

Former Dana auto parts worker describes filthy and unsafe conditions, management harassment and union collusion at Kentucky plant

Hiram Lee**6 September 2021**

Former Dana auto parts worker Andrew Denny contacted the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworkers Newsletter* to speak out on conditions inside the Danville, Kentucky facility where he worked from 2013 to 2019.

The Danville facility was one of many throughout the country that massively voted down a new concessions-laden contract put before them by the United Auto Workers union. Among Dana workers there is widespread desire for a strike against sweatshop conditions, including seven-day workweeks and 12-hour working days that recall the worst conditions of the 1800s.

However, the UAW and the United Steelworkers, which jointly negotiated the national agreement, are continuing their information blackout and carrying a campaign of intimidation and threats against militant workers. At the plant in Lima, Ohio, UAW local president P.J. Meyer had to be physically restrained during an assault against a female worker who had asked a critical question on social media.

The Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee, a group formed with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, issued a statement last week demanding an immediate calling of a strike, with strike pay equal to 100 percent of workers' wages paid for out of the unions' combined \$2.7 billion in assets. Moreover, the Committee called on workers to begin making preparations to form rank-and-file strike committees to enforce workers' control over the struggle.

Danny described to the *World Socialist Web Site* some of the conditions in the plants that are motivating this rebellion.

Denny, who worked as a machine operator, was ultimately fired after a dispute with company management over time he had taken off under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) following a knee surgery. "I'm 32 years old and I've got back problems and I've had knee surgery because of working in factories my whole life," Denny said. The company claimed that during Denny's recovery from knee surgery, he took unauthorized time off that was not covered under FMLA and dismissed him. Denny insists he was FMLA-compliant.

Denny described conditions at the Danville facility, where he made auto parts that would be used by some of the major auto companies. "The plant in Danville is really three buildings. Building 1 was called the 'clean building' and that was where management offices and some production were located. Building 2 was the dirty building. That's where most of the production with graphite took place. Then there was a warehouse. Where I worked, the floor was so slick it felt

like you were ice skating. That was from all the graphite particles that built up on the ground.

I've seen people trip over stuff. You walk on a slick spot and about break your neck trying not to fall down. If you're driving a forklift and go to stop it, the forklift will scoot and keep going, and if you hit something they blame you for it and give you a drug test. Anytime there's an accident like that they give you a drug test to try and blame you for it.

"There were machines with exposed wires, hydraulic leaks that made big puddles around the machines. You talk to management about it, and they say they're going to do something, but they never do, or they throw a band-aid on it at best.

"I notified OSHA because they're supposed to take care of environmental problems. If you went out on break, you would see foaming water in the creek behind the building. It looked like chemicals that had washed off some of our machines had gotten into the water."

Denny said that the air quality inside the plant was a major concern. "Of course, they tell you the air quality is okay in the factory, but it can't be with all of that on the floor. You come home and take your boots off, and you can see your legs are covered in black rings from the particles in the air. We're breathing that in too. You blow your nose, and it comes out black. They didn't provide respirators. They said we could bring our own masks and wear them if we wanted to, but they swore the air was clean."

When an air vent above Denny's machine malfunctioned, it forced air down through his machine and into his face. "So, a gust of air blows in my face. You stand there all day using these petroleum-based industrial lubricants and that gets blown in your face too. It took them years to fix it."

Just before Denny started work in Danville, Dana had closed a plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and shifted the contracts from that facility to Danville. Denny says this was because the workers in Danville were paid far less than the Milwaukee workers. The extra workload made conditions hard to bear. "I worked 8-hour shifts plus overtime for 8 months straight with no days off," said Denny. "It was mandated. We got 20-minute lunch breaks plus two 10-minute breaks. But what's 20 minutes for lunch? You get in line behind of bunch of other people waiting to use the microwave and by the time you get to eat half your time is gone."

Denny said production goals set by management were impossible to meet. “I’ve got sheets of laminated graphite coming out of the machine so fast you can’t keep up with it. The sheets are hot, a couple hundred degrees. I’m stamping out gaskets, twisting, bending for 8 to 12 hours. The most I ever produced in a day was about 2,000 parts. I ran myself to death doing that, but it still wasn’t enough.”

