

Details of Kentucky Ford worker's death still not revealed

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It has been four days since the death of 41-year-old electrician Ivan Bridgewater III at Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville, and company, union and state officials have still not revealed the cause of Bridgewater's death. Initial reports by Louisville police that the worker had been electrocuted have been denied by Ford.

Family and friends held a funeral service for Bridgewater in his hometown of Seymour, Indiana, across the Ohio River, 53 miles north of Louisville. Bridgewater leaves behind his wife of five years, Meagan, a two-year-old son, Ivan Bridgewater IV, and many other family members. A gathering to celebrate his life is being held today.

Bridgewater was hired into the truck assembly plant in September 2015. The massive six million-square-foot plant employs more than 8,000 workers who build Ford's highly profitable F-250-F-550 Super Duty pickups and Ford Expedition and Lincoln Navigators sports utility vehicles.

After working at Impact Forge, a component manufacturer and Ford supplier, Bridgewater was one of the 3,000 workers hired into KTP after 2014 to churn out new aluminum body vehicles, including the eight-passenger Navigator, which starts at \$72,000.

His widow told a local news station that the young couple was excited that he had gotten an electrician's job at Ford. "We were absolutely thrilled to have this," she said. "He was such a pro-union man. And he was so proud and I was so proud of him. I said, 'You've achieved everything you've ever wanted to achieve in your life now.'"

With the collusion of the United Auto Workers union, however, Ford and other automakers have combined crafts, shifted work traditionally done by skilled trades workers to lower-paid production workers, and

contracted out work.

At the same time, skilled trades workers are under enormous pressure to maintain and repair electrical systems, robots, conveyor belts and other equipment so the assembly line does not shut down. In another cost-cutting move, the UAW has also agreed to allow skilled trades workers to labor alone, a practice that is inherently unsafe.

In October 2015, a month after Bridgewater was hired, rank-and-file workers at KTP and neighboring Louisville Assembly Plant (LAP) overwhelmingly rejected the sellout agreement pushed by the UAW on behalf of Ford. The UAW only pushed through the agreement, which maintained the hated two-tier wage systems and grueling Alternative Work Schedules, through a campaign of intimidation, lies and outright vote rigging. Shortly after the "passage" of the deal, Ford executives boasted that the contract would allow it to keep labor cost increases below the rate of inflation.

One Louisville Assembly worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that Ford workers are being worked extremely hard in the plants with volume increase and line speedup.

While details of the cause of Bridgewater's death have not been revealed, some workers at KTP reported that they had heard that Ivan had been working alone in a loading dock area and may have been hit or crushed. "He shouldn't have been working alone," the worker said.

Another veteran LAP worker said new workers like Ivan are not properly trained about working in the outside perimeter of the plant where his body was found. Newer workers could also be afraid to complain about safety for fear of management retribution, he said, or they simply do not trust the union reps to do anything, "Union safety reps won't enforce anything

and you're lucky if they even come out." Referring to the UAW-Ford safety committee, the veteran worker said, "They do nothing until a tragedy happens. Then six months later the same thing can happen."

According to news reports, the Kentucky Safety and Health Administration is investigating the death. In a perfunctory statement issued Tuesday morning, aimed at mollifying growing suspicion and anger over Bridgewater's death, UAW-Ford Vice President James Settles said, "UAW Representatives from the National Joint Health & Safety Committee are onsite leading the safety investigation, while local law enforcement officials are investigating the circumstances of Mr. Bridgewater's death."

Far from assuring that the truth about this tragedy is revealed and that changes are made to prevent future fatalities and injuries, the National Joint Committee on Health & Safety (NJCHS), will only work to conceal what happened. The NJCHS is one of countless corporatist labor-management schemes predicated on the inviolability of Ford's profit interests and designed to reduce lost production due to injuries and cut Ford's worker compensation claims.

At the same time, the NJCHS provides a new level of full-time union positions, all expenses-paid junkets to "safety conferences," and a conduit for bribes through the various union-management "training" centers, as has been revealed in the UAW-Chrysler corruption scandal.

In 1998, the UAW, Ford and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which oversees agencies in Kentucky, Michigan and other states, established a "strategic partnership." The scheme, according to OSHA, fosters the "creation of a pro-active health and safety culture and a cooperative non-adversarial relationship that optimizes the resources of all parties." Instead of surprise "wall-to-wall" safety inspections, labor-management committees draft an "inspection protocol," which "will result in shorter more focused inspections." In addition, OSHA backs "maximum penalty reductions based on the agency's current policies for good-faith reductions for effective safety and health programs."

Nothing autoworkers have ever won—including wages, pensions, medical care and health and safety—has ever been achieved through labor-management cooperation. It was won only through the

most determined mass struggles. The longtime abandonment of the most elemental shop floor protections by the UAW, in the name of boosting competitiveness and corporate profits, is leading once again to entirely preventable fatalities, like the death of Ivan Bridgewater.

Ford workers need to organize rank-and-file committees to carry out their own, independent investigation and revive the methods of collective, mass action to oppose unsafe conditions, take control of production and assert their own class interests against the profit drive of Ford and the UAW.



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