you have to do favors to the shop steward to get anything. That includes giving them female company. It’s degrading, they’re opportunists.”

The Jefferson worker said they were getting little information from the UAW about the upcoming contract negotiations. “The union isn’t telling us anything about what they are trying to get in the contract. The tier-one workers want cost of living raises and to raise the tier-two workers up. We want to get rid of the 10-hour shifts and get paid overtime after eight hours.

“An older worker told me not to be fooled by a big signing bonus they use to get you to buy a bad deal. Management doesn’t care—all they are thinking about is getting out the trucks. There is already a high turnover rate at the plant because people don’t want to work this hard for low pay. Now they want a third tier,” she said, referring to a proposal to bring in workers at pay rates even lower then the current second-tier wage. “But there are already too many divisions among workers. We should eliminate the two-tier system.”

She described what it was like trying to live on the second-tier wage. “We’re making just enough to live—nothing more. Today in Detroit thousands of people are having their water shut off. I go down to pay my water bill and I see elderly people on fixed incomes and people not working lining up for help. But if you don’t have enough to make a payment they’ll shut you off. It’s not that people don’t want to pay, it’s just that there are so many elderly workers who have to pay out of their butts for prescriptions, to keep their houses from falling apart. On the news they say there is money to help people, but there is no help.”

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