

“This has to stop. There can be no more Danny Walters”

Death at Dana: Widow of Dry Ridge, Kentucky worker speaks out

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In memory of Danny Walters, July 15, 1960 to June 2, 2021.

On June 1-June 2, 2021, on a warm night after a week of extreme heat, Danny Walters was working a long shift at Dana's Dry Ridge, Kentucky plant when he suffered a grand-mal seizure. Amid the deafening noise of the machines and workers' music, Danny, an epileptic, staggered off the line, lost his balance, and began shaking on the floor. It is likely that he fell backwards and hit his head as he began to convulse.

According to witnesses who later spoke to the family, Danny's coworkers rushed to try to help him. An immigrant worker from the Democratic Republic of the Congo tried to prop up Danny's head, knowing his skull had to be protected. The worker tried to communicate to management that the line should be stopped. The company told the worker to get back to his station and refused to stop the line. The UAW took no action and production continued.

To the UAW and Dana, all that mattered was meeting the contract for axles that night. Ford and Stellantis, formerly known as Fiat-Chrysler, needed the parts to build their highly profitable trucks at plants across the country. Dana posted \$2 billion in sales for the first quarter of 2021 and paid out millions in dividends to wealthy stockholders.

To meet demand, Dana is forcing workers to labor under conditions worse than the 19th century. At Dry Ridge and other plants, workers work 12-hour days with only one unpaid day off per quarter. Even that “day off” can be taken away by the company for any reason. At one point, while working for Dana, Danny had worked *sixty days in a row, 12 hours per shift*, even though he is an epileptic. These conditions are enforced by the UAW, whose former top leadership, including two of its last four presidents, is in federal prison for accepting bribes from the Big Three. The corporate media is totally silent that such conditions exist in the United States in the year 2021.

On the night of June 1-2, Danny's wife, Marcia Walters, was visiting their daughter at college in Louisville. Nobody from the company or the UAW called to tell her what had happened.

Marcia noticed a missed call from someone on Facebook who appeared to be Danny's coworker. She thought: “Oh no, something has happened at Dana.” She called her husband's phone and it went to voicemail. She began calling the nearby hospital and nobody picked up.

Danny had been transported to St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Eventually, an EMS worker picked up Danny's phone and Marcia learned what happened. She told the hospital not to release Danny for fear he would have a second seizure. She was not home and could not take care of him.

Nevertheless, he was discharged that night. A relative arrived at the hospital to bring Danny home and says he found Danny sitting unattended in a wheelchair in the hospital lobby.

Later that night, Danny had another seizure at home, fell between the mattress and a dresser, and died of positional asphyxiation. Marcia

discovered his body when she arrived home in the morning. She looked at his phone and saw a message from the company: Danny Walters had been mandated for work the following day.

Marcia called the company and said Danny would not show up at work the next day. There was no need to penalize him with attendance points because Danny was dead. He was 60 years old. The company immediately cut off health care for Danny's daughter, forcing her to postpone necessary medical visits.

Marcia, a retired school teacher, is a widow now. She hasn't had much time to grieve; with the loss of Danny's job, she's been forced to go back to work. She currently has three jobs, one as a substitute teacher, one as a pre-school teacher, and one as a worship leader in a local church.

She is not the type of person who seeks out controversy, but she contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* because she hopes her story helps others fight for better conditions.

“There can be no more Danny Walters”

Although it is painful to talk about her husband so soon after his death, she says she felt an obligation to speak up.

“This has to stop,” she said. “There can be no more Danny Walters. I want to use my voice for the people that work there.”

She asks that Dana workers share this story widely and that they remember Danny Walters' name when they vote on the contract this Sunday and in the struggle ahead.

“Get up. Rise up. If workers all stand up together across every Dana plant in the nation, then they can stand up against this absolute absurdity that makes these people so rich. Danny lost his voice, so I want to use mine.”

We publish below an interview which Marcia gave to the *World Socialist Web Site*, lightly edited.

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I was married to Danny for 24 years. We would have celebrated our 25-year anniversary in July. There's no doubt in my mind that working at Dana brought him to an early grave. I was pleased when I saw in your articles [in the *World Socialist Web Site*] and to read that other people were joining together trying to stand up for the workers at Dana.

Danny Walters was my husband and he would have been turning 61 this year.

Danny is from the Hebron, Kentucky area originally, and moved to Dry Ridge in 1996 when we were married. He was the son of a pastor. Danny was a good man, he was doing this job to help us with benefits because I

am a retired teacher and under the Kentucky teacher retirement system, the state had jacked up the insurance cost for teachers. Our insurance for all of us through my retirement had gone up so much that we thought we had to get this job. Danny had prostate cancer earlier in the year and we had to have it removed.

If you were a loner, Danny was the kind of guy who would go over and sit down and talk to you. One of his friends was just bawling during the funeral. He told me that one of the workers from the Congo who did not speak good English was coming over and trying to help Danny, trying to put something under Danny's head. The workers from the Congo tried to get them to stop the line. Maybe someone's arm could be in a machine. But they didn't stop. The company and union told them to go back to their post and left him there banging his head. As an epileptic you're supposed to turn them on their side and place something under their head.

"He was mandated to work the next day"

My daughter is student at U of L [University of Louisville]. I went up to see her that night, and Danny was on the night shift. I did not get a call from Dana saying he had a seizure. If I'd have known sooner I would have come home from Louisville immediately. Somebody who worked there had tried to call me, and I tried to call back but they didn't pick up. Then I got really worried, it was about an hour or two into his shift. I thought, "Something has happened at Dana."

I kept calling St. Elizabeth Hospital close by and nobody would pick up. Eventually someone picked up and it was an EMS person saying they had transported him to the hospital. A relative went to pick him up and saw Danny sitting out in the lobby at the hospital with nobody watching him. Both of those places failed my husband that night. He actually died at home later that night. He had a second seizure because I wasn't home. If Dana or the UAW had called me, I could have come home in time to take care of him.

I did not get a communication from anybody until the next morning. That was the message saying he was mandated to work the next day. By that time he was dead but I was still getting these messages. That was distasteful.

Danny said, "I prayed I would die in my sleep rather than work there one more day"

I'm not sure exactly what happened to him at the plant because the company refuses to tell me. I called OSHA but I felt like they were protecting the company as well. I didn't understand why the company did not call me and let me know. OSHA told me the plant had no obligation to call me, and that does not seem right to me. They said there wasn't anybody in the office to call me. I know there were people there who knew who I was. This is a small town, there's people who knew him.

Working at Dana ruined his life. He had no time for anything else. His life revolved around work. If we got to see each other, it was to have a meal on his way to work. He was an epileptic, he required a lot of sleep. His seizures were stable before all of the work.

He worked at Walmart previously, which was easier on him, but they were cutting their hours and we were getting distraught about money. We heard Dana was a place where you could make a little more money. It needed to be close to home because driving was dangerous for him. I would take him to work. My husband was not a dumb man, but they

treated their workers as if they didn't have any common sense. What they were doing to them was probably illegal.

This area is not big on a lot of jobs. Dry Ridge is a small town, we are next door to Williamstown next to The Ark Encounter [a park with a zoo and a life-sized model of Noah's Ark from the Old Testament]. It's just a small town, so when people were telling me things that they heard happened to Danny that night, Dana told me, "You can't believe everything you hear." That's what the HR person said. I wanted footage of what happened. I never got anywhere with that. I just got pushed off. After a while I thought, "I'm getting nowhere."

Danny was depressed from this job. I saw his personality change. He said it was constantly loud, very loud all night long. I was worried about getting bills met. And my children are in college. This shouldn't have happened. He should have lived through this. Too much work and not enough rest just did it to him.

The money means nothing at Dana if you can't even spend one day with your family. What royally ticked me off about Dana was how much he hated his job. He would speak for 7 or 8 minutes nonstop about hating the job and what happened at work. It affects your family.

They would give them a number of parts that was their quota, and then they'd get to that number and they'd dangle a carrot over the workers, saying if you get this number of parts made, you'll get a day off. Then at the last minute, they'd add more to the quota. It was cruel. They'd get the workers' hopes up like they were going to get a weekend off or a holiday off or they were going to shut down for a week after Christmas and they'd call people in anyway. There was never any truth about what they did.

Dana changes the lives of every individual who walks through that door. I know married couples who ended up splitting up because of work. It's a common saying here: "Dana ruined our lives."

Danny told me that he wished—this is sad, this is how much he hated it—he wished he could die rather than go back another night. He said, "I prayed I would die in my sleep rather than work there one more day." We said, hold out 2 or 3 more years until we get our son started in college, then you can go in and quit and we will live with as little means as we can.

Dana delayed benefits amid pandemic

My daughter and I both tried to reach out to HR several times and they would say they didn't get my emails. And everything was done super, super slow, as if there was no concern that maybe we needed to get groceries.

Dana's benefits department held onto his death certificate for several weeks before they even sent it to the life insurance place. I don't blame anyone in particular but there were too many hoops to jump through at an already difficult time. As a result, I went two-and-a-half months before I got any help through his life insurance. That was difficult. I was blessed that my church helped me out, and other Dana workers helped me out. After his celebration of life service, I went to pick up the death certificates and when I got there, I found out his coworkers had donated their own money to help us. This was an unexpected show of love towards Danny. His coworkers knew he worked hard to provide under the hard conditions at the plant. They cared about us because Danny spoke of missing his family quite a bit.

I am retired but I have a job as a substitute teacher, as a worship leader in a church, and as a preschool teacher. I taught fifth grade. Teachers banded together too and we made some headway on our retirement that was going to be taken away [In 2018 there was a wildcat strike of Kentucky teachers to protect their pensions and Marcia made calls to the

legislature] but now things aren't looking good for new teachers. It's sad. If the union didn't help us as teachers we got together and did it ourselves. We just did. Because they tried to take away our legit money.

Right now I substitute K-12. With my three jobs right now I work well over 40 hours a week. Apparently I will also not get any of my husband's social security, ever. I cannot get it. If I was not a teacher I'd be in a worse place. And I'm in a pretty bad place. He just gave away tons of social security money that the government will take. It was up to \$65,000 or \$70,000. He worked all his life for that.

"The UAW did nothing for me"

The union doesn't do anything to help the workers. The UAW didn't do anything for me. They don't help at all. Danny said that, too. He would say, "It's just they get people in those positions who don't speak up. They don't do anything."

He said people would talk to the union reps but they do nothing. "The union's a joke" was his way of putting it. They're not going to do anything for us, they don't do anything for us, and nothing ever changes. I would say, do they think the workers have no brains? They don't think workers knew their rights.

You say some UAW leaders make over \$100,000 a year? Oh my gosh, I was probably making \$52,000 after 30 years of teaching. That's unbelievable and they're sitting in an office and they've got people on their feet 12 hours a day.

When I saw your article it set a fire in me. I said I need to do something to help these other workers. A relative of mine said, this is going to happen to someone else if you don't speak up on behalf of those employees. We had no family. That's the way it was for everybody. Danny would tell me that mothers would talk to him about not seeing their children. They would say I need to work 8 hours because I need to get my kids to school—they didn't care. They would say, "I wish I could just have one day off!"

He had to go get an FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] to keep from getting fired. When he had his seizure, I was worried he would get fired. What would I do if I couldn't pay my son's college tuition? Could I re-file FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]?

Marcia Walters' message to Dana workers

If I can leave something to help these workers at Dana, then maybe they won't end up in the same situation. Danny was tied to the job for the money. He didn't have options. He didn't have a college degree. When he worked at Dana there was no family life. The only benefit was when COVID came—and that's not a benefit—but they were laid off for a while and my son said, "That was the best time I'd ever had with dad since he started at Dana. At least I had those moments with him before he died."

I hope they strike. I hope they can get some intelligent people that know the law and can rise up against what's happening to them.

If they can strike, then strike. Find somebody in that plant that is vocal and strong and to support you and stand up for your rights. It's not going to work if they don't all band together. The company tries to tie their hands. If workers all stand up together across every Dana plant in the nation, then they can stand up against this absolute absurdity that makes these people so rich.

It's like a third world country in there. Danny called it a sweatshop. It

sounds like what you read about in your history book. I feel for the people because it's not easy. But if you can get support for the whole community of Dana employees, then do it.

When I would show students photos of working conditions in the old days or showing textbook examples of workers being mistreated in other countries, it reminds me of what is happening today. It can't be happening today, but it is. Forgetting about the working class is sad. It compares greatly to hundreds of years ago.

To Dana workers, I say: Get up, rise up.

I think the community would support them. What you hear people say is "I hear that's a horrible place to work. I've heard a lot of bad things about Dana." Even at church that's what people say.

This has to stop or there will be more Danny Walters. I want to use my voice for the people that work there.

I'm not full of hate, I'm full of desire to make things better. I don't want to stir up hate. I just want Dana workers to know they deserve more for their families and nothing will change if they don't say "enough is enough." I'm a strong woman. Dana workers can count me in on anything.

Join the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee and fight by our side. Email us at danawrfc@gmail.com and text us at (248)-602-0936.



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