

Defective transmissions on Ford vehicles tied to numerous injuries and accidents

Shannon Jones
24 July 2019

Ford officials are continuing to stonewall in the wake of revelations of serious transmission problems with the company's Focus and Fiesta models that can lead to sudden, unexpected acceleration or loss of power.

Numerous injury accidents related to the defect have been reported and more than 4,300 complaints related to the defect have been reported to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the US government oversight body.

The defect involves the DPS6 transmission, which Ford introduced in the wake of the Great Recession in an attempt to meet new federal gas economy standards. The transmission works for the driver like an automatic but operates internally more like a manual.

Ford marketed the car as an affordable vehicle that would get good gas mileage using high tech dual clutch technology that improved overall drivetrain efficiency.

Soon after the new transmission hit the streets dealers began receiving complaints from customers. The Fiesta was the first model equipped with the DPS6 and it was rolled out in March 2010, followed by the focus in March 2012.

An investigation by the *Detroit Free Press* uncovered internal company memos showing that engineers were well aware of the problems before the launch of the transmission, but company officials decided to cover up the defect and install the equipment anyway.

Shortly after the story ran, Ford quietly sent a note to dealers instructing them to fix problems with the transmission for free for the next week. There was reportedly a spike in customer visits to Ford dealers following the *Free Press* report.

In response to the reports, Ford wrote, "After the new transmission was on the road, other problems developed. We acted quickly and determinedly to investigate the problems. ... While we eventually

resolved the quality issues, the solutions were more complex and took longer than we expected. We regret the inconvenience and frustration that caused some consumers."

Despite Ford's repeated insistence that the transmission defect was not a safety issue, there have been documented serious injury collisions related to the sudden acceleration or loss of engine power caused by the faulty transmission.

The driver of a 2012 Ford Focus told federal safety regulators "I was stopped at a parking lot exit waiting to enter a thoroughfare, engine idling, with my foot lightly on the brake. Suddenly, the car accelerated forward, into the traffic lane, as though someone had pressed the accelerator pedal to the floor. I took a 45 mph T-bone on my driver's side door. [My] wife suffered severe injuries and was only saved by her air bag."

The *Free Press* reported other similar horror stories, including vehicles stalling at high speeds and being rear-ended.

Long before the initial launch Ford engineers knew of issues with the DPS6, but management applied pressure to go ahead anyway.

Following the release of the 2012 Focus, which was 300 pounds heavier than the Fiesta, problems got worse. There was a reported 10-fold increase in complaints to dealers. But Ford remained adamant that there was no need for a fix. One engineer noted in an internal memo the "high cost of substituting a different transmission in low-cost vehicles with a thin profit margin."

Engineers at all levels knew of the problems but were pressured to keep quiet. "The weight of the company is on your shoulders and it's incredibly stressful and intense," said one engineer.

In 2013, a Florida dealer wrote in an email, “I’m tired of looking like the bad guy for repairing all these DPS6 transmissions, when truthfully Ford’s the bad guy here. Let’s be honest. Ford produces a horrible product and we trans guys get the wrath of it.”

As complaints and reports of accidents piled up, the NHTSA finally became involved. However, as in the case of the notorious General Motors ignition switch defect, NHTSA moved to cover up the seriousness of the problem and defend Ford management, not protect the public. After a conference with Ford officials in 2014, NHTSA decided not to order a recall or even launch a formal investigation.

Instead of a fix, Ford proposed installing a warning system that would alert drivers when the car was about to slip into neutral.

Currently there are several class action lawsuits against Ford, including one based in federal court in Los Angeles covering 1.9 million owners and former owners. Ford lost its only trial case to date on the defect, being forced to pay out \$700,000.

Currently no deaths are attributed to the faulty transmission, but that is hard to track since police crash investigators would likely not look for the possibility of a transmission failure. However, many serious injury accidents related to the defect have been documented involving thousands of dollars in hospital bills.

An official with the watchdog group Center for Auto Safety told the *Free Press* he was concerned by the refusal of NHTSA to investigate. “The law is specific where you don’t need to wait for a body count. It may be we don’t know of further tragedies, not that there haven’t been some.”

Like the GM ignition switch cover-up and the Takata exploding airbag scandal, the latest revelations of faulty transmissions with the Fiesta and Focus underscore the incompatibility of a system based on production for profit with the health and safety of the public.

No credibility should be given to the calls by Democratic Senators Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut and Ed Markey of Massachusetts for a safety investigation. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have collaborated in the transformation of NHTSA into a toothless front for the auto companies. Grossly underfunded, the agency regularly turns a blind eye to even the most egregious safety violations in order to shield corporate malefactors from

liability.

That was the case in the GM ignition switch scandal, where only the determined action of accident victims and their families finally led to the forced recall of the dangerous vehicles. In the end, no high-ranking GM officials were held criminally responsible. The company merely faced slap-on-the-wrist fines that amounted to exoneration.

The incessant profit demands of Wall Street are forcing relentless cost cutting by the auto companies at all levels. Over the past year, Ford, GM, VW and other companies have slashed tens of thousands of jobs globally, including engineers and technicians.

The Ford transmission scandal follows the revelations that VW, Fiat Chrysler, Renault, Volvo, Hyundai, Ford, Subaru and other carmakers deliberately manipulated software to cover up violations of emissions and fuel efficiency standards. It also follows the criminal actions by Boeing related to the 737 Max, which led to the deaths of hundreds of people.

Industry analysts have made much of the new technologies, including electrical and self-driving vehicles, that will profoundly change the global auto industry. Under capitalism, however, these technological breakthroughs will not be harnessed for the benefit of society as a whole. The cost of developing these technologies has already led to a wave of global mergers and acquisitions, including the Ford and VW tie-up, mass layoffs and demands that autoworkers in the US and around the world accept more wage and benefit concessions.

As the Ford transmission scandal shows, the relentless drive for profit leads to a reckless disregard of the health and safety of the traveling public, making systematic cover-up a business necessity. This situation can only be resolved through the transformation of the global auto industry into a publicly owned utility under the democratic control of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact