

Lawsuit over Michigan worker's death highlights conditions in auto parts industry

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The horrific death of an auto parts worker in Ionia, Michigan in 2015, now the subject of a lawsuit, sheds light on the brutal regime existing among this section of workers, some of the most exploited in the United States. William Holbrook filed a wrongful death suit in US District Court in Grand Rapids, Michigan on March 7 of this year. The suit comes almost two years after the death of his wife, Wanda Holbrook, in an on-the-job accident at Ventra Automotive, an auto parts supplier located in Ionia, about two hours northwest of Detroit.

Ventra is a subsidiary of Flex-N-Gate, which is ranked 46 in *Automotive News*' list of Tier-1 global parts suppliers. Flex-N-Gate is owned by Pakistani-American billionaire Shahid Khan, who also owns the Jacksonville Jaguars National Football League franchise and English Football League Championship team Fulham F.C.

Flex-N-Gate is named as a defendant in the case along with Prodomax Automation, FANUC America, Nachi Robotic Systems and Lincoln Electric. The lawsuit alleges that due to negligence by these companies in the manufacture, installation, integration or engineering of robotic devices, "Wanda suffered tremendous fright, shock and conscious pain and suffering."

Wanda, a skilled journeymen maintenance technician, had worked 12 years for Ventra, where she repaired and maintained robotics. The heavily automated 714,826-square-foot facility specializes in stamping, welding and molding bumpers, trailer hitches and chrome plated plastics for major automakers foreign and domestic alike.

"It was nothing for her to work six or seven days [a week], for 10 hours a day," her husband recalled in comments last year to *MLive* and the *Grand Rapids Press*. On what would end up being her last day,

Wanda was working within the "100" cell of the weld department around 2 p.m. when a robot "hit and crushed" her head between two hitch assemblies. She was pronounced dead at about 2:39 p.m. when first responders arrived.

The company continued normal production following Wanda's death. It was not until January 21, 2016, following a six and a half month "investigation," that the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) issued a fine of \$7,000 to Ventra for failure to use lockout devices. Federal OSHA records show that the fine was subsequently dismissed after a company appeal.

For its part the International Union of Electronic Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) Local 436, the union at Ventra, has said nothing about the lawsuit. One worker in a Facebook post earlier this year wrote, "They're quite friendly and available until you ACTUALLY have a problem. Then they string you along for months promising they'll keep you informed and have your back, but I've seen plenty of times where the higher-ups don't stand up for the union or what's right.

"Most of the stewards are great, but I've personally watched the Union President and Vice President be involved in a case where someone was let go for following proper safety protocol because a Ventra supervisor called insubordination."

Wanda Holbrook is only the latest worker from the facility to suffer this tragic fate. On September 20, 1991, two workers at the same plant, then called American Bumper & Manufacturing Co., were killed by unsafe machinery. Ricky Dora, 21, and Stephen Eilar, 25, were crushed from the chest up under 1,300 tons of pressure as the Weingarten press they were operating cycled out of turn.

The workers had only been on the job a few days and had received inadequate training. Nevertheless, the union at the plant, the IUE, rushed to the defense of management, calling the accident “like an act of God.” A preliminary investigation by MIOSHA found that 51 workers had been injured and the company had been cited for 63 safety violations over the previous three years.

MIOSHA eventually found 216 safety violations in the plant, 96 of which were designated “willful and serious.” Among the violations, MIOSHA found that management had disconnected the wiring to the brake monitor on the press Dora and Eilar were operating at the time they were killed. Disconnecting the monitor makes the press run faster, but the workers cannot tell by looking at the monitor that it has been disengaged.

American Bumper was fined \$1,002,400 for the 216 violations, but paid only \$435,000 after appealing.

In 1996 the company was convicted of involuntary manslaughter for the deaths on the grounds that management ignored “clear warnings of catastrophic machine failures.” However, no one in management was held accountable and the company was forced to pay a derisory \$15,000 fine.

American Bumper was acquired by Meridian with the backing of Windward Capital Partners in 1997, but kept the name until late 1999 when it became known as Meridian Automotive Systems Inc.

In 2007, Meridian was fined \$7,700 for 16 MIOSHA violations, then another \$840 for two violations in 2009.

In July 2009, Meridian sold the Ionia, Michigan plant to Flex-N-Gate, along with three other plants for a total of \$42.5 million. These four plants would become Ventra Automotive. This deal came as part of Meridian’s preparations for Chapter 7 Bankruptcy, which left hundreds of workers unemployed.

In 2013, Ventra Ionia was fined \$2,250 for yet another serious MIOSHA violation.

While the company name, ownership and technology has changed over the years, there has been a decades-long record of safety violations and now three deaths.

Flex-N-Gate owner Kahn was hailed for making the company the first US auto supplier to adopt “lean manufacturing” principles, now commonplace, to increase efficiency and reduce waste. Kahn held a press conference with Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan on May

25, 2016 to announce a \$95 million investment in a vacant industrial park that could create up to 750 jobs.

The roots of these tragic deaths lie in the brutal conditions that exist in the auto parts industry, which have been imposed with the collaboration and complicity of the United Auto Workers and other manufacturing unions. Auto parts workers, who once were paid almost as much as workers at the Big Three automakers, are now some of the most exploited workers in America.

Beginning in the 1980s, the UAW collaborated with management in isolating and betraying a series of strikes by auto parts workers with the goal of lowering costs for the Detroit automakers.

This process accelerated in the 1990s, with the auto companies spinning off their parts divisions in order to renegotiate substandard contracts. A series of bankruptcies followed, which were used by the UAW to impose further cuts to wages and pensions.

Currently auto parts workers make about one-third less than a typical auto assembly line worker, with the wages in the auto parts industry falling by 14 percent between 2003 and 2013.



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