

“We had two people die on the line this year”

## Faurecia auto parts worker in Saline, Michigan describes appalling work regime

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21 December 2018

A worker from the Faurecia plant in Saline, Michigan, recently contacted the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* to discuss the conditions in the sprawling 1.3 million-square-foot facility. The long hours, health and safety concerns, substandard pay and virtual management-union dictatorship mirror the situation throughout the auto parts industry.

Faurecia, a French-owned transnational corporation, is the sixth-largest auto parts maker in the world, producing seats, interior systems, and emission control technology. The company, with factories in 35 countries, took in a profit of €714.5 million (US\$816.5 million) in 2017, up 34 percent from the year before.

“I hired in at \$11 not too long after Faurecia bought the plant. Some people had stayed on from ACH [Automotive Holdings Company] and had to take a pay cut,” the worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “Of the 1,700 or 1,800 workers, there are probably no more than 200 of us still working from that time.”

A brief review of the plant’s 52 years of operation, particularly since the year 2000, provides insight into changes in automobile production in the 21st century and the corresponding decline in living standards and working conditions.

Ford opened the factory in 1966 as an early producer of plastic components. It grew throughout the ’70s and ’80s as the use of plastics was developed and expanded. Ford continued to operate the plant throughout the ’90s until it reached a deal with the UAW in October 1999 to spin off its parts division, Visteon. This followed a similar move by General Motors (GM) which had spun off its parts division, Delphi, five months earlier.

Visteon became formally independent from Ford in April 2000, with the transfer of new stock to existing Ford shareholders. While nominally independent, the two companies were, in reality, wholly dependent on one another. Nearly 90 percent of Visteon’s revenue came from sales to its parent company Ford.

The move by both Ford and GM away from “vertical integration” by spinning off their parts divisions was a turning point in the industry. It expressed both the downward pressure on profits of an increasingly global productive process, and the inability of the nationally based trade unions to advance the independent interest of their members. Workers’ wages and benefits were not affected in the initial agreement allowing the spin-off, but it was widely understood that demands for major concessions were on the horizon as the two largest automakers

pushed for lower pricing.

Throughout its first five years as an “independent” company, Visteon was unable to turn a profit. In a move to avoid bankruptcy Visteon sought to narrow its focus on electronics. It transferred ownership of the Saline plant, along with 22 other facilities, back to Ford in October 2005 under the auspices of a newly developed shell company called Automotive Components Holdings (ACH). Ford agreed to reassume ownership to prevent supply disruptions, but they did so with the intention of selling off the factories and business as soon as possible.

It should be noted that at the same time Ford created ACH to prevent Visteon’s collapse, Delphi was in the process of filing for bankruptcy. This was essentially the first round of auto bankruptcies before the 2009 bailout.

It was over the next seven years of ACH/Ford ownership, and ultimately with the sale to Faurecia in June 2012, that major wage and benefits concessions, buyouts, transfers, forced layoffs and the proliferation of temporary or “probationary” employment were to be forced upon the workers. During the transitional period, any of the 2,300 workers could be employed by Ford, ACH, Faurecia, or various temporary agencies like Belcan or Devon Alpha Services.

When Faurecia took the operation over, about 700 jobs were cut from the Saline plant as final assembly of instrument panels was sent to the latest of Ford’s business creations: Detroit Manufacturing Systems, (DMS) a minority-woman-owned joint venture between Faurecia and Rush Group.

Wages of full-time workers at the Saline plant had been in the \$21-\$28 range, but would drop drastically to \$11 for new hires at both Saline and DMS. Any workers that stayed on during the ownership change saw their wages fall to \$15.50.

The worker noted, “Now with the contract we are on, new hires were supposed to start at \$12, but they had to go in and change it to \$13.25 because they couldn’t keep enough people.” The worker continued, “The turnover is so bad, at one point they were busing people in from the city.”

