

Dictatorship conditions at Ford's Kansas City Assembly Plant: Part One

Autoworker crushed to death in conveyer belt catastrophe

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This is the first in a two-part series on working conditions at Ford's Kansas City Assembly Plant.

A truck driver was crushed to death at Ford's Kansas City Assembly Plant in the days before Christmas, leaving behind a wife and small children. The worker, David Scott Ford, was a contractor who was killed while trying to keep Ford's assembly line running.

"There was a jam in the seat conveyer," a KCAP worker ("Chris") told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. "He was pinned back there for quite some time before anyone knew or found him. I heard one of our cleanup people heard some moaning and some kind of noise. I don't think he was in a position where he could actually cry for help, but nobody could see him. I don't know how long he was back there."

Another KCAP worker ("Alex") said, "I heard his back was broken and he died three days later. The seat conveyer belt goes up 10 to 15 feet in the air. They say this individual saw that a seat wasn't quite on the carrier correctly, so he tried to put it on the carrier and got caught in it. He was taken all the way up in the air and then back on the ground, where it dragged him along the ground. We're expendable here at Ford."

When asked about the death, Ford's Global News Manager Mike Moran told the WSWS he was "not familiar with that."

Ford is not paying attention to the fact that workers are dying in their plants. Instead, they are celebrating the recent announcement that the truck made at Kansas City Assembly—the Ford F-150 pickup—was the best-selling vehicle in the US this year with over 700,000 sold. Though this fact has been widely reported by the auto industry press, as of press time the worker's death has gone unreported.

"They try to keep these things hush-hush, they don't want them reported," said Alex, who is a skilled trades worker.

"Profit and production are the bottom line. Production is everything if you're in there, and they want that line going. They constantly want the faster line."

In its Christmas Bulletin, United Auto Workers Local 249 gave Ford and the deceased worker's contract company a free pass, telling workers that the deceased truck driver "was injured inside a restricted area." The bulletin continued: "DO NOT for any reason risk your safety while working in the plant. If you are not supposed to be in an area do not go in there for any reason."

The UAW did not return a call asking for further comment.

The fact that this deceased worker may have entered a restricted area in order to fix a jam in the assembly line does not excuse Ford for the tragedy. Only an organization that represents management would blame workers for factory deaths.

"It just shows that the UAW is doing their part to support the company and their position," Alex said.

What's more, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration will not be investigating the death.

Kansas City Area OSHA Director Barbara Theriot confirmed that the death took place but told the WSWS, "We do not have jurisdiction over self-employed people. Since he was an independent contractor, we have no jurisdiction. We only investigate employees of the company."

The truck driver is the second worker to die at Kansas City Assembly Plant in the last twelve months.

In December 2014, a worker was killed when a 7,600 pound rail crushed his body. Though OSHA cited Ford "for not inspecting the assembly line" and noted that "this worker's death was preventable and a tragic loss for his family," it fined the company only \$7,000. KCI Inc., the construction company that Ford had hired to rebuild the

assembly line, was fined \$70,000.

Chris, who is also a skilled trades worker, told the WSWs that the worker who died in 2014 “was a millwright out of Indiana. He was down in a concrete pit that has concrete walls about six feet deep. They were rigging up a piece of equipment and they rigged it to another beam and a weld on that piece of equipment broke and the load swung down and crushed him between the concrete wall and the piece of machinery.”

The cost of the OSHA fee on Ford is miniscule. At \$7,000, the penalty is not even one-fourth of the cost of an F-150.

What’s more, over a year later, neither company has paid the fee. OSHA representative Theriot told the WSWs, “They haven’t paid yet. Ford and KCI filed a contest so now it’s with our legal department and we’ll decide on whether we want to go to court or not. They can send a letter, and there is no criteria for that. Once they contest, they don’t have to fix anything or pay anything. I don’t know where they are with that.”

Theriot explained that sometimes it can take up to five years for contests to be resolved through the legal system.

Alex, the skilled trades worker at KCAP, said, “If someone dies on the line, the company doesn’t care. They just get them out of the way as fast as they can and then they get the line going. I suspect that was part of the problem in 2014 when the worker was crushed. It was during retooling, and they probably rushed those contractors to get the line going as fast as they could.”

Many workers know this to be the case, but documents published in “Inside the Ford-UAW Transformation,” a book co-authored by representatives of the UAW and Ford, show precisely how the company responds to worker deaths.

Ford has developed a science for reducing the amount of time the line is stopped, including after a worker is killed or injured. From 2004 to 2013, Ford has cut the amount of time lost by over 200 percent. They have even coined a term to describe to measure the time a line is down, the LTCR, or “lost time case rate.”

The callousness with which the company and UAW view deaths and injuries is revealed here in full. To the UAW-corporate alliance, the workers are simply bodies to be exploited for profit. When workers die, they cause “lost time.”

After all, as the authors report at the beginning of the book, they have to “consider the unrelenting heartbeat of the assembly line, where any lost production can exceed \$10,000 a minute in lost profit.”

This statement applies not only to Ford or the auto industry more broadly, but to the conditions workers face at their offices, factories and workshops all across the world.

In the US alone, 4,679 workers died on the job in 2014

with an additional 50,000 dying from occupational diseases. The average OSHA workplace safety violation for “serious violations” is less than \$2,000, and although nearly 400,000 workers have died on the job since 1970, less than 100 criminal cases have been prosecuted over that timespan.

When a prosecution does take place, those corporate criminals responsible for worker deaths are almost always let off with a slap on the wrist. Put together, those prosecuted have served a combined 100 months in jail over the last 45 years.

Writing in 1845 in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Marxist theoretician Friedrich Engels explained that in the final analysis, the for-profit capitalist system is to blame for the premature deaths of workers.

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, such injury that death results, we call that deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call this deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or the bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them to remain in such conditions until that death ensures which is the inevitable consequences—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual.



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