Workers speak on premature death of autoworker at Faurecia parts plant in Saline, Michigan

Tim Rivers
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The premature death of a vibrant woman at an auto parts plant outside Detroit last month has touched a deep chord among workers more than one year into a deadly pandemic.

While the cause of death of Jacqueline (Jackie) Pennington (age 55) has not been made public by the family, the workplace environment at Faurecia as described by her closest family friends and co-workers have left many wondering if these conditions may have contributed in some way to this tragedy.

Friends of Jacqueline flew in from as far away as Florida to attend the visitation held on April 28. Many spoke warmly of a woman who made everybody laugh and was always caring for those who could not work as hard as she did.

Jackie worked a night shift at the plant, which was taken over by the French conglomerate Faurecia in June of 2012 as part of a decades-long war on the jobs, wages, retirement, safety and benefit packages of autoworkers.

The company became the dominant supplier for interior parts and exhaust systems for North America by seeking to outdo its US counterparts and by enlisting the support of the unions to impose a program of forced work, brutal speed up and the systematic disregard for even basic safety precautions in handling deadly chemicals and hazardous production processes.

At the funeral, Antoenette Foster recounted receiving a call in the middle of the night a couple of years ago. “Jackie was really agitated,” she said. “She had been passed over because of favoritism between the union and the company. ‘I feel like I want to go postal,’ Jackie cried. ‘Don’t tell my momma. I don’t want her to know.’ But,” her friend Antoenette continued, “I could tell that she was under terrible stress.”

Regina, a lifelong friend, said, “Jackie was the life of the party. With a smile on her face, she would always have you laughing. A very hard worker, she was entertaining and a very caring person.”

Jackie’s mother Viverene El was understandably devastated by the loss of her only child, but at the same time very proud of her and the warm support of so many of Jackie’s friends, and pleased to have the event reported in the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Jackie’s is only the most recent in a string of premature deaths at Faurecia facilities reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Damien Jones died last July of a seizure in the midst of a grueling work schedule, and James Grady, a former worker at the Faurecia Gladstone plant who has advocated for workers on safety issues, reported a list of early deaths of Faurecia workers due to cancer, most likely induced by the carcinogen hexavalent chromium, a by-product of welding fumes in the poorly ventilated shops the company is known for.

Workers are reporting other deaths at Saline from COVID-19, but the full details are being suppressed by the union and the company.

Remembering Jackie from the factory floor, Lamont Newton said, “When you start a job, you are going in to make money to take care of yourself. You are not going into a slave factory. At least you don’t think so. Then when you get in there the stress is unseen, but it is there. That comes from the fact that the union and the corporation have made deals to just blow people off.

“You have no recourse. You have no one that you can speak to about it. You might switch shifts and get a completely different rap not knowing that it's all the

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same. I suspect that she went through that and was heartbroken.

"Then there's the issue of whether or not they're going to cut her out of her $50,000. If [the death] is related to the plant then the company owes her family $50,000."

Lamont continued, "The union is not even qualified to investigate what happened to this girl. Their job is just to make sure that that benefit is paid. Her parent deserves that for all of her work."

"What you are seeing is multiple people die," Lamont said. "I almost did, and I'm sure my family would not have gotten a thing. What is happening is the first statement to the membership is, 'Well, it was not COVID. And if it was, it didn't happen here because we have the best safety measures.'

"There was an accident there some years ago. A vat fell on the floor. He was in the puddle so to speak. And the fumes and the stuff from it and the material that touched his skin … because he was wearing shorts at the time. It's hot.

"That guy lost a lot of his nerves. He got twitches and stuff. He was exposed so badly, he could not work any more. He was disabled by the isocyanide. I can't even go in too deep to think about this place because it makes me feel sick.

"There was a woman who had a heart attack and died on the floor. They didn't move her body for four hours. They told everybody they had to work around her body. And the union didn't do anything. That is traumatic. So when you talk about stress. …

"We had a rat problem. They were laying tape all over the area where we were working. People would be working and we hear all this shrieking and it's these rats that were literally trying so hard to get off that tape that they were pulling themselves apart. That's unsafe, unsanitary. And nobody did anything."

A worker said that UAW local 892 president Larry Robinson's answer to everything is, "The company is doing the best it can do. We are working with them."

"We know you're working with them," the worker added, "but they are not doing anything to address the problem. You are working with them on lunches and dinners and kickbacks. That's what you're working on.

"They are bringing in prisoners. They are paying them anywhere between $9 and $12 an hour. The union fully supported it."

The worker spoke about the case of John 53-year-old Faurecia worker who died of a COVID-19-induced heart attack last December. "He worked in the battery shop," he continued. "So John worked alone. Larry and the rest of the union were saying that it wasn't COVID. Larry Robinson was protecting the company in the case of John Stamper. His kids were supposed to get that check from the company. Do you think they got it? No."

Another supporter of the rank-and-file committee in Saline said, "You are working with people and you don't know if they are healthy or not. You are contracting whatever they have contracted. Something has got to happen.

"Why would you put anybody in harms way?" She asked. "But they do it everyday and don't think anything about it.

"The money that was used to prop up the stock market should be used to pay people's wages so that they can shut down and quarantine and social distance to stop the virus."

Another supporter of the rank-and-file committee said, "They don't tell you when somebody dies, especially if they die of coronavirus. They don't say anything. [Jacqueline] may have had cancer … and that could be caused by the chemicals and the bad ventilation.

"We usually have a week off in July. They don't want to give us that. None of the Ford plants are doing a shutdown this year. A few of the lines already had their shutdown because of the parts shortage."

Last year, when the plant manager was exposed for concealing information about coronavirus infections on the lines, rank-and-file workers formed a safety committee at Saline in opposition to the UAW. Now, with a continuing high rate of infections and death in Michigan the demand must be raised for full information on COVID-19 infections in the plant and a four-week shutdown of nonessential production until the virus is contained.

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