

Near walkout at Detroit auto plant over unsafe conditions

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On Saturday, December 2, at around 9:00 am, workers on the overnight shift at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) on Detroit's east side began complaining to supervisors and union officials that strong-smelling fumes coming in through the air vents were making them sick. Several workers began vomiting or suffered from headaches and dizziness and demanded to go to medical.

While the chief concern of the floor managers and union reps was to keep the assembly line moving, workers took the threat seriously and wanted answers. Included among the 1,600 workers on the shift, and the next shift of another 1,600 workers due in the afternoon, were female workers who were pregnant and others suffering from asthma or other respiratory ailments for whom exposure to toxic gasses could do permanent damage or even prove fatal. The workers stopped work and gathered to discuss what to do.

According to workers inside the plant who texted the World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* as the incident unfolded, management and safety representatives from United Auto Workers Local 7 downplayed the seriousness of the situation, claiming there was nothing unusual about bad smells inside an industrial facility. Supervisors threatened workers with disciplinary action if they did not go back to their work stations.

A worker texted: "I'm at work and it's a strong gas smell inside while they are making us work. They stopped the line for five minutes then started back. They say it's coming from across the street."

Asked where the union officials were, the worker replied, "They keep saying it always smells this way. It's never been like this. People have started going to medical but only so many can go at a time because they're saying someone has to cover for you."

"President not answering phone," the worker texted, referring to UAW Local 7 President Reggie Griffin, "and steward said go to medical smh (shake my head). Long line in medical they won't even see ppl. They tell them to go outside to get fresh air."

There was widespread sentiment to stop production and

walk out of the plant to find safety, the worker texted, but "not enough are willing." Referring to the fact that management and the union were forcing them to continue to work despite the still unknown danger, the worker texted, "This is crazy. To management, union and safety there is no issue. They don't give a dam."

On the JNAP Local 7 Brothers and Sisters United Facebook page workers were also posting as events unfolded. One worker said, "How bad does the smell of gas have to get before they evacuate us. Maybe after we all start puking and passing out?"

"Girl had asthma attack the supervisor said 'Oh, don't believe that it's fake.' We need a new safety rep" she added, saying back in the day the safety reps "Would've had this place shut down, period."

In this case, however, union officials threatened workers who wanted to leave, saying it was "against the contract" to walk out.

WSWS reporters rushed down to the plant and witnessed several Detroit Fire Department emergency vehicles at the east side of the factory apparently loading workers into ambulances. A DTE Energy van was also present. One emergency responder told reporters there had been complaints in the eastside neighborhood about gas fumes for 2-3 days, but that the source had not yet been found. He said the fire department called in DTE as a "precaution."

A young worker in the west side parking lot who was returning from her lunch break told the *Autoworker Newsletter* reporters that the smell was worse inside the plant than it was outside. The union had told workers that management had brought in "sniffers" but "they sent us right back in. They just want us to keep working. Why are we paying union dues?" she asked.

The WSWS reporters then became aware of a serious smell on the south side of the plant and traced its possible source to a neighboring production facility owned by Aevitas, a company that recycles industrial oil and lubricants from manufacturing facilities. About five minutes later officials from the Detroit Fire Department, which has a local

engine company just south of the Chrysler factory, showed up at the Aevitas location and began questioning an employee.

Meanwhile, another worker in the plant texted that management and the union had returned conditions to “business as usual.” Management, he said, “just had a meeting. Plant Manager Zach was wearing a headphone piece. I presume he’s getting updates about outside.” His next text said: “The fire marshal is walking through inside with safety. The marshal was shaking his head as if he couldn’t believe it took so long to call him. It was happening around nine and they’re there just now. You can’t smell anything now, he should have been here then.”

This reporter replied, “The chief role of the UAW is to make sure there is no disruption of production, no matter what. A rank-and-file committee would have immediately halted production, called the fire department and if necessary called off for the whole day pending an investigation and resolution of the problem—with no loss of pay.”

The worker replied in a text: “That’s what is needed.”

Amazingly, not a single news outlet in Detroit reported the incident. Apparently, the safety concerns of workers at the sprawling 3 million-square-foot plant, which employs more than 5,000 hourly and salaried workers who live in Detroit and surrounding suburbs was not deemed “newsworthy,” as long as the production for the highly profitable Jeep Grand Cherokees, Grand Cherokees SRTs and Dodge Durango SUVs continued without disruption.

The WSWs called UAW Local 7 for information about the incident and to learn how many of the local members were taken to the hospital and what their status was. Sherry Saunders, the “trustee chair” of the local, said she “did not have any information” on the incident. She took down this reporter’s phone number to give to local president Reggie Griffin, who did not return the call.

As for Fiat Chrysler management, their response was evasive. After being bounced around several plant departments, the WSWs reached James Busi, a “talent manager” in the Human Resource Department and a former “Labor Relations and Safety Representative.” Asked about the incident, Busi said, “I am not aware of any such situation. I would be if it were a major incident. But this was not as major as it was made out to be.”

This reporter asked, “If it was not as major as it was made out to be that means something must have happened, right?” Busi replied, “I am not aware that anything happened.”

In his best corporate double-speak, the manager directed this reporter to talk to the “subject matter experts” in the union-management safety department. When I informed him that I had already spoke to the union local, he said than there was no one else to talk to.

This reporter also contacted a spokeswoman for Detroit Fire Commissioner Eric Jones’ office who said she had no information and would have one of the department’s commissioners call me.

Several days after the incident, UAW officials on the JNAP Brothers and Sisters United Facebook page tried to justify their cowardly inaction, saying safety reps would have been fired if they called workers out. Then one posted, “I want to give a shout out to President Reginald Griffin for sending all of the local 7 leadership, and appointed safety reps, to an OSHA training course. So, when you don’t see any of us on the floor this week, that is why. Lots learned in the first day. Hopefully we can take all the knowledge we gain, use it on the floor, and also educate the rest of the membership.”

So, after imperiling workers’ safety, the union officials were sent off on a junket for “safety training.” In fact, the joint labor-management safety schemes and their “partnership” with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration are designed to conceal from workers and the general public the real dangers workers confront on a daily basis and to ensure that profits continue flowing no matter what. Under these schemes, management is given prior notice before OSHA inspections and fines for violations are automatically reduced based on the grotesquely false claim that the UAW “represents” the workers and will resolve all safety issues.

As the recent revelations about the multimillion-dollar bribes paid by Fiat Chrysler executive to UAW officials shows, the union does not “represent” workers; it is a corrupt tool of the auto bosses.

Reflecting on the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter’s* call for workers to form rank-and-file committees to assume the responsibilities the UAW long ago abandoned, one of the workers who texted the WSWs, said, “We should have all stood together, united, and stopped the line and got out. Nobody’s safety is worth sacrificing to make their cars and their profits. If you pass out or have a heart attack, they just push you to the side to keep the line going. Workers are fed up and tired.”



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