

Behind Tesla's rise, part 2: Former Tesla worker speaks out on grueling, unsafe working conditions

David Brown, Eric Luin
24 May 2021

This is the second part in a two-part series. Read part one.

While much of the manic rise in Tesla's share values is driven by speculation, there is another basis for the company's money-making—the brutal exploitation of its workforce.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke at length with a former Tesla worker who has documented the deeply exploitative and highly unsafe working conditions from his time at the company's flagship production facility in Fremont, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have changed the worker's name to Howard in this article to protect his identity.

At the end of 2016, Howard began his new job at Tesla in the metal finishing department of the Fremont plant, optimistic at having secured a position at the much-celebrated company. Over the next three years he would experience relentlessly long hours and callous indifference to worker safety and management harassment, culminating in his termination in 2019 after getting injured on the job.

Tesla was playing fast and loose with worker safety from the very beginning of his employment. Instead of being provided careful training and given a review of safety checklists before being put on the line, all of Howard's training was "hands-on-only." "On my first day I was stacking parts coming off the 5A line and on the second, working a dual-action sander until my wrists were throbbing in pain."

The same negligent management attitude toward safety persisted throughout his time at Tesla. "About four months before I was fired, they laid off a bunch of workers and started reassigning those of us left throughout the factory," Howard said. "My team got put on the small parts press 3A. There was only one worker actually trained on it who knew how to adjust the belt height for differently sized parts, but he was working on a different line. Without adjustments the belt could launch these pieces of metal right at you, as you can see in the video, and there's no real protection."

According to *Business Insider*, from 2017 through 2019, Tesla was cited by Cal/OSHA for 45 safety violations and received \$277,955 in associated fines related to vehicle manufacturing, more than all the Detroit Big Three automakers combined, which themselves have increasingly undermined workplace safety with the assistance of the United Auto Workers union. In the same period, General Motors, logged six violations and \$22,411 in fines; Ford had 18 and \$90,162; or Fiat Chrysler, 23 and \$90,797.

"Safety problems weren't just from a lack of training," Howard explained. "They placed the station where we clocked in and out within three feet of this huge crane battery, right next to stacks of part palettes and an active forklift lane. You had to step over the caution tape on the ground just to punch in. We'd always joke whether today was the day we'd get crushed by a palette or hit by an arc coming off the battery. We

tried using other stations to clock in, but our supervisor insisted that this was his idea and we had to use that station."

"The entire situation with forklifts was a mess. They gave us 'training' that consisted of driving an empty bin and stacking it on another. Then they gave us the answers for the written test, and we were certified. But we weren't driving empty bins around, they'd have us double and even triple-stack them with these metal part bins. When you were overloading them like that it was easy to fall over while making a turn, but we were always told to go fast and make quota."

Forklifts are legally required to be inspected at the beginning of each shift and if any significant safety issues are found, they must be taken out of service. "Nothing at the Fremont plant was organized like that," Howard said. "No one inspected the forklifts. You can see in the pictures those frayed battery cables. It was also a free-for-all. If you needed to move a palette you just grabbed the closest forklift and took it. People left them running unattended all the time."

Howard described widespread homelessness among Tesla employees. "When I started working at Tesla, I was sleeping in the parking lot. A lot of people parked their RVs in the Walmart parking lot next door. There was also the loft in the factory with couches. About 20 people would just sleep there every night."

Tesla factory workers, or "production associates," make about \$20 an hour according to Glassdoor.com. With a 40-hour work week, 50 weeks a year, this amounts to \$40,000 a year or \$3,300 a month, barely enough to cover the rent of a two-bedroom apartment in Fremont, where the factory is located.

The chaotic environment created a multitude of problems and dangers. "The attitude of management was an accident wasn't an accident as long as you cleaned it up before anyone noticed. So, if you dropped a sheet of metal on the ground with all the oil and dirt, it didn't matter. Pick it up and toss it in the press. Then when parts started coming out with defects, they'd have us climb in the stacks of palettes looking for other defective pieces. It didn't matter if you wore protective sleeves or how careful you are, digging through that pressed metal you'd get cut.

"Those palettes weren't designed for climbing either. They were supposed to interlock to form a steady structure but most of the time they didn't. I remember one time I was standing near a stack and a nearby forklift unbalanced it. It started tilting like it was going to fall and I thought 'I guess this is how I die.' Luckily, the driver regained control. Another time, a forklift driver managed to knock over a whole set of those stacks like dominoes, and if we had been looking for defects at the time, that would be it."

This narrative suggests a multitude of violations of safety regulations and training requirements, and a blatant disregard by Tesla management for the well-being of workers.

In contrast to the dangerous practices described by Howard, typical forklift safety standards (although far from being universally enforced at other workplaces) include ensuring only balanced and secured loads are operated, maintaining safe speeds and distances, never allowing vehicles to be left unattended and running unless the wheels are blocked, and not allowing trucks to be driven near anyone standing in front of a fixed object such that the person could be caught between the truck and object (like placing an active forklift lane next to a clock-in station).

