

“Every Dana employee is not only fighting the company, they’re fighting the people who are supposed to be fighting for them”

Former Dana worker describes deadly work conditions at Tennessee plant

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Over 3,500 workers at automotive parts maker Dana Inc. are engaged in a powerful fight against low wages and oppressive conditions, which are prevalent in the parts industry. Over the last few weeks, workers in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky and other states overwhelmingly rejected a five-year concessions-laden contract pushed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Steelworkers (USW) unions, which have long overseen low pay and sweatshop conditions at Dana.

The UAW and USW have reacted to the rebuke by announcing that they will extend the current contract and keep workers on the job, ignoring the strike authorization votes by workers and widespread sentiment for a walkout. The Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was set up to provide a voice and leadership to workers, is demanding strike action and coordinating the opposition of workers across all the plants, as well as appealing to workers at GM, Ford, Stellantis, Deere & Co and other companies which use parts built by Dana workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to a former press operator at the Paris, Tennessee plant who left Dana because the long hours of mandatory overtime made family life impossible. The worker, who stays in close contact with her former coworkers, described the dangerous and abusive conditions at the plant and expressed her support for a unified struggle by Dana workers.

Paris, Tennessee is located roughly two hours west of Nashville in largely rural Henry County. According to the United States Census Bureau, Henry County has 32,199 residents with a median household income (in 2019 dollars) of \$40,502. The number of persons living in poverty is 18.3 percent, well above the national average.

“In the area we live in, there aren’t many decent jobs,” said Anita, who used a pseudonym to protect her identity. “It’s basically McDonald’s, Wal-Mart or Dana, and unfortunately, Dana is the best option. People say ‘Leave, find a new job.’ But it’s not that easy when you have family relying on you and there aren’t a lot of opportunities. You can’t just leave, and you shouldn’t have to. You should be entitled to your basic human rights. Nobody should be forced into heat exhaustion. Nobody should be forced to breathe poisonous chemicals.”

Anita described the horrific conditions inside Dana, which are

akin to some of the worst conditions of the 19th century. Workers are being forced to endure 12-hour days, seven days a week, for weeks on end. They also risk their lives operating dilapidated machinery, oftentimes in temperatures exceeding one hundred degrees.

“I’ve seen people be terribly injured at work, and you’re lucky if they let you go to the hospital. Even if they do let you go to the hospital, they’re not going to pay for you to have proper care.

“People have been burned on presses because they won’t fix them. Management stays on the maintenance technicians to fix them, but they won’t supply the parts needed to fix things. Dana talks a lot about safety measures, but it’s not safe; they only want to give you the illusion of safety. I’ve seen people burned so badly and told to work the next day. They’re burned so horrifically but Dana doesn’t give you enough time to get a skin graft and expects you to be at work the next day.

“A man had molten plastic shoot out of a press onto his face. He’s not the only person to have been burned by molten plastic. I’ve seen a man’s arm impaled by a machine and he had to be airlifted to Nashville. You would think they would say, ‘Well, maybe we do need to change something.’

“Every day, there are people risking their lives. I’ve seen the top plates of these [press molds], which are moved with forklifts because they’re solid metal, fall inches away from people. The company won’t provide proper bolts. They won’t fix the safety chains.

“Everyone is working in 115-degree heat. And 115 degrees in a building with stamping presses, which produce heat like giant ovens, is a different kind of heat. It’s really hard to handle. Your body is not meant to withstand that for very long.”

Due to the nature of Dana’s production, workers are constantly exposed to hazardous chemicals and fumes, which increases their chances of long-term illness, including cancer.

“I understood when I went to work in a factory that there are chemicals and things that might be harmful, but I didn’t agree to breathe that in 12 hours a day, five days a week and weekends. I agreed to 40 hours. I can’t count the number of people I know who have gotten sick with lung issues, or cancer, or have died. It shouldn’t be like that.”

