

# Ford contests token fines for death of electrician Ivan Bridgewater

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Ford Motor Company was cited for seven serious violations and fined \$37,800 by the Kentucky Department of Labor on May 30 for the death of 41-year-old Ivan Bridgewater III at its Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville, KY on December 9, 2017. On June 22, Ford Motor Co. contested the fines, which are listed on the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) website.

Ivan Bridgewater, an electrician, was found dead just past midnight on the morning of December 9 on a loading dock where he was working alone. Emergency crews did not arrive at the scene until around 1:00 AM. Five days later on December 14, 2017 the Jefferson County coroner declared blunt force trauma the cause of Bridgewater's death.

A six-month-long investigation was carried out by the Kentucky Department of Labor, which oversees Kentucky's state OSHA office. Through the investigation, it was discovered that Bridgewater died while attempting to repair a dock lock in a poorly lit area. A semi-trailer backed into the loading dock, which pinned him against a wall, crushing him. According to the OSHA report, Bridgewater "suffered crushed injuries to include rib fractures and hemorrhaging which killed him."

The drawn out character of the investigation into Bridgewater's death is par for the course for both state and federal OSHA in relation to workplace fatalities. Funding cuts to OSHA at the federal and state levels over the past decade by Republican and Democratic party politicians have resulted in fewer full-time inspectors per worker and a lack of resources needed for carrying out investigations in a timely fashion. As per OSHA policies, management serves as the main point of contact from start to finish in investigations and inspections, resulting in biased findings in favor of

the companies.

The sprawling truck plant employs more than 8,000 workers and operates around-the-clock, churning out highly profitable pickups and sports utility vehicles for Ford. Workers at the plant are members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 862, which has issued no criticism of the manner in which the investigation was conducted or Ford's contest of the slap-on-the-wrist fines.

Ford is opposing payment of even the token fine at the same time that its 2017 full year results show a 65 percent year-over-year increase in net income (\$7.6 billion for 2017) and \$8.4 billion in pre-tax profit for 2017. The company's massive profits are largely the result of a campaign of cost-cutting, aided and abetted by the UAW.

The UAW pushed through a pro-company contract agreement in 2015 that expanded the number of temporary part-time (TPT) workers and maintained the two-tier wage and benefit system and 10-hour Alternative Work Schedules. The UAW routinely turns a blind eye to management's skirting of safety issues, including forcing skilled trades workers to work alone.

Around the time of Bridgewater's death, UAW Vice President James Settles issued a perfunctory statement, informing workers that, "UAW Representatives from the National Joint Health & Safety Committee are onsite leading the safety investigation, while local law enforcement officials are investigating the circumstances of Mr. Bridgewater's death."

The UAW's current silence on the slap-on the-wrist fines and their contest by Ford have vindicated the WSWS's warning that such investigation by the joint labor-management safety committee would be a whitewash of the company and cover up the complicity of the UAW, allowing the hazardous conditions to

continue.

The minimal fines issued for Ivan Bridgewater's death are a matter of course for OSHA, a federal agency which primarily serves as a pro-company organization that provides corporations with legal cover for hazardous working conditions. OSHA systematically avoids the prosecution of companies for the deaths and serious injuries of workers, instead levying minimal fines as compared to their profits, which they are free to contest.

Bridgewater's case follows the 2009 death of 54-year-old Ronald Cassady, a millwright with 16 years at the Kentucky Truck Plant, who died from multiple blunt force injuries after an I-beam struck him in the head and chest. The only fine OSHA issued to Ford that year was a paltry \$10,000 for workplace safety and health violations.

Another Ford worker, Lynn Hagood, had her legs crushed after she fell into a pit on the trim and final assembly line at the Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit, MI at around 1:00 AM on May 4, 2018. Plant officials tried to restart production and extend the shift to make up for downtime following the accident, but workers refused to continue working. The workers stopped production independently of the UAW, which did nothing to help following the accident.

Workers spoke out on Ivan Bridgewater's death following the publication of an article on the WSWS. One worker wrote, "OSHA has been an anti-worker joke as anyone who has been speeded up knows. The remedy to these fatalities is to hire more electricians."

Another worker spoke out against the role of the union in helping Ford to cover up workplace safety violations: "Nobody's safety is worth sacrificing to make their cars and their profits. It's the "UAW-Ford Joint Committee on the Health and Safety of UAW and Ford."

The experiences of Ivan Bridgewater's death at KTP and Lynn Hagood's injury at Flat Rock show that autoworkers cannot rely on the UAW or OSHA to enforce safety in the auto industry. Workers need to build rank-and-file factory committees to put forth demands such as the training and hiring of more full-time, skilled employees so that workers do not have to work alone under dangerous conditions. These committees should operate independently of the bogus UAW-Ford joint safety committee. They should fight

for full funding and staffing for the maintenance of the plant, including the provision of sufficient lighting and safety equipment, the following of lock-out-tag-out procedures, an end to round-the-clock production, adequate training programs and independent worker oversight of health and safety matters.



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