

# Chicago Ford workers denounce unsafe working conditions and UAW complicity

Our reporters  
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A little over a week after veteran autoworker Lynn Hagood's legs were crushed in a horrific workplace accident at Ford's Flat Rock Assembly Plant outside of Detroit, shock and anger continues to spread among autoworkers in the US.

The case has struck a nerve with tens of thousands who face grueling, dangerous conditions on a daily basis, in shifts that regularly last 10 hours or longer. When workers seek to alert supervisors, the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, or government regulators to hazardous or life-threatening issues, they are at best met with indifference: at worst, victimization and the loss of their jobs.

"I heard about what happened [at Flat Rock], and it's terrible," a worker recently retired from Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "This is the way it is for Ford workers. The union hushes it up, so we hear almost nothing about it. The Flat Rock workers need to see that they have support, or they won't know that other people support them."

While the *Autoworker Newsletter* has sought to shine a light on the details and causes of the accident at Flat Rock over the past week, all too often workplace injuries or deaths either go unreported, or are actively covered up by the companies, unions, and state.

Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant is a microcosm of the conditions facing autoworkers at plants not just in the US, but around the world. Built in 1924 and the company's oldest factory still in operation, it is frequently described by workers there as a "hell," with leaking roofs, vermin, and unbearably hot temperatures in the summer. These deplorable conditions coexist with futuristic robotic production systems inside the facility. Workers report that seeing their coworkers faint from heat exhaustion is a common occurrence.

The full extent of injuries and even fatalities at the plant is difficult to determine. The UAW, which claims to

represent workers, instead routinely ignores complaints about working conditions, defends the companies when accidents occur, and colludes with them in covering up the causes.

At the same time the government agency nominally tasked with overseeing workplace safety—the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)—functions in reality as a professional cleanup crew, whitewashing corporate criminality and conducting "enforcement," which amounts to purely cosmetic, wrist-slap fines.

What little data is available from OSHA, however, is nonetheless revealing. Just less than a year ago, an incident similar to the one at Flat Rock took place at Chicago Assembly. According to OSHA's website, on May 28, 2017, a worker operating a "moon buggy" broke their foot when it became pinned between the vehicle and a platform. Since OSHA only provides severe injury data for a narrow window—January 2015 to June 2017—it is unknown whether and how many similar injuries occurred before or since.

More seriously, in January 2016, the collapse of a concrete wall at CAP killed a construction contractor and critically injured another, despite at least one worker at the plant previously filing reports with OSHA about the dangerous-looking area.

At the time, OSHA claimed it would carry out an investigation—not, however, of Ford, but rather of the construction company, Litgen Concrete Cutting and Coring Company.

While a search of OSHA's "Fatality and Catastrophe Investigation" database using the exact investigation number (1115285) produced zero results about the case, a Google search of OSHA's site returned a cached webpage seemingly showing that a \$7,000 fine was levied against Litgen and subsequently withdrawn after the company contested and a "formal settlement" was reached. The

“violation item” (ID 01001) listing the fine is listed as “Deleted.”

Over the weekend, reporters for the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* spoke with workers at CAP about the accident at Flat Rock Assembly and the working conditions in Chicago. Since the UAW and companies have remained virtually silent about the case, many said that they had not heard about it, but nonetheless expressed shock and horror. While some described persistent safety issues, others denounced the abuse of temporary part-time workers (TPTs) and the hostility of the UAW to workers’ needs.

“We’ve had issues with long cords under things dragging, and with water coming in through the ceiling,” said a veteran worker with nearly 20 years at the plant. She said she sought to report safety issues, however minor, as soon as she noticed them. “Anything I see, right away I bitch about it. I say, ‘I’m not going to work in these type of conditions, and you better do something about it.’”

The worker said that company demands had increased for greater productivity in recent years. “The lines have definitely been speeding up, and they’re putting a lot more work on people’s jobs. People have to hustle more.”

She said younger second-tier and TPT workers were abused by management. “I feel they’re mistreating them with how they’re paying them and how they’re doing their benefits. I know their benefits have been cut [compared to ours]. We came in and had to wait 90 days for our medical and dental, but I don’t think they get their dental and vision for almost two or three years later, which I think is absurd. They might not even be here that long, and they still need to take care of themselves.”

When asked whether she felt the UAW defends her interests, she responded, “No, nowhere near. The UAW doesn’t represent us like they should. They don’t follow through. People like me who are ‘tier 1,’ we’ve had our wages frozen for over 10 years, and then for them to give us that small little raise under a dollar [in 2015], it was an insult! Ford is making billions of dollars, and it’s just pure greed. The shareholders and the CEOs are making all that goddamn money. Share that money with the people who are putting in the real work around here.”

Stating what workers needed, she said, “Everyone wants pay raises, we already know that. They want raises, and they want their benefits right away. And they want better treatment, I guess, as a worker. More respect. Because you’re just a number here.”

A second-tier worker noted that the company would

often seek to evade responsibility for safety issues. “Ford is going to protect itself. For instance, the first thing they ask you if a problem happens is, ‘When did you know it was a problem?’ You might say, ‘I noticed it a couple of days ago.’ They will then ask, ‘Did you report it?’ ‘Well, I figured the next shift would ...’”

“No company is going to want to pay you because you got hurt,” he added. “They are going try to make it be your fault.”

Another worker, who had been at the plant for four and a half years, reported seeing at least 10 rats each year, and like many others, noted the roof leaked when it rained.

“My main concern with the company is, if this is a unionized company, why are there so many tiers?” he added. “Everyone should make the same pay. We got eight years [of ‘progression’ to top pay] on a four-year contract. I don’t know how that got passed, but there is something fishy going on.

“I also didn’t like how they did the TPTs and the legacies, because if you don’t have respect for the people that have sweated and been here, then I definitely know what you have planned for me, being a worker that’s only been there four years.

“Then for the TPTs there is no profit sharing. That’s not right. Where does that money go? These guys have been here two years. Where does that money go? No vacation? Health benefits?”

“Most people who work at Ford don’t have faith in the union,” said the worker who had recently retired. “The deterioration of working conditions has been going on for so long, and nothing has changed since the new union leadership was elected. The UAW runs things like they are an illegal mob. If you complain about safety and health hazards, you will be written up or fired for refusing to do your job.

“I had to retire because I am sick with cancer, which I believe was caused by chemicals that I was forced to work with at Ford. The UAW and OSHA pushed my concerns under the rug.”



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