As wages have declined daily, working hours have skyrocketed. The worker described the arduous character of the alternative work schedule (AWS), which consists of four 10-hour shifts, but which often adds up to 12 hours or more at the plant. The AWS was a major concession given up by the UAW during and after the Obama administration’s restructuring of the auto industry. It

effectively entailed the elimination of the paid lunch break and overtime pay for shifts over eight hours or on the weekends.

Many workers “don’t like the AWS shift because of the hours. A lot of people are not from the Saline/Ann Arbor area and have a 45-minute drive or longer, one way, so that’s another two hours added to a 12-hour day. It’s impossible to pick kids up from school, cook dinner, help with homework, eat, shower and get enough sleep. Something’s going to lack in the day and usually it’s sleep. Running off four or five hours of sleep a night for a person up in age is not healthy at all.

“Which brings us to why the turnover rate has gone even higher since the AWS started. We get eight points for the entire year, and it’s a half point if you’re one minute late, one point for call-off, no sick days, no personal days, and vacation days have to be requested at least two days in advance. For hi-lo drivers vacation days are very often denied because we’re always short on drivers.”

“We have had two people die on the line this year! One woman recently had a heart attack and earlier in the year another woman died. I think they said it was an asthma attack. Both were on the weekend when there is no medical in the plant.”

This reporter noted that neither death appeared in the official Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) yearly tally, now standing at 36, of workplace deaths in the state. The worker explained, “They tried to say it wasn’t work-related or that they died at the hospital of something. But in one case she lost her bowels on the line. I hate to say it but you’re pretty much gone at that point.

“The union is more and more working with the company. If the company wants to change something they just go in and change the contract. What’s the point of having a contract if they can just go in and change it?”

“They just changed our health insurance and made it worse. They don’t accept Promedica doctors anymore and that made it hard for some people from smaller towns where that’s all they have. The union just let it happen.

“Also, the company just put cameras up. They say it’s not to watch us, but they even have cameras in the break room. I’m not even sure if that’s legal.

“I would say the majority in the plant are disappointed in the union. It seems the company gets away with everything they throw our way. They make changes to the contract and make rules as they go. More and more people are opting out of paying dues and I can’t blame them.”

A 2015 article from *Crain’s Detroit Business* pointed to the “three key ingredients for survival” of the Saline plant: “an owner, Faurecia, with deep pockets; a loyal customer, Ford; and a pragmatic union.”

The “pragmatists” of the UAW have no interest in educating their members on the decades-long record of layoffs and concessions at the Saline plant or anywhere else, because it would expose their own treacherous role in enforcing the profit interests of the companies.

For the defense against further concessions and plant closures, restoration of past losses and advancement of future gains, workers must build rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW.

The contract covering the Saline plant expires on May 31, 2019. Workers should not wait for the phony highlights offered up by UAW Local 892, likely days before the vote. They should organize rank-and-file committees to advance their own demands.

General Motors’ plan to close five plants in North America and lay off 15,000, heralding a sharp escalation of the attacks on autoworkers, has already placed parts workers’ jobs in the crosshairs. Over the next six months, rank-and-file committees at Faurecia should reach out to workers at DMS, Lear and across industry lines. Likewise, in their struggle against the French-based transnational corporation, Faurecia workers will find allies internationally in their class brothers and sisters engaged in “yellow vest” protests against social inequality and the Macron government of France.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* will aid workers in this fight by facilitating lines of communication, providing a platform for workers’ voices to be heard, and offering a fighting perspective to guide the struggle forward.

We encourage workers at Faurecia and elsewhere who want to join the fight against layoffs and concessions to contact us today. A steering committee has been established to carry forward the struggle against plant closures.

*The author also recommends:*

A significant step forward: Detroit meeting of autoworkers resolves to form rank-and-file committees  
[13 December 2018]

Wage cutting in the American auto parts industry: The background of the American Axle Strike [8 May 2008]

Detroit Manufacturing System and the new face of auto parts production  
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