

Whistle-blowing auto parts worker says he was harassed, victimized after exposing safety issues on line producing airbags for Ford

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A worker at the Faurecia auto parts plant in Saline, Michigan says he was subjected to harassment and victimized after blowing the whistle on unsafe management practices on a line manufacturing airbags.

Lamont Newton asserts he was forced out of the plant nine months ago for medical reasons and even denied access to unemployment because the company's Human Resources Department misrepresented his condition.

"This is a nightmare," he said. "You go get your job, work hard, don't miss a day. You are doing it because of your family. You have great intentions. ... Now I'm injured. I can't see. I almost had a heart attack and I have to take medication for the rest of my life."

Conditions at the plant have rapidly deteriorated since Lamont started 10 years ago. Wages have been cut, jobs wiped out and the intensity of work has been continuously ratcheted up. During the past 12 months, the spread of COVID-19 has only made the situation more deadly.

"Their slogan is 'Quality is job one,'" he said. "But that's not what they want. They want more and more production, profits and any way they can cheat on materials."

At first Lamont tried to be a model employee, never missing a day, producing videos to promote the company and working as a gap leader to devise methods and job descriptions to streamline production. He had been led to believe that his job as gap leader made work easier and safer for everyone on his team. But over time he came to realize that, on the contrary, the company was using him to speed up the line and bring pressure to bear on his co-workers.

When he appealed to his union, the United Auto Workers, he encountered a corrupt organization that has been thoroughly integrated into company management.

When the company broke a sewer line and the effluent oozed out onto the factory floor, Lamont demanded the right to move his team until the mess was cleaned up. But management forced them to stay right there working next to a pool of excrement in front of the cafeteria.

The situation was beyond revolting. The company and the union responded by distributing paper masks and bringing

portable toilets to the line. They drove pump trucks into the plant to evacuate the latrines on the spot.

"All the time they were getting people to do more and more," he said. "They were also getting rid of people. If a family member died, you could not even get time off for bereavement."

He described employees who, after working 12 hours a day, seven days a week for eight weeks straight were reduced to the point of collapse. When asking for time off, workers would be told by the supervisor to take a card with a phone number and call a counselor, but instructed not to miss work.

To cut costs, the company has eliminated hazmat suits and protective materials. "The machines use iso-cyanide and other hazardous chemicals," he added. "I watched janitorial people, the so-called process techs, picking up these chemicals with sponges in their hands."

When he went to United Auto Workers Local 892 to take up a fight, the union would say, "Yeah, they can do that," he says.

Ford Motor Company opened the giant facility in 1966 to specialize in plastics and interior trim. It currently supplies parts for the F-150 plant in Dearborn, Michigan as well as Jeep, General Motors and Tesla. In 2000 the auto maker spun the plant off as part of Visteon corporation, as part of a strategy to launch a full-scale assault on the wages, safety, working conditions and benefits of the workforce. From its inception the plan enjoyed the full collaboration of the UAW.

By the time Lamont started in 2011, the ownership had shifted to a wholly-owned Ford subsidiary called Automotive Components Holdings LLC, which the auto maker was threatening to shut down altogether.

But the attacks on the workers only intensified when Faurecia Interior Systems acquired the operation in 2012. Through the takeover, the French conglomerate became market leader in North America for exhaust systems and interior parts. The largest shareholder in the company is now Stellantis, the product of a merger between Fiat Chrysler and French automaker Peugeot.

Faurecia exploited the economic crisis of 2008 to launch a major cost-cutting drive and then used the financial crisis that

followed to double its size between 2009 and 2014. Last year Faurecia became eighth largest parts supplier to the world auto industry.

The first thing Faurecia did in 2012 was cut a dollar an hour from every hourly employee. UAW 892 did nothing but give a green light to whatever the company wanted. Management went through line by line saying: “We don’t need that many people over there. We are going to let go the people that came from Ford. You guys can do it with half the people.”

As long as he was going along with the program, the supervisors and plant manager were Lamont’s best friends. As soon as he began to resist, the company and the union worked to make his life miserable.

A turning point came in March of 2017. According to Lamont, a supervisor turned off the video cameras that monitor scoring, which is a vital process in producing air bags. Lamont was in charge of the line and felt keenly responsible for the safety of future passengers who would depend on the critical parts.

Two months earlier, during January 2017, automotive supplier Takata had pleaded guilty to criminal charges of falsifying data about production of defective air bags, which had been implicated in 16 deaths.

“I’m not going to jail for their profits,” he said. “My name is on those sheets and on those videos.” When his protests to supervisors and the plant manager fell on deaf ears, he called the hotline at Ford Motor Company. Ford said they would protect his identity, but did just the opposite. They sent a team of investigators that went straight to management and pinpointed the problem.

The pressure on Lamont became excruciating. Several weeks later his windshield was smashed in the employee parking lot. And when he tried to file a grievance in the aftermath of that incident, the officials at UAW Local 892 buried the case, preventing him from taking it to the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board).

Lamont was then assaulted by a co-worker inside the plant, who threw toxic chemicals into his face, causing excruciating pain and permanently damaging his eyesight. The motivations behind the incident were never adequately explained.

While Lamont’s health was excellent when he began working in the plant a decade ago, his experiences have left him with serious physical and emotional trauma. “My windows are tinted because the light hurts my eyes. I was driving home and having to stop the car because I would start crying. I am not a wealthy person,” he said. “I am 48 years old. I have worked all my life. Now I have nothing left.”

“My friends that were in Iraq tell me that a lot of my symptoms are the same as theirs. You are not paranoid, but you are anxious to the nth degree. You are looking over your shoulder. You are under attack and you cannot protect yourself.”

Every time he filled out a claim with the state of Michigan for

unemployment compensation or public assistance, he was denied. The reason, he says, is that when the state welfare office called the company, “They would say, ‘No, he is not laid off. He has the ability to work. He is just refusing to work.’”

“It is sickening,” he said. “To the management and the union I am dead.”

He continued, “From August 1 until today, I have lived without any income. I have to depend on friends and family members to help me to survive.”

His repeated attempts to go through the channels that are supposed to protect a worker’s rights at work, filing complaints with HR and grievances with the union, were continuously frustrated.

“How can you consciously support something that will never support you?” He asks. “The corporations own the media, and they don’t want anybody to know what’s really going on. We do not have a democracy.”

The collusion by the UAW with the company has led other workers in the plant to launch an independent Rank-and-File Safety Committee to expose the real conditions inside the plant and fight for emergency measures, including the shutdown of nonessential industries with full compensation for workers, to fight the pandemic. The committee in Saline is part of a nationwide network of safety committees at auto plants, school districts and Amazon warehouses throughout the country.

Lamont is a supporter of the committee. “I watched news reports about UAW officials getting 15 month sentences for having fun with the UAW money. That is just terrible. These guys get millions of dollars and all they want to do is preserve the class system. I want UAW members to see the deceit.

“When something like this happens and you see the deceit and the betrayal of so many people who have control, and you can’t do anything, that stinks.

“The way this society is built, the capitalistic way, and the way these people are running their companies, they are destroying people. Obviously profits outweigh the value of life.”



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