

# Questions remain one month after death of auto parts worker in Western Michigan

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One month after the death of auto parts worker Scott Teusink as a result of on-the-job injuries, many questions about the circumstances surrounding the accident remain unanswered. The incident took place at Challenge Manufacturing, in the city of Holland, in Western Michigan. Workers at Challenge stamp, weld and assemble various formed metal auto parts and components. The Holland plant is not unionized.

According to initial reports in the local press, Scott, age 56, was at work on Friday, December 22, 2017 when he was hit by a massive steel coil. Local police and firefighters responded to the scene. At 6:38 p.m. Scott was transported by private ambulance to Spectrum Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, about 30 minutes away. Scott was reportedly conscious at this time.

At some point over the next week he was transported to the Meijer Heart Center, also in Grand Rapids, where he died on December 30, eight days after the accident at Challenge.

The Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Administration (MIOSHA) was informed of the incident on January 2, 2018—11 days after the accident—at which point an investigation was opened. To date, only a brief account of the incident has been posted on the MIOSHA website.

In its entirety the synopsis reads: “On December 22nd, a 56-year-old coil handler was separating two coils of steel while the steel was standing up and when the banding was cut, one of the coils fell onto the coil handler’s legs. The coil handler passed away after having surgery on his legs on December 30th.”

The death of Scott Teusink—the 38th workplace fatality in Michigan in 2017—received only brief mention in the local press and is now being swept under the rug. Jeannine Vogel, public information

officer for MIOSHA, told the *Holland Sentinel* that the complete investigation could take “several weeks or months to complete.”

The WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* has filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with MIOSHA, as well as the city of Holland police and fire departments, seeking all reports and witness statements on the accident.

We will publish material as it becomes available. However, comments from workers provide a glimpse into conditions on the shop floor at Challenge.

It is clear Challenge, which is not unionized, has a bad reputation for safety and working conditions. Commenting on the article in the *Holland Sentinel*, Suzie Ascencio said “I am actually surprised that it took this long for the company to be investigated, there have always been safety issues.”

Another worker, Sydney Gann, shared his personal experience at Challenge and memories of Scott. “I started the same day as Scott. We were both temps that went in together. We actually became friends. This makes me soooo MAD at Challenge. I worked there for almost two years. There is piss poor training. The PPE [personal protective equipment] isn’t really all that protective. There are safety hazards around every corner! There’s oil all over the floor. I was a transfer press operator and they had coils stacked all funky EVERYWHERE.”

He continued, “The coil chains never really got PM’d [preventative maintenance] or any kind of stress test. The management was always on their phones. Scott always wore his PPE and Hardhat as a coil/ material handler. Challenge needs to be shut down...”

He concluded, “I will say Scott was a very cool employee. He got me a card, a gift card, and some beer as a congratulations for making it (through) the

probationary period. The only employee to ever give me anything. That says a lot about who he was as a person. Challenge just needs to be SHUT DOWN! and undergo a face lift and new ownership. This is unacceptable and all of Holland and surrounding areas that know of Challenge's bad rep knows that there shouldn't be a blind eye and this incident should be treated VERY SERIOUSLY and not go unpunished because if everything would have been "in order" this would have never happened and Scott would still be here today!"

It was even suggested by another worker that Challenge had acted to conceal previous safety violations from investigators: "When that lady hurt her leg they torched the table and threw it away before investigators got there," he wrote in reply to Sydney Gann's comment.

During a three-week strike in February 2017, workers at Challenge's Kansas City plant reported, among other things, having to pay out of pocket for personal protective equipment. The United Auto Workers shut down the strike after just three weeks, leaving workers with substandard pay and benefits far lower than those at the auto assembly plants.

Comments and reports like these show the reality behind the claim that Challenge is an "employee owned" company. The phony Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) provides a PR cover for Challenge and the low wages paid to the supposed employee-owners. It does not provide workers with any meaningful voice in how the company is run or what they are paid, nor does it shield them from the volatility of the capitalist market, or protect them from layoffs, speed-ups or unsafe conditions.

In fighting for safe and decent working conditions workers can place no reliance on the corrupt, pro-company trade unions such as the United Auto Workers. Likewise, government agencies such as MIOSHA generally side with employers by imposing miniscule fines for gross violations that are often further reduced after company appeals.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* calls on workers at Challenge and other auto parts plants and industrial facilities to contact us regarding conditions in your workplace. We will provide workers with a platform, if necessary under conditions of anonymity, to guard against possible company/union retaliation.

This is part of a broader fight to mobilize the independent strength of the working class in defense of safe and decent conditions in the factories. We call for the building of independent rank-and-file factory committees in every workplace as new organs of working class struggle.

*The author also recommends:*

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[28 February, 2017]

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