Denny said, “A lot of the people at Dana Danville work 40 hours a week and they’re still in poverty. They’re afraid to step up and say what’s wrong because they need the job. With overtime I could bring in about a thousand or maybe eleven hundred dollars a week after taxes, which might not sound like much, but where I’m from most people are making between three and four hundred a week.” By the time he was let go in 2019, after almost seven years at a union job, Denny was making just under \$16 an hour.

Denny says he was targeted by management and eventually fired because he spoke out so frequently about problems at his facility. He often pointed out hazards and asked for repairs. He says the company was aware of the report he made to OSHA and that tensions only escalated when he first began taking FMLA time off because of his daughter.

Denny’s daughter has cerebral palsy and requires the use of a wheelchair. Throughout her young life, she has needed significant medical attention, and there have been multiple emergencies that pulled her father away from his work on short notice. Denny relied on the FMLA, which grants workers limited protections so that they can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave in the event of a family medical emergency while retaining their jobs and health benefits.

The company never made it easy to request the time off. “Things would come up, emergencies would happen,” Denny said, “and you’d tell the supervisor you need to go take care of it. They spend 20 minutes trying to convince you not to go. I took my regular vacation days instead of FMLA time sometimes, so I didn’t have to argue with someone.” After putting up with harassment from management long enough, Denny switched to third shift, thinking this would lessen the interruption to his working hours. “I’d get off work at 7 am, go to the doctor with my family, sleep for a couple hours and then start the next shift,” said Denny.

When he was preparing to switch to third shift, Denny told his first-shift supervisor, “I guess you’re going to miss harassing me on the days I call in FMLA.” His supervisor complained that a worker with similar needs might be coming to his shift. “She’s off on that FMLA all the time,” said the supervisor. “I’ll make her cry. I’ve made her cry a couple times already. You wouldn’t believe the people I’ve made cry. They can’t take it like you can.”

In an incident similar to the one that ultimately got him fired, the company claimed Denny had taken time off that was unaccounted for. The company gave him two weeks to prove that he was authorized for FMLA leave and that he logged his time correctly or he would be terminated.

He went to Ron Holetzky, president of UAW local 3062, with his concerns. “Ron told me not to think anything of it,” said Denny. “He said, ‘I don’t care if you called in or not. I’ll get you out of it.’” While Denny took this to mean that Ron was going to work things out, he decided to cover his bases and found the call logs necessary to prove that he had reported his time correctly.

When two weeks went by, Denny, Holetzky and others were called into a meeting with human resources to see Denny’s proof or fire him. Holetzky had arranged nothing. “But I was able to send them a picture of my phone log that proved I had called in my hours like I was

supposed to,” said Denny. “That’s the only thing that saved me then. If I had trusted Ron and not worried about anything, I would have been fired. I feel like they were setting me up so that when they brought me in, I wouldn’t have any proof.”

Denny told us that it was an open secret that officials from the union local would go on trips to Florida for union business only to have them turn into barhopping adventures. “That was my dues money on the card they were swiping down there to pay for it all at the end of the day,” said Denny. “You expect the UAW to protect you, but they totally screwed me over.”

Denny was finally fired in 2019 over another FMLA dispute. This time he was again given two weeks to prove he was justified in taking time off to recover fully from knee surgery. But only a few days into the two-week period, before Denny could get in to see his doctor to get proof that he had not yet been released for work, he was summarily fired. “When my employment was terminated, they told me my health benefits would be cut off by the end of the month and said don’t set foot on the property again.”

Denny filed a wrongful termination grievance that Holetzky pledged to discuss with higher bodies within the UAW apparatus. It never happened. Instead, Denny received a letter from Holetzky six months after his firing that informed him his grievance had been withdrawn. Denny said that a subsequent call to international union rep Mike Abell confirmed that his grievance had never been taken seriously.

When Denny came across reporting on the most recent Dana contract struggles in the *WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter*, he decided the time was right to speak up. “You can’t let somebody destroy thousands of people’s lives for profit and not say nothing,” explained Denny. Reflecting on the votes against the new contract agreement, Denny said, “The contract vote is a step forward. A lot of people are opening their eyes to what’s going on.”

Denny warned his fellow workers not to trust the unions, however. He said, “In my experience, the union helped me a few times with small things. But when it comes to a big issue, they just turn and go to the company and ask what they should do about it. The company tells them and then they do it. At Dana Danville, the union works directly with the company to collude against the workers.”



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