

# Ford Flat Rock plant injury highlights deadly conditions for US workers

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The horrific injury of a 55-year-old Ford worker at the Flat Rock Assembly Plant on May 4 has highlighted once again the deadly conditions facing autoworkers and all workers throughout the United States.

The injured worker, identified by co-workers as Lynn Hagood, had her legs crushed by heavy machinery after falling into a pit on the trim and final assembly line. Workers rushing to her aid described hearing a “death scream” as they struggled to release her.

After Hagood was finally pulled out and taken to the hospital, the plant manager attempted to restart the line and add additional time to the 10-hour shift to make up for lost production, but workers rebelled and refused to continue working.

Flat Rock workers have been told Hagood’s leg was broken in two places and that she is recovering. They also say the worker posted a message on an internal social media page thanking her co-workers and saying her injuries could have been worse if they had not responded so quickly.

Neither the United Auto Workers union, Ford nor Michigan health and safety regulators have issued any details of what led up to the accident. Workers, however, say there have been several “near misses,” including one only a couple of weeks ago, at that location on the assembly line, where the motor and transmission are lifted on a “moon buggy” into the rest of the car.

Workers also report that, as a high seniority worker, Hagood had not been on the assembly line for many years and that she was assigned to fill in for the regular operator and put to work there without any serious training.

Ford is currently carrying out a savage cost-cutting and downsizing plan to boost its profit margins and satisfy Wall Street. This entails eliminating passenger cars from its line-up and focusing almost solely on highly profitable SUVs and pickups. The company is laying off 2,000 workers at its Michigan Assembly Plant for a six-month retooling and plans to cut billions in production costs.

Key to the cost-savings are concessions handed over to the automaker by the UAW in the 2015 contract, which was

rammed through against widespread rank-and-file opposition. In a conference call with Wall Street investors afterwards, the Ford CEO boasted that the deal would give the automaker “flexibility” to increase the number of temporary and part-time workers, add daily and weekend mandatory overtime and wipe out thousands of jobs in the event of a fall in sales. The Ford boss also said the deal would increase the automaker’s “all-in” labor costs by less than 1.5 percent annually, i.e., less than the general rate of inflation.

Both Ford and the UAW are seeking to drive out higher-paid “legacy” workers and replace them with second-tier “in-progression” workers, temporary part-time employees (TPTs) and other low-paid temps. One means of doing this is to force older workers, like Hagood, back on the line to do heavy work.

“Every plant is dangerous,” a TPT at the Dearborn Truck Assembly Plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, responding to the accident at Flat Rock plant, 20 miles away. “The machinery on the line is heavy and powerful, and the line never stops. If you get caught, you could be crushed before anyone knows it.”

The worker agreed with many others who are speaking out about the role of the UAW, which functions as a tool of management. “You are supposed to be able to get the union steward if you experience any unsafe condition. But that is not true. They will mock you and say something like, ‘Oh, you don’t like it, you don’t like your job.’ Instead of defending you, they actually threaten you—that you could lose your job.”

He explained further the growing anger among workers. “Many people are angry about conditions in the plant. And it is not just there. Everywhere you look people have had enough.”

Older workers are particularly vulnerable to deadly accidents. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 36 percent of all worker fatalities, or a total of 1,848 deaths, occurred among workers aged 55 or older in 2016, the last year for which the government has compiled figures.

One of the dirty secrets of the supposed “economic recovery” has been the overall increase in workplace fatalities as corporations squeeze as much production as possible from workers.

A total of 5,190 workers lost their lives on the job as a result of traumatic injuries in 2016, up from 4,836 deaths in 2015. All told, 150 workers died each day from hazardous working conditions in the United States. Employers reported nearly 3.7 million work-related injuries and illnesses, but these figures are notoriously under-counted. The true toll of work-related injuries and illnesses is 7.4 million to 11.1 million each year.

As fatalities and injuries rise, both parties have cut federal and state health and safety oversight. After years of reductions, there are currently a total of 1,821 federal and state Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) inspectors responsible for more than 9 million workplaces. At current staffing levels, it would take OSHA 158 years to inspect each workplace under its jurisdiction just once, up from 84 years in 1992. At present, there is only one federal or state inspector for every 77,908 workers.

While the number of inspectors fell during the Obama years, the situation is getting even worse under the Trump administration, which is seeking to lift whatever health and safety regulations remain.

Even if found guilty of “serious” or “willful” violations, or after the serious injury or death of a worker, OSHA only issues wrist-slap fines. The median current penalty per fatality investigation conducted in FY 2017 was \$7,500 for federal OSHA, and the median current penalty was \$4,000 for the state OSHA plans.

When accidents happen in the auto industry, the UAW rushes to help the corporations conceal the causes. Under the terms of “Strategic Partnership Agreements” between the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), the UAW and Ford, the state agency cedes all responsibility to the union and the corporations, which are not antagonists but co-conspirators against workers.

Under such “partnerships,” fines for safety violations are regularly reduced. Rather than surprise inspections, the agency carries out a “MIOSHA Day On-site Non-Enforcement verification visit” once every three years at a time determined “in conjunction with the site.” During that time, “the plant manager, the union chairperson and their leadership team” simply provide a “briefing” to the MIOSHA representatives on injuries and illnesses and what “corrective actions” are being taken.

While the AFL-CIO and the UAW recently marked “Worker Memorial Day” on April 28, the unions have been complicit in the undermining of safety in the name of boosting the “competitiveness” and profitability of big

business.

In addition to giving up long-standing work rule protections, enforcing speedup on behalf of management and regularly ignoring the safety grievances of workers, the UAW has increased the length of the work day, creating greater fatigue, including for TPTs who often work an additional job because their wages are so low.

In the 2015 Ford contract, the UAW agreed to the elimination of one minute of break time for every hour worked by 53,000 hourly workers. According to one study, that gave Ford 7,000 extra hours worked per day for the entire workforce, the equivalent of almost four years of free labor for Ford. In addition, the UAW backed the elimination of the eight-hour work day and straight time on weekends when it agreed to the Alternative Work Schedule of four, ten-hour days.

The still unexplained death of 21-year-old TPT Jacoby Hennings after a confrontation in a UAW office at the Woodhaven Stamping Plant on October 20, 2017; the fatal crushing of Ivan Bridgewater, 41, at the Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville on December 9, 2017; and the recent accident at the Flat Rock plant are all warnings of the deadly conditions in the auto industry, overseen by the UAW.

If workers are to defend their lives and limbs against the relentless drive for profit, they must form rank-and-file factory committees to assert their will against the dictatorship of the corporations and the UAW. This includes enforcing line speed and safety conditions on the shop floor and asserting workers’ control over production.

At the same time, workers must declare the UAW-Ford contract, rammed through by payoffs, threats and fraud, null and void and fight to abolish the two-tier system, reestablish the eight-hour day and transform all temporary workers into full-time employees with full wages and benefits.



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