The Ford Flat Rock accident and the fraud of UAW-management safety oversight

Shannon Jones
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It has been more than one week since the accident at the Ford Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit that injured veteran Ford employee Lynn Hagood, age 55. The woman suffered severe leg injuries after falling into a pit on the trim and final assembly line. The incident shocked and horrified workers, who insisted on being sent home after the accident although Ford management was determined to restart production.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that the area where Hagood was working on the assembly line—where the motor and transmission are lifted on a "moon buggy" into the rest of the vehicle that is being assembled—was known to be dangerous. They raised questions about whether Hagood had received proper training.

Since the accident, no one from management or the United Auto Workers has issued a statement on the incident or reported any pertinent facts. This is despite the fact that Ford workers throughout the US have been following the aftermath of the accident closely and sharing articles posted by the *Autoworker Newsletter*.

Workplace deaths and injuries are on the rise. Figures published by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration showed a 13 percent rise of workplace deaths in 2016, the latest year for which figures are available.

Flat Rock Fire Chief William Vack told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that while details of the department's response to the accident last week at Ford were protected by privacy laws, accidents at the plant are frequent. "We get EMS calls routinely out there, probably two or three times a week," he reported.

As it does every year, the UAW marked Workers Memorial Day on April 28 with a perfunctory notice, listing the names of UAW members who died on the job in 2017 and calling on workers to be "vigilant" about safety issues.

While the UAW calls for workers to be "vigilant," the attitude of union executives toward safety issues is attentive in only one respect: shielding management from any blame in workplace deaths and injuries. The role of the joint UAW-management health and safety committees, such as the UAW-Ford National Joint Committee on Health and Safety, is to block any serious investigation of workplace accidents and ensure that no one is held accountable.

Union-management joint committees provide a lucrative source of income to the union, both above the board and underneath the table, as evidenced by the ongoing investigation into the illegal diversion of funds to the pockets of UAW officials from the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center.

A 25-year veteran worker at Flat Rock Assembly told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that she favored an independent investigation of safety conditions at the plant. "The UAW never tells us anything. Our union is crap."

She continued, "Accidents are common. I used to do the moon buggy. It is very dangerous. The accident did not surprise me. They do not train very well. I have seen them train someone for 15 minutes and then the team leader will leave them alone for the rest of the day."

As part of its drive to enhance shareholder "value," Ford is engaged in a ruthless cost-cutting drive. This has included the erasing of demarcation lines between different job classifications, carried out with the connivance of the UAW.

Nearly five months since the death of Ivan Bridgewater, an electrician at the Ford Kentucky Assembly Plant in Louisville, no report has been issued on his death, which devastated family and co-workers.

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The electrician was apparently working alone at the time, an inherently unsafe practice that has been increasingly sanctioned by the UAW.

This is hardly an isolated case. The UAW, in collaboration with Ford and the other auto companies, has a long record of covering up issues of workplace safety. It is nearly 20 years since the explosion at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan. The February 1, 1999 blast killed six workers and injured 14 others. The immediate response of the UAW was to rush to the defense of the company. The day after the blast, UAW International Vice President Ron Gettelfinger declared that the plant was one of the safest in the Ford system.

Six months later, the Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Administration (MIOSHA) issued a devastating report on the accident, indicting the company, and by implication the UAW, for gross violations of safety. The report found that a natural gas build-up caused the explosion that could have been prevented if management had installed a $12 million ventilation system recommended by their insurance carrier. However, Ford officials decided that the system would have been too costly to install and maintain.

The state investigators found a host of other unsafe practices, including the disabling or removal of many safety devices.

The UAW was well aware of the unsafe conditions. Three of the six workers killed in the explosion had previously filed safety grievances with the union pointing to hazardous conditions, including the specific boiler that exploded. The MIOSHA report noted safety deficiencies on the part of both Ford and the UAW.

Once MIOSHA filed its report, the UAW again came to the defense of management. It issued a joint report with Ford insisting that “no one factor or event was responsible.” In the end, MIOSHA handed Ford a wrist slap, $1.5 million fine, less than one day of profits. Significantly, as part of the settlement, which was signed by both the UAW and Ford, the company handed the union $1 million for a scholarship fund and other programs, in effect a payoff to the UAW for its loyalty.

The UAW-Ford joint safety committee is a conspiracy to silence workers and make sure they have no voice in workplace conditions. On its very face it denies the principle that workers have independent interests that must be defended against management depredations.

Out of the mass industrial struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, autoworkers made gains in terms of work rules and safety. Up until the 1970s wildcat strikes by autoworkers over health and safety issues were a regular occurrence. In one famous instance in 1972, workers at the Lordstown, Ohio General Motors assembly plant struck for 22 days against speed-up and cuts to the workforce.

What was achieved in this direction in an earlier period has been ripped to shreds by the UAW’s program of labor-management partnership. Far from workers having identical interests with management, a bitter class divide exists between the billionaire owners of the auto companies and the workers whose sweat and blood produces the profits for the auto bosses.

How can there be any improvement in safety without a full and independent investigation of all workplace incidents? Workers need an independent voice in health and safety matters, including line speed, work rules, job training and monitoring of workplace practices. This requires the setting up of democratically elected rank-and-file factory and workplace committees chosen from among the most trusted militants to serve as the eyes and voice of workers.

These committees must be completely independent of management and the UAW and based on the understanding that workers must defend their independent interests against the auto companies and the capitalist profit system as a whole as well as the big business politicians. They must fight to enforce workers’ control over safety conditions as well as line speed and assert workers’ control over production.

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