

Growing anger over injury of autoworker in Kokomo, Indiana

Shannon Jones
17 September 2018

There is growing anger among auto workers over the injury of a Fiat Chrysler Kokomo Casting Plant worker in Indiana, amid a news blackout from FCA management and the United Auto Workers.

An article posted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* on the injury of the worker, Eric Parsons, has been widely read by workers, with hundreds sharing the article and commenting on it on Facebook.

Parsons was severely injured on September 5 when a die slide fell on top of him. He was later evacuated by helicopter to a trauma center in Indianapolis. He suffered multiple injuries, including internal bleeding as well as serious injury to his pelvis and spine. He faces a protracted recovery period, and family members are hopeful that he will be able to walk again. They have set up a gofundme account to raise financial support.

One reader of the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* wrote, “I can tell you with no uncertainty that OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] + UAW + FCA = collusion.

“I’ve personally worked in areas with blatant OSHA violations, witnessed co-workers take the concerns to our steward, following procedure, witnessed them contact OSHA, following procedure, witnessed OSHA agent *rather than investigate* speak to UAW regarding complaint, then post ‘investigation found no evidence’ or ‘corrective action taken’ notices WITHOUT EVER LOOKING AT THE SITE.

“I’ve continued working at that site for months without anything being done to abate the hazard, and had dozens of co-workers referred to the OSHA notice whenever they expressed concern about the problem.”

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly plant near Detroit said, “If the UAW could

hide the language of [the 2015] contracts from us, why would they care about safety? We knew that something was wrong when the corruption scandal began, but this is just adding to what is already there,” she said referring to the multiple indictments of top UAW officials for receiving illegal payoffs from Fiat Chrysler.

The casting plant employs some 1,400 workers, and supplies critical components used in the manufacture of transmissions. FCA’s massive transmission operations in Kokomo supply all of the company’s North American vehicle assembly plants.

The Kokomo Casting Plant pours about 1 million pounds of aluminum each day, or about 3 percent of the world’s supply of aluminum. The plant recently installed three new die cast machines to produce Chrysler’s eight-speed transmission. The facility also makes engine blocks for Ferrari.

The plant has also begun to re-melt aluminum in the name of improving efficiency. As a result of this and other changes, the plant won a bronze award on the World Class Manufacturing (WCM) scale. WCM ratings focus on eliminating waste.

The dies used for the manufacture of transmissions are massive, weighing several tons. The die slide is used for the manufacture of internal parts of the transmission. The maintenance of the dies involves an extensive lockout system.

There are many potential hazards in a casting plant, where crucibles of molten aluminum are transported overhead to feed the giant casting machines. The injury rate in die casting is approximately two times the rate for the rest of industry, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

A spokesperson for the Indiana Occupational Health and Safety Administration told the WSWS that an

investigation into the recent accident has begun, but could provide no further details.

One Kokomo casting plant worker wrote to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, noting the potential hazards of working in the plant:

“Working on the dies in the machines at [the] casting plant there are lock out procedures you have to follow for your safety. Also in moving dies there are safety rules to follow. If any of these are changed it could or will kill you. I have seen two operators killed in machines while I worked there.”

In 2011 the Indiana Occupational Health and Safety Administration fined Fiat Chrysler \$200,000 for safety infractions it uncovered following the death of a worker at the Kokomo Casting Plant. Claude Brock Jr., 62, a maintenance worker, fell to his death from a conveyor system. The fines involved penalties for not requiring the use of appropriate equipment for the prevention of falls and for improper training.

In a statement to the press, Brock’s widow, Alberta Brock, criticized IOSHA for not imposing more severe penalties on the company and noted that her husband had previously indicated to her that he was surprised that more workers weren’t killed or injured at the factory due to unsafe conditions.

In another horrific tragedy, in September 2007 John Kelly Wright, 48, was crushed to death by a die cast machine. According to an account published by his nephew, Wright was crushed between two side panels of a die cast machine after going inside to check on an apparent malfunction. Sensors had detected that a part had not been properly ejected after it was cast. Wright had gone inside to adjust the pneumatic pins that eject the transmission from the machine after it has cooled off from casting. Problems with the pins had been a longstanding issue.

A sensor is supposed to detect when the door to the machine is open. However, for months prior to that the sensors had apparently been malfunctioning. Wright and other workers had complained about the safety equipment but had been told a fix was not “cost effective.” Even though the door was wide open, the machine went into operation, with Wright still inside.

Chrysler was eventually fined a mere \$15,000 in relation to the death, which the company promptly appealed.

Workers at four Kokomo area Fiat Chrysler

transmission plants voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization in July over unresolved health and safety grievances. Since that time, the UAW has imposed a virtual news blackout on the state of the negotiations. Reflecting the unserious nature of the UAW leadership’s claim to be waging a struggle, no strike deadline has been set.

No confidence can be placed in the UAW-Fiat Chrysler joint safety committee to uncover the facts relating to the injury to Parsons. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* encourages Kokomo Fiat Chrysler workers, friends and family to contact us with information and background to this tragedy. All contact information will be kept confidential.

Only an independent investigation initiated by workers can prevent similar occurrences. This calls for the building of rank-and-file factory committees, independent of management and its UAW lackeys.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact