

Company faces allegations of abuse by both management and UAW officials

Ford settles claims over sexual and racial harassment at Chicago auto plants for \$10 million

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Ford Motor Company recently settled harassment claims with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for \$10.1 million over complaints by female autoworkers that they were sexually and racially harassed by company supervisors and union officials at two Chicago-area plants.

For the second time in two decades, Ford faces a class-action lawsuit by female autoworkers over an environment where they routinely faced sexual harassment, intimidation and violence. While the company ignored their claims, the workers also faced retaliation from management as well as from officials of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 551 if they complained or reported harassment incidents to higher-ups or the EEOC.

The conditions faced by these workers today hearken back to the 1930s in the United States—prior to the formation of the UAW and the mass industrial unions—when workers labored under conditions of extreme exploitation and industrial slavery. In the 1930s, female autoworkers were often sexually assaulted or propositioned for sexual favors to ensure job security or advancement. Today, the unions such as the UAW work hand-in-glove with management in recreating such an oppressive climate of industrial servitude, sexual harassment and violence.

While the EEOC noted that there was systematic sexual and racial harassment of female workers at Ford's Chicago assembly and stamping plants, and that such conduct violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the settlement it worked out with Ford is essentially toothless.

The EEOC case is separate from the women's lawsuit. In fact, Ford is citing the EEOC settlement in an attempt to quash the lawsuit. Keith Hunt, the attorney representing the plaintiffs in the case, told the *Chicago Tribune* that the settlement amounted to little more than a "backdoor deal" to "circumvent the class-action process."

The lawsuit filed by Hunt in November 2014, virtually identical to one he filed against Ford in the late 1990s, included more than 30 women. Hunt presented evidence that sought to

demonstrate a pattern and practice of abuse at the two Chicago Ford plants from 2012 to 2014. During that period, more than 1,500 female workers who worked at both the assembly plant in Chicago's south side and the stamping plant in Chicago Heights were subject to sexual abuse and racial harassment.

The suit notes that, in 1997, 14 women filed a class-action lawsuit against Ford. In 1999, the EEOC attempted to reach a settlement with Ford requiring the company to pay \$9 million towards training and compensation for the victims. The EEOC created a "Conciliation Agreement" that recommended workplace monitoring for three years.

However, the workplace atmosphere of harassment did not change in the years following the first settlement. The lawsuit states bluntly: "Ford is a recidivist offender that has willfully ignored the issues and evidence raised in prior litigation and EEOC findings and has failed to take measures to eradicate known discrimination and harassment from the workplace."

The pattern and practice of abuses against female workers detailed in the suit included sexual assault and attempted rape; requests for sexual favors in exchange for job advancement; unwelcome touching, groping and sexual advances; being subjected to jeers, lewd comments and sexual suggestions as well as abusive and misogynistic comments against female workers by supervisors; and pornographic imagery displayed in the plant that was humiliating to women.

Additionally, male supervisors and union officials offered better tasks to female employees who submitted to sexual advances and all kinds of punishment and retaliation if they did not submit. The suit claims that Ford was aware of and routinely turned a blind eye to these abuses.

Supervisors were also known to have organized parties on- and off-site where strippers and prostitutes were present, and managers engaged in sexual and lewd acts in front of other employees. Tickets were also sold to such events during working hours. The suit also notes that such practices go back

as far as the 1980s and 1990s, when managers used their offices, parking lots and the roofs of the plants to engage in sexual activity with female workers.

The sexual exploitation of employees, the suit adds, also created a tense atmosphere for workers.

The conflict of interest was so brazen that superintendents and human resource managers routinely engaged in sexual acts at work, making it impossible for women to report sexual harassment or discrimination by supervisors. Some workers who complained to the EEOC were warned that if they did not stop complaining they would be terminated.

Effectively, Ford and the union created a regime of retaliation against workers who complained. Various forms of retaliation detailed in the suit included threats and acts of termination; denial of overtime; denial of bathroom breaks; being forced under the supervision of their sexual abusers; being sent home without pay and suspension of their shifts; less desirable work offered as punishment; not providing workers with adequate medical care when they are injured; increased performance scrutiny; being moved to less desirable shifts; surveillance and stalking of workers' homes by union and management officials; and assaults and physical violence. The hostile work environment has affected more than 1,000 women.

Among the cases cited in the lawsuit, Jacqueline Barron was denied bathroom breaks when she denied the sexual requests of a supervisor. When Barron complained, she was told to "watch her back." When she complained to Natalie Dahrenger in Labor Relations, Dahrenger refused to listen to her and told her to return to work. When Ford became aware that Barron had filed a sexual harassment charge in January 2014, they fired her. In addition to losing her job and income, she continued to suffer from emotional anxiety and psychological distress.

Among those included in the suit were leading union officials such as Allen "Coby" Millender, chairman of UAW Local 551. Millender was accused of sexually assaulting numerous female autoworkers in the plant. When Millender discovered that autoworker Helen Allen had brought a lawsuit against Ford and named him, he publicly shamed her in front of over 200 workers, many of them union bureaucrats. Following this incident, Allen faced vandalism of her car and at her lunch area, with images of phalluses drawn to harass and humiliate her.

Millender also threatened to move a worker to an overnight shift if she did not lunch with him in his office and submit to his sexual advances. Millender was temporarily suspended by Ford following the suit, but was reinstated with the help of UAW Vice-President Jimmy Settles in 2015.

Millender would go on to represent Local 551 in bargaining talks in which the UAW rammed through a sellout contract against a near-rebellion by autoworkers in 2015. Ford workers at the plant rejected the contract by more than two to one. The UAW used lies, intimidation and voter fraud to push through the concessions contract and impose the dictates of management upon workers, including the maintenance of the

hated two-tier system. Since then, autoworkers throughout the country have faced speed-ups, long hours and further exploitation by the auto companies.

The sexual assault of female workers is part of a broader assault on autoworkers in which they live under conditions of a management dictatorship in the workplace. When women reported they were being abused, supervisors and Labor Relations figures frankly replied, "Ford doesn't care about workplace relations. Ford only cares about the bottom line."

A worker with five years at Chicago Ford spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, noting, "I don't think Ford or the UAW cares about sexual harassment. There was an incident I witnessed where a couple had an argument and the guy hit the woman and then followed her to her department and hit her in front of a supervisor.

"This was a little bit after Ford said it had a 'zero tolerance' policy. The guy was eventually reinstated and came back with all his seniority. And now all of a sudden he is a group leader. What does that say about the claim they are a 'zero tolerance' company if he can do that and they bring him back?"

"There were rumors of union reps and higher-up union officials taking advantage of female employees. There is a general feeling of disgust that you are somehow part of all this. It is BS that this is going on. There is this whole image of Ford as a company, but the reality is different."

He spoke about the conditions at Ford, "The union just seems to be a secretary for the company. When it comes to the issues that matter, they are not fighting. They have a bargaining team that doesn't even bargain for us.

"It is not a two-tier system any more, it is six tiers. You have the legacy workers, then the 'in progression' workers. Then there are long-term supplemental and short-term supplemental and they also have part-time supplemental, who work three days a week."

The author also recommends:

Workers face 1930s-type exploitation at Chicago Ford plants [15 July 2015]



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