

Tesla management imposes brutal workplace regime as it ramps up production

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Workers at California-based electric carmaker Tesla are facing an increasingly brutal management regime as the company seeks to ramp up production in preparation for its full-scale entry into the car market. The company is working out production issues with its new lower-priced Model 3, with a production target of 500,000 vehicles in 2018 and 1 million units by 2020.

Delays in production have been blamed by management on the workforce, which labors under abysmal conditions at least equal to or worse than those confronting autoworkers at GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler.

The management regime at Tesla is by all accounts draconian. In one of the most well publicized cases, some 700 workers employed at Tesla operations in the Bay Area were fired without warning on October 13. Solar City, the solar energy company acquired by Tesla in late 2016, also announced the firing of hundreds of workers around the same time. Included in the terminations were factory workers, engineers, administrative personnel, and sales staff.

Tesla management justified the sackings on the grounds that those terminated had failed to meet annual performance reviews conducted throughout the company in the beginning of the third quarter

In reality, it is Musk and the Tesla executives who are the source of the production problems and not the hourly and salaried work force. Musk stated that the terminations were “only two percent of a 33,000-employee workforce”, but the number is closer to seven percent of the 10,000-worker staff in the Fremont-San Jose area.

Wages range from \$17 to \$21 per hour while in Alameda County, the site of the main Tesla factory located in Fremont, the living wage for one parent and one child is over \$28 per hour. The Bay Area minimum cost of living for a family of four is now over \$70,000 per year. Many Tesla workers have been forced to live as far as one to two hours driving time from Fremont to be able to afford housing.

The typical workweek is 60 to 70 hours, with mandatory overtime as the norm. Safety considerations are minimal if nonexistent. In an article published by the Guardian, Jonathan Galescu, a production technician at Tesla who has seen coworkers collapse or be taken away in ambulances, stated,

“I’ve seen people pass out, hit the floor like a pancake and smash their face open. They just send us to work around him while he’s still lying on the floor.”

Assembly line worker Michael Sanchez, who had dreams of becoming an artist and a car service technician, has two herniated discs, is on disability, and is no longer able to write without pain. Tesla claims that he incurred the injury while installing a wheel, but Sanchez claims that his condition is the product of working on cars that were suspended above the line, forcing him to continually look up and work with his hands in the air full-time. Said Sanchez, “You can make it through Monday. You can make it through Tuesday. Come Wednesday, you start to feel something. Thursday is pain. Friday is agonizing. Saturday you’re just making it through the day.”

Tesla attempts to hold workers accountable for injuries sustained on the job by discouraging workers from reporting them due to the massive drop in pay that could result. Workers assigned to “light duty” receive supplemental benefits from workmen’s compensation, but have their wages dramatically reduced. One production worker who experienced two back injuries said, “I went from making \$22 an hour to \$10 an hour. It kind of forces people to go back to work.”

On November 13 in 2014, a low-pressure aluminum casting press failed and threw molten metal onto three workers, which ignited their clothing. The three workers, Jesus Navarro, Kevin Carter, and Jorge Terrazas, sustained second- and third-degree burns. Navarro was in the hospital for 20 days with burns on his stomach, hip, lower back, and ankles. A Cal-OSHA investigation determined that Tesla failed to maintain the press in a safe operating condition and allowed the machine to be used when the safety interlock was broken. The investigation found that Tesla had not given the workers training about the hazards of the machine and that they were not wearing face and eye protection at the time of the accident. Tesla received a slap-on-the-wrist fine of only \$89,000.

On-the-job injuries have been reported to be 30 per cent higher than those for the Big Three automakers. Since 2014; there have been more than 100 visits by ambulances to the Tesla plant.

On March 27 of this year, DeWitt Lambert filed suit against Tesla, charging it with subjecting him to months of physical,

sexual, and racial harassment. Lambert, who is African-American, had his phone stolen by another worker who recorded a 60-second tirade that consisted of nothing but racial insults and threats of violence. Another coworker stuck a drill motor into Lambert's backside in front of coworkers. A supervisor wrote Lambert up for eating a candy bar while he was on the assembly line, and he received a reprimand for posting a Facebook picture of himself in the plant.

On October 16 of this year, another three African-Americans, Owen Diaz, his son Demetric, and Lamar Patterson, filed suit in Alameda County Superior Court charging Tesla with engendering a work environment that was hostile to minority workers.

Tesla's manufacturing of its Model S and Model X began with the purchase of the NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing Inc.) plant in Fremont, California by Elon Musk at the end of May 2010, just a month after Toyota rolled out its last Corolla on April 1 of that year. Musk, now owner of five mansions in Bel Air, California and having a total estimated worth of \$72 million, was able to buy the factory for a song – only \$42 million. Prior to that, Tesla was manufacturing its Roadster model, which was built in sections that were then shipped to Menlo Park, California and to Wyndham, England for final assembly. Production of the Roadster was discontinued in 2012.

Previously, NUMMI had been jointly owned by General Motors and Toyota. That operation began in 1984 two years after General Motors shuttered its Fremont assembly plant in 1982 after 20 years of producing cars and pickup trucks. In 2009, GM pulled out of the enterprise in the wake of the 2008 economic meltdown and as part of the deal brokered with the Obama administration to keep it afloat after its declaration of bankruptcy. Toyota activity ended March 31, 2010.

Neither the national nor the local unit of the United Auto Workers did anything to stop the shutdown. Only in February 2010 did the local conduct a petition drive aimed primarily at diverting the workers from taking any militant action to block the plant closure.

On January 24, 2010, a meeting called by the local UAW heads exploded into a shouting match and a near physical brawl between rank-and-file members and the union bureaucrats as workers tried to vent their feelings about being kept in the dark about the negotiations and the status of their severance package. The union leaders ended up calling in the police.

On February 12, 2010, the UAW leadership staged a rally based on a nationalist policy directed solely at the Japanese instead of against both GM and Toyota. The rally was poorly attended, with many of those who did come rejecting the chauvinist poison spewed by the UAW bureaucrats, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, UAW Vice-President Bob King, and local Democratic Party functionaries. The UAW officials slandered the Fremont workers as "the worst workforce in the automobile industry in the United States" and denounced them

for excessive absenteeism and sabotage of vehicles produced, then had the gall to demand a slice of the workers' severance payouts.

Given this record, attempts by the UAW to organize workers at Tesla have gained little traction. However, the UAW is continuing its effort to organize workers, particularly in the wake of mass firings carried out by the company earlier this fall.

The latest move by the UAW has been the filing of an unfair labor practice complaint charging Tesla management with interrogating employees about their union activities at its Gigafactory battery plant in Nevada and subjecting workers to "heightened supervisory scrutiny." The UAW also charges that included in the recent mass firings were supporters of the UAW, who it claims that they were singled out for their support of union organization at the Fremont plant.

The Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* completely identify with the striving by Tesla workers for an independent organization to wage a fightback against these brutal conditions. However, it must be stated bluntly that the UAW is not the organization workers need for that fight. As the experience of autoworkers all across the US has demonstrated, it acts as a bribed tool of management in blocking any organized struggle by autoworkers for better conditions. The ongoing investigation of the bribery of top UAW officials in Detroit is only the most grotesque expression of this.

We call for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of both the UAW and management to wage a real fight on the factory floor against attacks on jobs, wages and benefits and in defense of working conditions and safety. The *WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter* will offer advice and assistance for all workers interested in taking up this struggle.

Sign up for the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* today!



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