

Tesla assembles cars in a tent amid investigations of workplace safety

Toby Reese
31 July 2018

Over the past month, California-based electric automaker Tesla has added an additional assembly line for its latest Model 3 vehicle inside a large tent in the parking lot of its Fremont manufacturing facility. Numerous press reports about Tesla's operations cite unsafe working conditions, lack of air conditioning, and reduction in quality control. As one commentator observed, production in this manner has not been seen "outside of the military trying to service vehicles in a war zone."

Along with individual private investors, Tesla's rapid entrance into the auto market has been backed by Daimler AG and Toyota, as well as by loans from the US Department of Energy. Yet the company continues to show a significant net loss, \$2.2 billion in 2017 alone, as it attempts to work out assembly line methods to expand its production and compete with auto manufacturers that have been in the business for decades.

The makeshift operation in Fremont began as the company attempted to speed up production of the Model 3 to meet already overdue promises for a waiting list of customers as well as for the company to start turning a profit to meet the increasingly insistent demands of investors. The new conditions of production at Tesla have led to the opening of further investigations by the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) into worker safety violations, on top of previous cases already under way.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk stated on Twitter that the tent was created based on the need for "another general assembly line to reach 5k/week Model 3 production," and that he's "Not sure we actually need a building. This tent is pretty sweet." Musk had reportedly been sleeping on the floor of the factory and had, by some

accounts, been yelling at employees in order to speed up production. Business Insider noted that on June 26, in another effort to speed up production, Tesla asked engineers to quit doing a car safety check known as a "brake-and-roll test."

Shortly after starting the additional assembly line in the tent, Musk tweeted on July 1 that the plant had finally reached its previously stated production goals by making "7000 cars, [in] 7 days" (the additional 2,000 units being Model X and Model S vehicles).

The tent was constructed in three weeks after hastily receiving building permits from the City of Fremont, and the new assembly line was rigged up using scraps and spare parts lying around the facility. Tesla was given approval to use the tent for six months initially with a possible six-month extension. The use of a tent for auto manufacturing is unheard of and immediately raises questions of adequate infrastructure, including plumbing, electrical, mechanical systems, fire sprinklers, fans, and ventilation ducts.

In June, Musk announced a 9 percent cut of its workforce in a "company-wide restructuring" to "reduce costs and become profitable." This translated to the jobs of over 3,500 employees from Tesla's total workforce of around 37,000 at the time.

After the layoffs, many employees responded to Musk's notification on Twitter. While some confused posts went so far as to praise Musk for the opportunity to work at Tesla even though they had just lost their positions, others spoke of the lack of respect they were being shown despite diligent service.

Abdu Marquez stated, "I was one of the most loyal hard working you had. I sacrificed so much for your company even my daughters birth due because I couldn't leave the production line unattended. This layoff tells me that Tesla doesn't respect or care about

loyalty anymore. I pushed and pushed everyday. ...”

There are currently more than 10,000 workers at the company’s single production facility, which is now running 24 hours per day, seven days a week. Workers at the plant have expressed concern about burn-out after working 12 hours or more per day for up to six days a week, including mandatory overtime and weekend shifts with little advance notice. Some workers have claimed that they have been told to work until the daily quotas have been met, even if it means to keep working past the end of their scheduled shifts.

There are several investigations currently under way by Cal/OSHA regarding workplace injuries at the plant. Recent media reports of workplace violations and injuries source back to an independent media non-profit known as The Center for Investigative Reporting, which publishes on the web, radio, podcast, and social media under the name *Reveal*.

The first Cal/OSHA investigation was opened on April 12 after an employee working for a subcontractor was reportedly hit by a skid carrier, breaking his jaw. A second investigation was opened on April 17 directly after *Reveal* released a report that Tesla had been inaccurately recording injuries as “personal medical” cases instead of “workplace injuries,” causing the company to under-report on its injury logs. In a May article, reporter Will Evans shows that the company added 13 injuries from 2017 to OSHA logs after the company had produced its legally mandated injury report earlier this year.

Another investigation was initiated by Cal/OSHA on June 19, the details of which are not yet clear. Considering the correlation with start of assembly in the parking lot tent, the events very well may be related.

In both 2015 and 2016, Tesla’s injury rate of 8.8 and 8.1 injuries per 100 workers, respectively, compared to the industry national average of 6.7 and 6.2 per 100 workers. Significantly as well, “serious injuries” requiring days of work or job restrictions were almost double the national average for each year.

Tesla claimed in a blog post on April 16 that *Reveal*’s article “paints a completely false picture of Tesla” and “is in fact an ideologically motivated attack by an extremist organization working directly with union supporters to create a calculated disinformation campaign against Tesla.” Musk has tweeted comments

along the same lines.

Although no evidence was presented by Musk or Tesla to contradict *Reveal*, the United Auto Workers (UAW) is pursuing a self-serving, duplicitous, campaign in order to secure increased income by securing bargaining rights over the Tesla workforce.

The UAW has reportedly spent more than \$422,000 on its Tesla campaign—renting office space and hotel rooms, and purchasing videos, t-shirts, ads and campaign flyers—in an attempt to unionize workers. The campaign has been met with little success. Although Musk claims this is due to the union’s interests not being “aligned with Tesla’s mission to accelerate the advent of sustainable energy,” many workers are aware of the treacherous policies of the UAW at the very same location when it was operated by General Motors (GM) and later by GM and Toyota as the New United Motor Manufacturing Inc.

At that time, the UAW attempted to channel anger behind bankrupt appeals to American nationalism, while refusing to organize any opposition to the closure of the plant. In 2010, worker anger erupted in a union meeting when UAW officials tried to prevent workers from speaking.

Workers are also no doubt following the current proceedings in Detroit where, at the writing of this article, former UAW President Dennis Williams has been implicated in a scheme to funnel millions of dollars from Fiat Chrysler into the pockets of UAW officials. The payouts included spending on resort and spa fees, lavish meals and other perks that were intended to keep the UAW “fat, dumb, and happy.”

Workers should place no stock in UAW nor should they trust the outspoken Musk for their workplace conditions, benefits and pay. To bring about genuine change in production, they will need to take their own independent initiative in the formation of rank-and-file committees and develop a socialist perspective to understand the attacks on their livelihoods.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact