

Nightmare odyssey of an American autoworker

A Chrysler worker's 15-year fight to win her job back

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This is the story of Cordella Minney, an American autoworker treated like a modern-day slave by Chrysler management, the United Auto Workers union and the American legal system.

A mother of two and grandmother to four, Cordella was born and grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana in a family of 11 children, nine sisters and two brothers. Her parents both worked to support the large household—her father as a taxi driver and her mother as a nurse's assistant.

Chrysler hired Cordella in 1996 to a job as a part-time worker at the Indianapolis Foundry where she later became full-time. As a result of her employment with Chrysler she was able to purchase her first home and her first car.

However, her life soon took a drastic turn. After courageously speaking out against sexual harassment by a Fiat Chrysler supervisor in the workplace, Cordella's life became a terrible ordeal. She faced continuous harassment by management, abetted by the UAW.

The harassment continued for more than a decade and culminated in a workplace assault in 2013 that led to Cordella being fired by Fiat Chrysler and framed up on criminal charges. Despite her acquittal she has yet to regain her job.

Reports received by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* indicate that the pressing of women workers for sexual favors and other forms of harassment is a serious problem in many factories, recalling the dark times before the rise of the mass industrial unions in the 1930s. Continuing abuse was highlighted by the recent lawsuit by women workers at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant as well as Chicago Stamping, alleging rampant abuse by supervisors and local UAW officials.

In 2002, Cordella filed charges with the UAW against a Chrysler manager at the Indianapolis Foundry alleging sexual harassment. "I went to the union to let them know this man had asked me for sexual favors and when I refused that he hit me and threatened to kill me," Cordella told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. "I showed them my bruises and told them what he said. They called him into a separate office and verified what I had said."

Under pressure she signed a statement pledging that if management and the union spoke to the supervisor, she would not file any charges. "That was their way of sweeping it up under the rug."

She continued, "From that point on my job was a living hell. I was denied promotions by my manager. I was denied raises. I was elected as a trustee for the union and I was denied being allowed to take part in meetings or other duties.

"When I went to management, they were on board with him. When I went to the union, they were on board with him.

"It was so bad that I was stressed out and depressed because I knew that these things were happening because I came forward. I got no help from the union. I ended up taking a medical stress leave. This happened in June

(2002). I first went to the union in February."

At that point Cordella filed a lawsuit against Chrysler for discrimination and sexual harassment. This only increased pressure from management. She reported that her house was even placed under surveillance.

Despite having the proper documentation from her doctor, Cordella said she was called back to work. "I was put back on a job with jack hammers and drills that I was not supposed to do because I had a brain tumor removed in 1998."

Cordella said her doctor called management and instructed that she be put back on medical leave. However, management claimed there was not proper documentation of her condition and terminated her.

After management, with the agreement of the UAW, rejected a grievance over her termination, Cordella filed a lawsuit. In the interim she lost her home and her car was repossessed. She ended up filing for bankruptcy.

In the end, Fiat Chrysler agreed to settle the lawsuit for \$50,000 without admitting wrongdoing. "It was a slap in the face. It was horrible.

"There was nothing I could do. My former attorney, who dropped me because I filed for bankruptcy, became Chrysler's attorney against me.

"They had all these high-profile attorneys. I didn't have anyone representing me.

"The judge denied my appeal. My attorney got \$16,000. They paid the other creditors and gave me a check for \$1,800 and change. The UAW denied my reinstatement, including [former UAW Vice President for Chrysler] General Holiefield."

However, Cordella would not give up and continued to fight. She appealed the decision and was finally reinstated, but not until April 2011. She was granted her accumulated seniority, in effect an admission by management that her termination had been unjustified.

At the time, she was living in Columbus, Ohio. The Indianapolis Foundry had closed in 2005, so she was assigned to the Kokomo Transmission Plant and given a moving stipend.

"I was immediately sent back to the floor. The people had already heard about me and what had transpired at the foundry. In fact, there were some of the very same managers they had at the foundry."

"I started getting all the horrible jobs," she said, despite having some 13 years' accumulated seniority.

"They knew my whole story, both the UAW and management, and they used that against me.

"I went to the UAW to let them know I was getting all this negativity and didn't understand why."

However, the UAW ignored her complaints. "I just went in every day and sucked it up. I wanted to get my life back on track. I was willing to let bygones be bygones, but it didn't work like that."

Despite her seniority, Cordella found herself moved from shift to shift

and put on the least desirable jobs. “I finally landed a bid job. It was still one of the hardest jobs there. It was on three machines making pistons.

“Other bid jobs came up, but again they were given to people with less seniority.

“I worked diligently. I came in every day; never walked through that gate tardy.”

Then, on October 11, 2012, as she was getting ready to leave work, Cordella fell into a chemical pit where the flume cover had not been properly replaced. There were no warning cones as mandated.

“Down I went. By the grace of God there was a metal bar up under that grate. That’s what kept me from falling 10 to 12 feet down into the chemicals. I would not be here today if I had fallen into those chemicals.

“My left leg hit that metal bar. I was taken to the hospital. They said there was a contusion to my left thigh. There was enormous pain. It was worse than labor pains. It hurt like hell for months.”

However, Cordella was only allowed off work for two weeks. “My pain was worse than ever. I could not walk up the steps to my apartment. I had to crawl up the steps and slide down the steps.”

As a result, Cordella had to relocate to a first-floor apartment. Six months later she was still hobbling around. Yet, she could not go back to her own doctor because it was now a workers’ compensation case.

“I got no union representation whatsoever, except, ‘whatever they say goes.’”

Cordella eventually hired a workers’ compensation attorney, but this only led to further harassment. She started getting bogus write-ups from her supervisor for petty infractions, such as taking too long on a bathroom break.

Then, in October 2013, another employee assaulted Cordella in what is widely viewed as a provocation instigated against her as retribution for her efforts to stand up for herself in the plant against management and the union.

Ferrell Henderson, a long time Fiat Chrysler employee who retired earlier this year from Kokomo Transmission told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “That department had all kinds of tensions. The union sided with management. They did nothing for Cordella. They are making life as difficult as hell for a lot of people.

“They knew all about her background. This incident was all they needed to put her outside.”

After a brief exchange of words over a work issue, the much larger woman came over to Cordella’s workstation and swung her fist.

Startled, Cordella screamed. In self-defense, Cordella then hit her attacker back.

“She threw me to the floor and was sitting on top of me. I grabbed her hands because she was trying to choke me. Some of the skilled trades guys saw her and pulled her off of me.

“I never left my workstation, she came off her workstation and attacked me.”

As a result of the altercation Cordella said she suffered a concussion. However, rather than being given medical attention she was sent to her supervisor’s office and questioned by management. She was then told she would be suspended indefinitely and was escorted out of the plant by management and the Kokomo police, humiliated in front of her coworkers and friends.

After the incident, Ferrell called Cordella and told her he heard about what had happened. He reported that the other woman had previously made threats against Cordella. Ferrell told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that a week to 10 days before the incident the other woman had told him, “I am going to get Cordella ... I am going to beat her up,” a fact he later testified to under oath at Cordella’s criminal trial for battery.

During the 19 months leading up to her trial on criminal misdemeanor charges of battery, UAW officials refused to assist in Cordella’s defense in any way.

Cordella continued, “The UAW wouldn’t speak to me. They said after the trial we will talk to you.”

The trial took place after 19 months. Cordella reported it took the jury only 45 minutes to reach a not guilty verdict.

Despite the acquittal, management said Cordella’s termination would stay in place. “The UAW was pissed that I was found not guilty. They just knew I was not going to get my job back,” Cordella noted.

Cordella sought to retain an attorney in an effort to regain her job. The statute of limitations for such cases is two years, but no attorney would agree to help her during the 19 months it took her case to come to trial, leaving her only a five-month window to file a civil suit. She was finally able to retain an attorney, but he decided to delay filing a lawsuit until the UAW appeals process ran its course. The UAW delayed several months and ultimately made its final decision rejecting Cordella’s appeal. By this time, it was past the statutory filing deadline.

“I filed papers with the attorney board over what he did. But they said that as long as he returned my retainer fee there was nothing to be done.”

The refusal of Fiat Chrysler to reinstate Cordella following her acquittal was an egregious violation of her rights. Cordella noted that according to court records, the manager who had initially backed the filing of criminal charges against her had earlier been convicted on criminal charges of reckless endangerment for an incident stemming from drunk driving. He is still employed by Fiat Chrysler.

Cordella issued personal appeals to former UAW President Dennis Williams and his successor Gary Jones about her case. Both times the UAW dismissed her calls for assistance. Federal investigators are looking into the activities of both men in relation to the UAW corruption scandal. Williams was implicated by a top former UAW official in the Chrysler department as having authorized illegal payouts from joint training centers.

“That ordeal adds salt to the wounds I was suffering. I was denied everything. And this was at the time during the UAW corruption scandal. It cuts like a knife.

“It hurts even more when I hear about some of my brothers and sisters, whether I know them or not, going through the same bull crap.

“I read about the case of Jacoby Hennings at Ford Woodhaven. It was the same pattern. Some of the tactics they use are different. They will put you on a job to eventually get rid of you.

“To rehash my story really hurts, but I do have to share. I am not the first one and I won’t be the last. This is stuff that really truly happens that can push people over the edge. It is really sad that these big corporations get away with this.”

Do you have a story of abuse by management or the unions? Contact the WWSW Autoworker Newsletter today. We will respect any request for anonymity.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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