Roasting on the line: Autoworkers warn of unsafe conditions at US plants as summer heat hits

Marcus Day
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Hot, humid weather blanketed much of the central United States on Wednesday, creating miserable and often dangerous work for tens of thousands of workers at auto factories and other plants.

In Detroit, the high was nearly 90 degrees Fahrenheit. In Toledo, Ohio, the high was 91. In Arlington, Texas, the high was 97, with 97 percent humidity. In Chicago, the temperature broke 100.

While Thursday brought a brief reprieve of cooler weather for some, next week and after is forecasted to bring temperatures once again near or above 90, with heat indexes near 100.

As much as the temperatures swelter outside, autoworkers frequently suffer under even hotter temperatures inside their plants, often with no relief from air conditioning.

Asked "How hot was your plant today?", a number of workers wrote in to the *Autoworker Newsletter* Wednesday night.

"We have a thermostat that read 91.3 degrees with 48 percent humidity," wrote a worker from Saginaw Metal Castings in Michigan. Another worker in Michigan wrote, "I work at Wayne Assembly. It is 100 in the plant now, but we have good ceiling air flow. Still hot though."

A worker from Ford Louisville Assembly wrote in and said, "The heat index in Louisville today is 98 degrees. We're supposed to get extra breaks according to OSHA and the local agreement, but [UAW Local 862 President] Todd Dunn will not ENFORCE the agreement."

"It's like after shutdown we're supposed to be acclimated back to temperatures," he continued, "like shorter workdays to get built back up. Never happens, right back to 11-hour days, expected to run full production or you get wrote up." Above a certain temperature in the plant, he said, workers are "supposed to be given an extra break per hour. Never happens."

Asked if he had heard of any workers fainting or experiencing heat exhaustion, he said, "It happened to me. I'm still messed up. It like messes your blood up. It was commonplace at both Louisville plants with no airflow. They're honestly going to kill someone."

In Chicago and Chicago Heights, Ford Motor Company earlier this year poured $1 billion to retool its assembly and stamping to prepare for the production of the new Explorer SUV and luxury Lincoln Aviator. The company in recent weeks invited numerous business news publications to tour the nearly 100-year-old assembly plant on the city's South Side.

Unsurprisingly, the corporate media trumpeted Ford's claims of new "perks" for employees, with the *Chicago Tribune* writing, "A surprisingly cool breeze blows continuously throughout the factory, thanks to 160 new 20-foot ceiling fans installed as part of the plant upgrade."

However, a worker at Chicago Assembly wrote in revealing that stories of Ford's new "cool breeze" is so much hot air. "I was told the new fans were approved by a maintenance manager who was intrigued by an attractive sales agent. Evidently, he went for her bidding and convinced the plant manager to go with oversized ceiling fans.

"The problem with that," he continued, "is that the fans are programmed and calibrated to not go at their maximum output speed (out of concern for burning them out), so even when a line maintenance worker sets

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them to rotate at a higher velocity, they're programmed to only go so fast (not at its maximum rate) thereby allowing for hotter temperatures. According to Chicago Ford assembly plant's local contract, the safety team has to do a 'wet bulb' test, which is a scam as well, because the tooling used to do the test is calibrated to read a lower temperature than it actually is, in order to continue production schedules."

"Another time the union has colluded with the company and has failed its members."

As dangerous as it is, excessive heat is far from the only hazard workers face walking into the plants. At Ford's Sterling Axle Plant, a fire erupted early Tuesday morning. "We encountered a very large production machine that had 30,000 gallons of oil inside of it," the local fire chief told the *Detroit News*. "The oil was burning inside of the machine." The plant, which except for the area where the fire took place was largely on summer shutdown, was evacuated.

Sterling Axle is one of three Ford plants, along Rawsonville Powertrain and Woodhaven Stamping, where the United Auto Workers union surreptitiously forced through a "new competitive wage structure" in the 2015 contracts, capping second-tier (since dubbed "in-progression") workers at substantially lower wages, $22.50, than at other plants.

A worker at the plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that last year a "young worker was found dead in the bathroom at the plant, but there never anything explained about it. His parents still work there."

"We want equal pay for equal work and the elimination of this special agreement at the plant," he continued. "By accepting new tiers, the UAW set the precedent for outsourcing from within. They want us to be contractors like Uber drivers, with no rights."

A worker from the Ford stamping plant in Chicago Heights also recently told the *Autoworker Newsletter* about an explosion inside a vault at the factory, which went unreported in the press.

"There was an explosion on the Fourth of July," in an area where electrical cables are concentrated, he said. "Luckily nobody got hurt. It was scheduled shut down. But people could have gotten hurt. It could have been very bad. The door to the vault was blown off. It's literally a metal vault door, that had three locks and multiple latches."

"The concrete walls inside the vault were getting moisture," he explained. "We've had very high humidity lately because of the heat and that was the likely cause of the explosion. But there should have been dehumidifiers in there."

"It's because Ford is not willing to invest in infrastructure. They run things until failure, and it shouldn't be that way. There's gears in the plant from 1965. And the UAW has done nothing to make things better. There are plenty of other safety issues, too."

Whether it's excessive heat, fires, explosions, or countless other safety hazards, many workers walk into an industrial slaughterhouse on a daily basis. When concerns are raised with union safety reps they fall on deaf ears at best, or, at worst the black-balling of the worker who did the warning. When the predictable accidents or health problems do occur, state safety "regulation" agencies such as OSHA cover up for the negligence of the companies and unions.

In the coming contract negotiations, which formally begin on Monday, the UAW will conspire with the companies to enforce new concessions, including more job overloading, the expanded use of temporary and part-time workers and the cutting of health benefits.

For workers to achieve safe workplace, new organizations are needed: rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the unions, which must raise as demands workers' control over health and safety issues, line speed and production.

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