

“This is the deadliest plant I’ve ever worked in”

Injured Flat Rock Ford worker was shifted to dangerous job with almost no training

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New details are emerging about the terrible accident on May 4 at Ford’s Flat Rock Assembly plant, which sparked a walkout over unsafe conditions at the plant just south of Detroit.

While the United Auto Workers and Ford management are concealing the details of the incident, information is coming to light from social media posts and statements factory workers have provided to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.

At approximately 1 a.m. last Friday morning, a female worker whose name has still not been released fell into a pit and had her legs crushed by machinery at the trim and final assembly section of the manufacturing line. Workers told the *WSWS* that she was 55 years old and a veteran worker but that she had not worked on the assembly line for many years. Even though she was unfamiliar with the new job assignment, which workers had complained about before, she was given only a brief orientation.

A witness told the *WSWS*, “I heard her screaming. It was death screaming. There was a young man screaming, ‘Help.’ When that woman fell into the pit, she crossed a sensor, so the alarm was going off. She was under the line up until her high thighs. You could only see her from her pelvic area up. She was down there alone and screaming. Workers jumped down to comfort and help her.”

Workers reported that the plant manager attempted to restart production and extend the 10-hour work day to make up for lost production after the injured worker was taken by emergency personnel to the hospital.

“The accident occurred a couple of lines from me,” another senior worker told the *WSWS*. “There had been several near misses at this location, including one just two weeks ago. There were questions about the safety of the job. The union and company were supposedly looking into it, but nothing happened until this occurred.

“We were running understaffed as always. Workers were grabbed from body, paint and other departments to come over and fill in on the main line. The worker who was hurt had worked for Ford for 30 years. She had not been on the line for 20 years because of her seniority, but they forced her to take the job so the regular operator could get time off. They only gave her one hour of training, and she didn’t feel comfortable because it was not safe. This is a very difficult job. It’s where two lines meet, and the motor and transmission are connected to the car.

“Nothing has been officially said so there is confusion about what exactly happened. I heard she was crushed by a moon buggy, which is essentially a carrier that cradles the motor, the transmission and the front suspension and moves underneath to push this whole assembly into the car. The motor and the suspension are the heaviest parts of a vehicle. We heard she was pinned in when she was moving wires out of the way and adding springs to the front suspension.

“The floor is a moving pallet with gaps in between. You have to pay a lot of attention. But if you’re not familiar with the particular job you can step back and there is no floor. She hadn’t been on the line for 20 years and might not have encountered a floor like this. If you don’t get proper training, you don’t have a clue what to watch for in your surroundings.

“In the auto world, there are tons of moving robots and machinery. After 30 years you can get comfortable and feel like you’re seasoned. But if your job is changed you don’t really know what dangers you are being subjected to. Most employees don’t have any choice when a sub department is down, and they want you on the main line to keep pushing the cars out.”

The injured worker, who is reportedly still hospitalized and recovering with a leg broken in two places, posted a Facebook notice to workers in an internal group thanking them for stopping the line and quickly coming to her aid, saying that it could have been much worse.

“We had people puking, shaking, it was horrible,” a coworker wrote in a Facebook post. “Her screaming before they stopped the line will haunt a good amount of people... The company wanted to start the line as soon as they got her out and on the ambulance. What makes me sick is this is the second person within a month to fall in and they did nothing. NOTHING!”

Another Flat Rock worker said, “Ford wanted to start the line back up after she was taken by the ambulance. But the workers were too shaken up and rattled to start up. When you see something like that your mind is not in the right place. When the plant manager said go back, the union chairman said no, but he knew if he had gone along with management we would have walked out anyway. The UAW chairman knew he had to say no.

“I’ve worked at Chrysler and other companies, and Ford is the worst. This is the deadliest plant I’ve ever been at in my 20 years in the industry. In just the last three years a worker has lost a

finger, another had an arm ripped off at the shoulder, another had his leg badly injured when he was pinned in by a hi-lo, and now a lady has been pinned in by a moon-buggy. They keep on putting Band-Aids on the line to keep it running. We can't have a situation where production is more important than a human life."

Ford is under particular pressure from Wall Street investors to increase its profit margins and slash labor costs. With the full collusion of the UAW, the automaker is currently implementing a restructuring plan to slash \$11.5 billion in costs between 2019 and 2022, on top of the \$14 billion previously announced last fall.

A key aspect of this is increasing "labor flexibility," which includes forcing older workers to take on harder work and pressuring them to leave the plants. These higher-paid "legacy" workers can then be replaced by low-wage second-tier workers and temporary part-time employees (TPTs) who pay dues to the UAW but have no rights. The 2015 UAW-Ford contract lifted the cap on the number of TPTs and sanctioned the virtually unlimited use of these super-exploited workers.

Ford is also phasing out production and North American sales of almost all its passenger cars and focusing on more profitable pickup truck and SUVs. The Flat Rock plant produces the Ford Mustang, one of the last cars the company will make, and the 3,500 workers at the plant are currently producing at a high pace, making accidents more likely.

A TPT worker with two years at the plant said, "The Michigan Assembly Plant is going down for a six-month retooling, and production at Dearborn Truck Plant is being disrupted because of the fire at its supplier plant. With Flat Rock the only plant pushing vehicles out, they are running the crap out of us. We are putting out 53 cars an hour. They say they want to reduce that to 44 an hour, which means cutting about 400 jobs, but they said that was the target last year too.

"Flat Rock, Dearborn Truck and Kentucky Truck were all found guilty of abusing part-time employees and were forced to hire some as full-timers at the time of the 2015 contract. But the agreement lifted the cap on TPTs, and our plant saw an increase from 100 to 480. Over the last two years that's declined, but it is still 348.

"We have no benefits, no job security, and if you ask for a day off, they'll ask you, 'Do you like your job?' If you have a problem on the line you go to the union and they say you have no rights, or they'll give you the notorious answer, 'We'll look into this.' After weeks of not hearing anything you go up and ask the UAW rep and he says, 'The company has the right to do it.'

"There are a lot of TPTs in their mid-30s and early 40s who have two jobs and are working 90 hours a week to earn enough to live. They're all filled up with coffee, energy drinks or whatever to stay alert because they treat you like a robot. One of these Mustangs we build sells for \$40,000 and some of the Lincolns can cost as much as \$120,000. In one day we're producing enough to cover our wages for the whole year.

"After 2009 when the auto industry was restructured, the UAW said we would get all we gave up back in the next contract. It's been ten years, and we've gotten nothing back. The UAW is nothing more than a cheap labor contractor. The American Dream of an autoworker having a decent life is long gone."

Thousands of autoworkers at Flat Rock and other factories are reading and sharing previous WSWs articles on the accident and spontaneous walkout. This has prompted UAW officials to accuse the WSWs of disseminating "fake news." Meanwhile, the UAW is doing everything to conceal its own complicity in tearing up work rules, imposing speedup and imposing management's dictates. Workers also do not know what other rights the UAW signed away in secret memos in exchange for promises of future investments and the production of a new autonomous vehicle at the plant.

"There were some comments on the Facebook page about your article being 'fake news,'" another TPT said. "But a number of us TPTs said this isn't fake news. We get no holiday pay. No profit sharing. We get bounced around and get nothing. They don't like when workers are talking to each other and with workers in other plants. But what is happening at Michigan Assembly, Dearborn Truck and other plants directly faces us. A lot of TPTs are starting to come together to speak out. What was in your article was not 'fake news,' it's what goes on. If you're an activist, both the UAW and Ford will be gunning for you."

If workers are to defend themselves from unsafe conditions and exploitation, they must form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW, to unite all workers—first and second-tier, TPTs and other casual workers—and counterpose the will of the workers to the dictates of the UAW and Ford. The first task is to carry out an independent investigation of this accident and oppose the union-management cover-up.

A factory committee must enforce the line speed and safety conditions, protect all workers against arbitrary abuse and victimization, and assert workers' control over production. At the same time, workers should declare the 2015 UAW-Ford contract, pushed through with company payoffs, intimidation and outright ballot stuffing, null and void. The hated two-tier system should be abolished and all TPTs and other temporary workers transformed into full-time workers with full pay and benefits.



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