

Fiat Chrysler Kokomo casting plant cited for safety violations before latest worker injury

Marcus Day
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One week after a worker was horribly injured at Fiat Chrysler's Kokomo, Indiana, casting plant, new information regarding safety violations at the factory is emerging.

Details about the circumstances behind the accident are still scant. Last Wednesday afternoon, the worker, since identified as Eric Parsons, suffered severe injuries after a heavy die slide fell on top of him. According to the Kokomo Fire Department, the lower half of his body was pinned when they arrived, and machinery had to be used to lift the equipment off him. Parsons, who among other injuries suffered broken ribs and a broken back, was then emergency airlifted to a nearby hospital.

According to a GoFundMe page initiated by his family, Parsons underwent surgery to stop internal bleeding and repair damage to his pelvis and spine. He faces a protracted recovery.

The horrific injury has prompted an outpouring of support from family, friends and fellow workers, with many noting their gratitude that the worst didn't occur and that Parsons survived. Many others have expressed a hunger for information about the causes behind the workplace accident. A report on the *World Socialist Web Site* Tuesday, "Critically injured Kokomo Fiat Chrysler worker faces protracted recovery," has been widely shared, quickly becoming the most read article on the WSWS in the past week.

However, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1166 continues to maintain its silence about the event and has yet to issue a statement. For its part, Fiat Chrysler has largely done the same, with spokeswoman Jodi Tilson telling the *Kokomo Tribune* that an investigation is ongoing, while declining to offer any further detail.

While the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (IOSHA) has yet to even confirm whether it is actually conducting an investigation of the

accident, what little information it has released sheds light on the unaccountability and indifference to safety of the automaker.

An inspection of IOSHA documents relating to inspections conducted between August 17, 2016, and January 11, 2017, shows "severe" safety violations at the plant. The "safety order" report from February 2017 shows that the casting plant was found to be in violation of a number of elements of the Indiana Occupational Health and Safety Act, including hazards such as:

- ? Elevated platforms lacking guard rails
- ? Existing guard rails not reaching an adequate height
- ? Unclear procedures for controlling hazardous energy on conveyors
- ? Electric equipment lacking appropriate markings

All of the violations were initially categorized as "serious" by the Department of Labor. Nonetheless, a total fine of just \$17,000 was levied, a drop in the bucket of FCA's daily profits, and a little over half the price of a new Jeep Grand Cherokee.

As is the norm, however, even this pittance was deemed to be an affront by the company. In March 2017, the company "duly and timely petitioned for review of the Safety Order." Subsequently, most of the violations were either "deleted" or amended to "non-serious," and the total fine reduced to just \$2,500.

Countless other examples could be produced of "appealed" violations, slap-on-the-wrist fines, and OSHA investigations of workplace accidents or fatalities that function as nothing more than whitewashes.

Together, the company, state inspectors, the union and trade organizations work to falsify and embellish workplace safety procedures. For the last two years, the North American Die Casting Association has given the

Kokomo Casting Plant a safety award, with Plant Manager Jerry Peterson stating, “The most important thing we do is safety. It is difficult to explain the environment we used to work in where keeping people safe was a daily concern.”

Following the 2008 economic crash, workers at Fiat Chrysler’s factories and numerous other workplaces faced ramped-up demands for increased efficiency and output—if their jobs remained at all. In 2009, the World Class Manufacturing quality improvement scheme was implemented with the complicity of the UAW during the takeover of Chrysler by Fiat. As has since come to light, a key factor in the imposition of the program and numerous other concessions to wages, benefits and work rules was the bribery of UAW officials, including UAW Vice President for Chrysler General Holiefield by company executives (see: “UAW corruption scandal reaches the top”).

While union officials turn a blind eye to dangerous working conditions and routinely ignore complaints, workers are increasingly fed up with endless factory injuries and are looking for a way to fight back. Earlier this summer, workers at the neighboring Kokomo transmission plants voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike over hundreds of grievances relating to health and safety violations. However, since the vote, the UAW has kept workers in the dark about the content of its negotiations with the company, and has not even submitted a request for strike authorization to the UAW regional director.

As long as production remains subordinated to the private profit interests of the corporations and their adjuncts in the trade unions, workers’ lives and limbs will continue to be expendable. In order for workers to guarantee their safety and decent working conditions, it is necessary to organize rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the pro-company unions, to assert control over production.



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