

“It’s honestly scary going to work because you’re not safe any more”

## Kentucky Ford worker describes hazardous working conditions

Keisha Gibbs, Marcus Day  
14 November 2018

Nearly one year ago, on December 9, 2017, 41-year-old electrician Ivan Bridgewater III was found dead on a loading dock at Ford’s Kentucky Truck Plant, where he was working alone. After dragging out a six-month-long investigation, the Kentucky Department of Labor fined Ford Motor Company a paltry \$37,800 for seven violations, six of them serious, relating to Bridgewater’s death.

Despite the token character of the fine, Ford Motor Company, which had pre-tax profits of \$8.4 billion in 2017, contested the penalty in June, a practice which is routine. OSHA’s website still lists the violations as “under contest” almost five months later.

Ivan Bridgewater, the father of the deceased young man, posted a moving tribute to his son earlier this month to commemorate his birthday. “This is a photo of my son, Ivan. Today would have been his birthday. He was killed eleven months ago at his workplace, the Ford auto plant, in Louisville, Kentucky. He was an awesome young man, and I was very proud of him. He was patient, kind, and respectful with me, and that’s not always easy. He loved his family, especially his wife and son. I miss him more than words can express. Parents should never outlive their children. The pain and loss never go away. Rest in peace buddy.”

The hazardous and intolerable situations, which make tragic and completely preventable deaths such as Ivan’s practically a regular occurrence, only continue to worsen, a product of decades of collusion between the United Auto Workers union and the auto companies.

A worker at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP)

recently spoke with a *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* writer about the conditions workers in the plant face.

Don, who chose to use an alias in order to protect himself from retribution by the company and the union, described the indifference with which management and the UAW alike treat workers’ safety.

“We don’t have safety meetings anymore. [When] you’re on the line working, a team leader comes up and says, ‘We just had a meeting on some dude getting electrocuted at another plant. Don’t stick your finger in a light socket. Hahaha.’ And you can’t even hear what they are saying half the time because of all the background noise. It’s honestly scary going to work because you’re not safe any more.”

The UAW is indifferent to the conditions of the plant. According to Don, when workers go to the union with complaints, “they just say it’s being investigated” and conditions remain the same.

This summer, when the UAW took no action to address the unbearable temperature conditions in the plant, Don called Kentucky’s Occupational Safety and Health Program. He was told there were no available hygienists to immediately investigate. “I called in the second week in June and a hygienist didn’t come out until September.”

Recently, workers have posted in the UAW 862/KTP Facebook group pictures of rashes developing on workers’ skin after coming into contact with the epoxy used in the aluminum body vehicles. “The chemical used for the epoxy in itself is crazy,” Don said, “but throw that on top of not having a clean plant and not

caring about safety, that makes the situation even worse.” Workers have been paying out of pocket for treatments for the rashes, he said.

At one point, the post with pictures of workers’ rashes was removed from the Facebook group. It was quickly reposted. “The union lets employees know they are monitoring Facebook,” Don said.

The UAW has a history stretching back decades of assisting in the cover-up of workplace injuries and fatalities by way of various “labor-management partnerships.” In 1998, the UAW, Ford and the federal OSHA established a “strategic partnership,” in which surprise inspections were to be abandoned in certain states in lieu of “inspection protocols,” to be drafted by union-company committees, and “focused inspections.”

Funding cuts, both at the federal and state level, have also resulted in fewer OSHA investigators and resources to adequately address the health and safety standards of workplaces. That, coupled with OSHA’s pro-company character, means that complaints of violations are routinely ignored. As Don put it, “The company has OSHA paid off because Ford will threaten to leave, and Kentucky needs the jobs.”

In move that will further undermine the woefully inadequate state oversight of workplace safety, the state’s Republican governor, Matt Bevin, signed an executive order in July abolishing the 13-member Occupational Health and Standards Safety Board, made up of safety experts and representatives of business and unions. All powers to enforce federal regulations have been transferred to a single “at will” employee appointed by the governor.

Kentucky’s state occupational safety agency failed to adequately investigate almost every workplace fatality over a two-year period, according to an investigative report published earlier this week on November 12 by the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting, the Ohio Valley ReSource and the Center for Public Integrity. Titled “Fatal Flaws: How Kentucky Is Failing Its Workers,” the report analyzed what it described as a “quietly issued” and “scathing” federal audit of Kentucky’s agency, which found that the state is conducting fewer investigations than it has in at least 10 years, and is identifying fewer hazards when it does.

In addition to declining safety standards at KTP, hygiene and sanitation have also been neglected. Don

described conditions in which the restrooms are frequently out of soap and paper towels. At one time, Ford employees were in charge of janitorial work in the plants. These duties have been subcontracted to independent companies, which frequently make the lowest bid. In an effort to cut costs, many companies cut back on essentials, such as adequate cleaning supplies.

Over the summer, Louisville, Kentucky, had the worst outbreak in the country of Hepatitis A, a highly contagious virus that infects the liver. The virus spreads through contaminated food or water or through contact with fecal matter. Nevertheless, Ford took no additional measures to ensure sanitation in the plants, nor did the UAW demand any.

This past summer, at the Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant, two workers, David Hinderman, 53, and Donald Tafoya, 61, died after contracting legionnaires’ disease. The plant had to be temporarily shut down to be disinfected.

The Kentucky Truck Plant, Louisville Assembly Plant, and Kansas City Assembly Plant are the three largest Ford plants by workforce in the United States. The F-150 pickup, the best-selling vehicle in the world, and Super Duty trucks account for 90 percent of Ford’s global profits. The average price of a Ford pickup is \$47,000, and the company nets around \$10,000 for each truck. The workers whose labor produces those profits cannot even get their restrooms stocked with an adequate amount of soap or toilet paper.

The UAW and auto companies work hand-in-glove towards unfettered profit-making, with no regard to the safety of their employees. To ensure truly safe and decent working conditions, workers must organize independently of the pro-corporate unions and form rank-and-file factory committees, in order to conduct a struggle to end management’s dictatorship over the shop floor and replace it with industrial democracy and workers’ control over production.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**