

Worker killed in Indiana auto parts plant

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Melissa Stephens, a 44-year-old auto parts worker and mother of four, was killed Saturday night, October 21, while working at the Autoneum North America plant in Jeffersonville, Indiana, a suburb of Louisville, Kentucky. Autoneum, a Swiss-based company that produces vehicle sound and heating systems, has repeatedly been fined for safety violations.

Stephens was killed during the third shift, at approximately 11:37 p.m., from what authorities said was a “blunt force trauma” from the machine she was working on. The details of the accident and the injuries that Stephens suffered are unknown at this time. The company, the Clark County coroner, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) are reportedly investigating the death.

It appears there is no union at the Jeffersonville plant, which supplies components for Ford and General Motors.

In a video interview with WSMV.com Channel 4 News, Stephens’s widower, Michael Stephens, said Melissa was his “rock” and that he was “proud of his wife of over 20 years.” He portrayed his late wife as a hardworking and determined woman, and said he “admired Melissa and all her achievements.”

Michael Stephens told reporters that when he pressed management for details, the only answer he got was “that it happened and it happened fast.”

A spokesperson for Autoneum said the death was an “accident” and claimed that “Autoneum complies with occupational health and safety regulations at all locations and is committed to the highest local and international standards in this area.”

In fact, Autoneum North America has been found in violation of OSHA standards 33 times before this fatal accident. It also has a horrific record of “amputations,” i.e., workers having their limbs crushed, mangled or severed by machinery.

The majority of the company violations were

categorized by OSHA as “serious,” which means there is a “substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result and that the employer knew, or should have known, of the hazard.”

Autoneum was fined \$569,463 by OSHA in January 2017 for the amputation of the hand and forearm of a 46-year-old worker at its Toledo, Ohio plant on December 23, 2016. The worker’s arm was caught in a shredder while he was guiding pieces of scrap metal into the machine.

The company was found in violation of three willful offenses—“a violation that the employer knowingly commits or commits with plain indifference to the law”—and two repeat violations, which are charged when another inspection shows the employer did nothing to correct unsafe conditions.

These included inadequate machine and point of operation guarding; failing to properly train workers on machine specific procedures for isolating energy sources; no “locking out” equipment to prevent unintentional energization; and exposure of workers to struck-by hazards from machine components.

The company has contested each of these violations on the January report and has not paid the fine. At the same Toledo plant, two other incidents of amputation have been filed by OSHA, one on May 18, 2015, and the second on December 17 of the same year. Another amputation occurred at the Wilkes-Barre plant in Pennsylvania on May 10, 2016.

On the Facebook page for the Jeffersonville plant, workers complain of seven-day workweeks with no days off, long hours of backbreaking labor, and being forced to work in the heat during the summer. One commenter noted she was hired through a temporary labor agency (which takes a cut out of workers’ meager paychecks) and that after just four days of working eight-hour shifts she was suffering from severe foot and back pain.

Bill, a worker from the nearby Louisville Ford plant spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the death and the exploitation of autoworkers who are forced to labor under unsafe conditions.

“The death of this worker could have been prevented. The company had already been fined like \$500,000 at another facility for unsafe acts. I think OSHA should do more follow up to make sure the problem is resolved rather than [issue] fines. At the Louisville Ford Assembly Plant, they have a heat stress program that is never enforced. The heat index was over 100 degrees, no extra breaks, working close to 11 hours a day. The union and company just laugh at you. So, our hearts go out to her family because we know first-hand how these companies treat you!”

The United Auto Workers union is chiefly responsible for the deadly conditions in the parts industry. During the 1980s, the UAW isolated and betrayed a whole series of strikes at parts suppliers with the deliberate intent of lowering costs for the Big Three auto companies, GM, Ford and Chrysler.

The percentage of workers in so-called independent parts suppliers represented by unions fell from 65 percent in 1975 to less than 20 percent by 1995, and even less today. In 1980, an auto parts worker earned 15 percent lower wages than a worker at a Big Three assembly plant. By 2013, the differential had risen to 33 percent. The gap would be far larger except for the fact that the UAW has slashed the wages of autoworkers in the Detroit Three plants as well.

The auto parts manufacturing industry is especially prone to buyouts and takeovers from investment firms. In early 2016, Autoneum sold its UGN facility in Chicago Heights, Illinois, to the private equity firm Angeles Investment Partners, grabbing \$33.7 million from the transaction. After taking a hit in sales after the disposal of the facility, the company continued to rake in profits by ratcheting up the exploitation of its remaining labor force.

In its 2016 media release sales report, Autoneum states, “Thanks to continuous efficiency enhancements in production ... Autoneum once again increased its operating result in 2016.” The “efficiency enhancements in production” have no doubt led to the dangerous conditions that have stolen the lives and limbs of workers.



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