Far from opposing these conditions, the UAW helps enforce them, Anita said, “I read some plants get ‘heat breaks.’ We didn’t know that was a thing until we saw some comments on one of [the WSWs] articles on Facebook. We brought it to our UAW reps and asked, ‘What is a heat break?’ Come to find out, it’s in our agreement, but we didn’t know, it was kept from us.”

“The union is not doing what it’s supposed to do. Every single Dana employee is not only fighting the company, they’re fighting the people who are supposed to be fighting for them.”

Anita also described how the new 12-hour, seven-day-a-week schedule at the plant was increasing the danger of COVID-19 infection. “That doubles your chances of exposure. Not only do you have to come in for your shift, but when you have to come in early or stay late, you’re exposed to a completely different shift of a completely different set of people.

“If you don’t get your test results back in a certain amount of time you’re going to get pointed,” she said, referring to punitive disciplinary points. “We’re people, and we deserve basic human rights, and part of those rights is being able to protect ourselves, our families and our coworkers from something that is killing so many people every single day.

“Our plant doesn’t even have a plan. They don’t have a protocol. You’ve got to have rules, especially when you’re talking about something as critical as people’s lives. If you’re exposed, you go home, get tested, quarantine, do what you have to do. People are killing themselves every day just because they need a means of providing for themselves and their families.”

Anita said Dana workers were becoming more confident that they could fight these conditions. “When I started working at Dana, I didn’t know I was selling my soul. I was just trying to get a job and make a living, but you’re signing your life away and your family’s life away when you sign that employment agreement. We finally have a chance to take that back, get a new agreement on our terms, that allows us to be good employees and good for our families. It’s well past time to make a change.

“When I heard the 12 hours would start again, I got angry and sad, because I thought I can’t do anything about it. I can’t do anything about it, but we can. As a whole, we can.”

She described how the UAW reacted to the overwhelming ‘no’ vote by Dana workers, including by 83 percent of the workers at the Paris plant. “We pay the union money to protect us, to help us and to fight for us, and when you’re being told, ‘Get ready, this is our chance, we’re going to strike, we’re going to stick it to them,’ and then literally hours before you’re told, ‘Never mind, we’re going to put an extension on it and you’re just going to have to sit tight and deal with it.’ Every single employee, every single family member of an employee I’ve spoken with felt like that was nothing but a slap in the face.

“We’ve heard that the UAW International is talking about making committees to go around to each local to find out what we want from the contract, but we’ve also heard that they’re not going to be allowed to speak to the workers, only the union representatives in each plant. I think it’s a facade. I think they’re trying to hold us over, to make it look like they’ve been negotiating. The UAW not telling us anything until the last minute is horrifying. They have something to hide.”

Anita described how the WSWs was helping Dana workers communicate with each other and coordinate their opposition. “Dana likes to isolate people. They don’t like to talk about other plants in other parts of the country, or anything like that, so when this started becoming a big thing and I started reading your articles, I was literally brought to tears. I realized that there are people who have it worse than what we’ve experienced, that’s astonishing to me.

“There are so many workers and family members that truly appreciate what you guys are doing. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gotten emotional because someone is providing this information.

“For years, we thought it was a local issue, that our local management was so bad and causing all these problems, and it’s just so hard to wrap your mind around the fact that it’s happening across the country and being allowed to happen.

“If we stop, [Dana] stops. They can’t get people in there to work now, what’s going to happen when there’s none of us left? I’ve heard a lot of times, ‘You need [Dana] and that paycheck more than they need you,’ and that’s not true, because without us they don’t get a paycheck either. They don’t get their pockets lined unless we’re making the product.

“When everybody realizes that we do have power, as long as we unite, if we demand basic human rights, we can do it if we all stand together.

“Your whole life you’re taught that [Democrats and Republicans] have power, and you don’t, but you’re the one making their power. You’re the one putting in your labor to make their power, so who really holds the power?

“We need change. People can’t keep living in this hell. Yes, we need raises. While Dana employees are some of the best-paid in our area, it’s still not enough to make it. It’s definitely not enough to compensate for the things that they’re put through.”



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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