Workers face 1930s-type exploitation at Chicago Ford plants

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More than 100 years after Upton Sinclair wrote his classic novel *The Jungle* exposing conditions of industrial slavery in Chicago, some of the same conditions are being recreated at Ford plants in the city.

The ongoing class action lawsuit filed by workers at two Ford plants in the Chicago area points to the existence of conditions in the plants similar to those that existed before the rise of the United Auto Workers and the mass industrial unions, with the exception that the union is now involved in the alleged abuses. The suit names not only management officials but top local UAW officials.

At least 33 employees at two Ford plants, Chicago Assembly and Chicago Stamping, have joined a class action lawsuit filed in late 2014 alleging widespread sexual harassment, threats of violence and racial discrimination. The suit names Ford employees and executives as well as leaders of UAW Local 551. About 5,000 workers are employed at the two plants: 800 at stamping and 4,200 at assembly.

Workers say they are subject to racial and sexual insults, groped, have had their jumpers pulled off, been verbally and physically threatened (in one case, a worker claims to have been violently pushed to the ground and threatened against making any further complaints about harassment), been repeatedly asked to perform sex acts in and around the plant, and to do so in exchange for money. The suit details how management hired sex workers to perform at plant events, contributing to a hostile environment. Plaintiff Christie V. said working at the plant was “a total nightmare.”

The current suit was filed in November 2014, initially on behalf of four women. It has since expanded to include many more employees. An independent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigation earlier in 2015 confirmed evidence of harassment and racial discrimination in the plants, and retaliation against workers who fought to stop the harassment. Retaliation ranged from denial of overtime to reassignment to work more closely with the alleged abusers.

A first-tier worker who started at Ford Assembly in the mid-2000s, was laid off for a period, and called back around 2010, recently described some of the conditions in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. The worker’s name is being withheld to prevent retaliation.

“I had a superintendent tell me he’d choke me out and I’d wake up pregnant. This was my boss’s, boss’s boss.

“It’s more than sexual, because there’s a lot of men here that have been harassed. Their jobs have been manipulated, their overtime has been manipulated and threats made against them.

“They’re manipulating people, period. If they can’t get what they want from you, they totally manipulate you. If it’s sex they want, and you’re not giving it, they’re going to manipulate your job. You’re not going to get any overtime, you’re going to get the hard job.

“Coming here and working at Ford, and seeing how this particular management does things, I see how the union manipulates it in the company’s favor. They don’t have anything posted in common areas, as far as your rights, the numbers to call, what to do, what to expect. I’m one of the people they steer clear of. Because I read the contract, I’m a troublemaker, that’s my reputation.

“The first tier and the second tier are actually starting to come together, because we see now what they were doing is dividing and conquering. Well now it’s backfiring. And you hardly ever see the union rep

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because of it."

The two Ford plants have a history of this type of abuse of the workforce. In 1997, fourteen women workers at both plants filed a class action sexual harassment suit and as a result Ford was forced to pay a $9 million settlement and operate under EEOC monitoring for three years.

At least eight managers have been removed from the two plants. In May, Ford reported it had also suspended the plant manager, human resources and labor relations officials at the assembly plant. The company has not released details of the suspensions.

UAW Local 551 chairman, Allen "Coby" Millender, is named in the suit and was subsequently suspended by Ford. However the United Auto Workers Local 551 challenged the suspension of Millender [http://uawlocal551.com/reps3.html]. UAW International Vice President Jimmy Settles filed a grievance against the suspension of Millender, who returned to his position in April.

According to the *Detroit News*, when one plaintiff attempted to complain about harassment to Millender, he allegedly invited her to have a romantic lunch with him in his office and to "bring those pretty lips."

Speaking to the *Chicago Tribune*, Keith Hunt, an attorney representing the female employees in the suit said the union had not represented workers, noting, "for years, they've done absolutely nothing." He went on to remark on the hypocrisy of the union intervening to protect a top local official when it had done nothing to protect its members.

In her memoir of the 1936-37 GM sit down strike, UAW organizer and socialist Genora Johnson spoke of what women workers faced at an AC Sparkplug plant in the GM-controlled town of Flint, Michigan in those dark days.

"I'll tell you about the conditions of these young women. After the strike, a Senate investigating committee found that in one department of A.C. alone, the girls had all been forced to go to the county hospital and be treated for venereal disease traced to one foreman. Those were the conditions that young women had to accept in order to support their families. Sometimes they earned just enough to provide food for the family and they couldn't lose their jobs because nobody else in the family had a job."

Ken Malone, a participant in the Flint sitdown strikes in 1936-37, described a foreman at GM's Buick plant before the strike, "He was a good one for messing with the women and the men's wives. He would have a party at his house...and you all came. When he began to bother the women you said nothing or faced being out of a job...Times were rough. To keep your job you did anything the foreman asked. If you went hunting you brought him a piece of venison; if you went fishing he got the largest fish; if you had a garden he always got a basket of vegetables from it. And women, the foremen chased after your own wife and if you wanted a job you let him."

Malone further described conditions to the *Bulletin* newspaper, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, in 1987: "We were worse than a chattel slave because I know from what I read about them they had at least a barn to sleep. There was mass unemployment. Not only was there hunger, but people wore badly torn shoes, with no coats. There was no such thing as pension funds or welfare and no one heard anything about someone retiring."

Echoes of those terrible conditions are increasingly common today, especially as relates to younger workers, who are being systematically stripped of benefits won by previous generations. This situation is not only an indictment of capitalism, but speaks to the bankruptcy and failure of the unions, which are abetting a return to industrial slavery.

This is not simply the result of the corruption of individual union officials, but the failure of nationally based organizations wedded to the defense of the capitalist profit system. It underscores the call by the Socialist Equality Party for a break with the UAW and the construction of new rank-and-file based organizations of struggle.

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