Howard also described an abusive work environment and an insidious cult of personality promoted around Elon Musk by management. “Some of the managers would really push this creepy cult around Elon Musk. One of them would point to the cameras in the factory and say, ‘Elon’s watching’ or ‘He can read your emails.’ The desired goal was to speed the f**k up. We’re worried that if we’re not working hard enough, this little tyrant is going to come over.”

Musk himself, Howard said, “is a demagogue who surrounds himself with yes men. All the talk of his intelligence, no, he’s got a lot of money, and he’s got people around him who want to make money and get his stuff done.”

Managers also acted like royalty. “They’d call a team meeting and be late, but if you went back to the line after 10 minutes and they showed up, they’d start screaming at you.

“The company would prey on whatever emotion or angle they can to get the most out of you. Saying ‘how good it was to work to Tesla.’ It gets really tiring really fast, but it worked on me for a while.”

Howard said supervisors would respond hostilely if workers pointed out safety problems, with the common refrain being, “‘Hey, why are you preventing us from meeting our targets? Why are you taking money out of our mouths?’ It’s just guilt trip after guilt trip.

“They set things up so that if they wanted you gone, they could find a reason. Like clocking in. They had one station for our shift of 70 people. If you clocked in a minute late, they could write you up. If you clocked in too early, they could write you up. The whole thing was just so they’d have a reason to punish anyone they wanted to.

“Tesla is leading the charge in the worst kind of way. They’re an innovator, but they’re an innovator in psychological terror.”

While Tesla currently produces a relatively small proportion of the automobiles manufactured in the US, it has a disproportionate share of workplace inspection cases among automobile manufacturers. These cases are primarily opened following a workplace accident or complaint. A search of all federal and state program OSHA inspection data involving the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code for automobile manufacturing since the beginning of the year shows there have been 50 inspection cases opened. Tesla accounts for 12 of these inspections, or 24 percent.

The Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH), commonly referred to as Cal/OSHA, has several ongoing inspection cases involving Tesla, the most recent was opened on May 5, related to an accident at a factory in Lathrop, California, about 50 miles east of the Fremont plant.

This also does not account for numerous incidents at other Tesla operations, such as battery manufacturing plants in Nevada. The *Reno Gazette Journal* recently published an exposé that details the influence of Tesla over the Nevada state government and OSHA program following repeated accidents where workers had their fingers crushed.

The fact is that OSHA and related agencies nominally tasked with regulating workplace safety are beholden to the corporations. Even when egregious violations of safety regulations are found leading to death or serious injury, they often lead to nothing more than token fines, which are often waived on appeal.

In September of 2020, the federal OSHA issued its first COVID-19-related citations against the meat packing industry, after more than six months of inaction during which time 18,000 workers were

infected and at least 203 died. The fines levied against JBS and Smithfield Foods totaled less than \$30,000, or less than \$2,500 per worker who died at the two plants that received citations. In 2019, after Cal/OSHA became aware that Tesla was routinely under reporting annual counts of workplace injuries, which are considered an important metric for assessing injury rates at worksites and across industry sectors, the state agency levied just a \$400 fine against the company.

After Tesla reopened its Fremont factory in May 2020—in open defiance of county public health ordinances—state and county Democratic Party officials, including California Governor Gavin Newsom, gave Tesla free rein for its unsafe reopening plan.

This callous willingness to endanger human life to meet production targets is a major reason that Tesla’s stock is now soaring.

The case of Tesla demonstrates once again that workers’ rights to a healthy and safe work environment is incompatible with a system the subordinates the needs of the world’s working class to the profit interests of a handful of ultra-wealthy oligarchs. If the major automakers get their way, the transition to electric vehicles will bring the horrific conditions facing Tesla workers to the rest of the auto industry.

The WSWS urges workers at Tesla to contact us to discuss initiating rank-and-file safety committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, and completely independent of and hostile to the Democrats, Republicans and trade unions such as the UAW, which itself functions as a bought and paid for tool of corporate management.

Rank-and-file committees, which have been initiated at a number of major plants, including the Volvo Truck plant in Virginia where workers recently overwhelmingly voted down a UAW sellout contract, will form lines of communication with like-minded workers across the auto industry and among their brothers and sisters in other sections of the working class. These rank-and-file committees must ultimately be linked with an international network to coordinate the fight for workers’ rights in the US and across the globe. To that end, the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the WSWS, has initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)

These new workers’ organizations, in contrast to the pro-corporate trade unions, are taking as their starting point what workers really need, and not the profit imperatives of Tesla and billionaire oligarchs such as Musk. For Tesla workers to secure a safe workplace, sufficient pay and benefits, along with every other democratic and social right, the wealth of the corporate and financial elite must be expropriated and redirected to the working class, and the auto industry placed under workers’ collective control and ownership, as part of the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact