"The union never helps us, they just help the company"

Dana worker with head injury suffered seizure on the job

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22 September 2021

Join the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee and take up the fight against Dana and the USW and UAW! Email them at danawrfc@gmail.com or texting them at (248) 602–0936.

More details are emerging about the brutal working conditions at the Fort Wayne, Indiana plant operated by auto parts company Dana. According to workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on condition of anonymity, coworkers in the plant have suffered head injuries and seizures, severed fingers, COVID-19 outbreaks and, in one case, even death inside the plant.

The new information comes as the United Steelworkers and the United Auto Workers continue to keep Dana workers nationwide on the job on an indefinite contract extension, even after workers voted down a tentative agreement by a more than 9 to 1 margin.

A new memo posted in the plants by the USW confirm warnings made by the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee, an independent group of workers set up to oppose the unions' treachery, and the WSWS that the unions are deliberately attempting to drag negotiations out past the critical changeover period when the auto industry retools to produce next year's models, and when a strike by the 3,500 unionized Dana workers in the US would be most effective.

The memo declared that negotiations over a second agreement are "tentatively" scheduled to continue through October 10, when the changeover will mostly have already taken place. Significantly, the USW repeated its justification for the contract extension by claiming that it was necessary in order to keep the company from ending automatic dues collection—in other words, shut off one source of cash to the privileged union bureaucracy.

At least some of the incidents at Fort Wayne reported to the WSWS took place after the initial contract was rejected at the beginning of the month, meaning these injuries were made possible by the unions' contract extension and their deliberate sabotage of Dana workers' struggles.

For example, earlier this month, a production worker handling parts inside a robot cage at the Fort Wayne plant stepped on a loose controller cord, fell and slammed her head twice on the concrete floor. After management sent her back to work despite her injuries, last week she collapsed from a seizure and was sent to the emergency room but has been sent back to work once again.

Workers on her line say the shift supervisor is married to the physician's assistant who diagnosed her with something in between a "kind of concussion but not full concussion," and sent her back to work the next day. "The lady who fell and hit her head, what I am hearing her equilibrium is STILL messed up," one worker said. "The company doctor ordered an x-ray but didn't want to, due to how expensive they were!" One worker reported that the right side of her face and neck lost sensation.

"I noticed that the union stewards and production managers surrounded her when she came back to work. She had a cane. We heard about the [diagnosis] and it didn't seem right. In this department there's oil everywhere. She's not the first person to fall. I've been here a long time. The company claims there has been only 30 [falls] in ten years, there's been over 15 just this year."

"These robot cages have oil everywhere," the worker continued. "They break down and we are told to go inside this cage and manually move the parts. The union claims it's cleaned, honestly they never help us, they just help the company."

In response to employee complaints, the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (IOSHA)

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launched an investigation over various safety issues, including unlabeled chemicals, blind spots for motorized vehicles and foot traffic, employees hammering parts stuck on robots leading to injuries, safety sensors on machines malfunctioning, oil-coated areas and the spraying of fungicide in one area of the plant after a coronavirus outbreak, causing physical discomfort among workers.

In its report, IOSHA dismissed all of these complaints except for unlabeled chemicals, for which the company was assessed a penalty of $1,275. According to workers, management hastily tried to correct more obvious issues in the plant before the inspection.

In its official report, IOSHA admitted observing pools of oil on the floors which constituted, by any objective standard, serious safety hazards, only to wave it off on the flimsiest of pretexts: “Areas heavily coated in machine oil with pools of it in most areas. Power cords are lying in these oil pools. Response: Oil was observed on the floors during the inspection process. To prevent falls the employer has installed anti-slip flooring throughout the department. The floors are regularly cleaned by a ride on floor cleaner. The employees also have access to floor scrubbers and mop stations. No safety order recommended.”

With respect to use of disinfectant in the plant, the report takes Dana management’s account of the incident at face value: “Employer is disinfecting workspaces with employees nearby causing them to become nauseous due to the fume. Response: The employer is aware of a onetime incident where the work area was inadvertently spraying with hand sanitizer instead of the correct disinfectant. The employer was attempting to disinfect the workplace because of Covid-19. No safety order recommended.”

This, however, is contradicted by accounts from workers, who reported and documented Aspen One Step as being the disinfectant sprayed on workers, and that it was used not only once but as a normal practice.

Workers also report other serious physical injuries sustained during work. One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that a burr broaching machine tore the thumb off of a co-worker. “[She] lost her finger and no one saw her again, nothing from the company or union on what happened. There are five machines with a hydraulic press rod with sharp teeth to remove burrs [from the parts]. Three of the machines have doors for safety [and] two don’t ... heard that another worker lost the tip of his glove because he was tired one night. Should have never happened.”

One worker also described a recent death inside of the plant. “There was a skilled tradesman, an electrician named Joe McDougall. He wasn’t feeling good and was found in the back of the plant. His wife who was also was working in the plant started looking for him since they took breaks together. We never heard anything from either the union or the company. It was all word of mouth. After he was found the union and management claimed it was within 20 minutes, but really it was an hour or two later.”

The plant’s Environmental Health & Safety Coordinator is particularly despised by workers in the plant for covering up a coronavirus outbreak in the plant which led to five confirmed cases. Neither the line nor the surrounding workers were informed, who found out only through word of mouth.

In a separate incident, the supervisor attempted to downplay the risk of a machine leaking coolant over electrical wires, after workers refused to work on the machine out of safety concerns. “[He] downplayed the risk and denounced [the worker who reported it]. On this line we try to be careful all day,” one worker said.

“We have come full circle [compared to factory conditions a century ago]. It’s a human rights violation. There’s times where human resources reject workman’s compensation to make workers pay for their own treatment.

“We’re isolated by the unions. We had concessions in 2007 that saved the company, but we workers were screwed. Young people are made desperate for work. I want them to do better, like before when workers were making closer to $25 an hour.”

“Workers need to unite,” he concluded. “The union and management isolate you and pick you apart. The union tries to protect people who are close to them. When we’re mandated they tell us to ‘deal with it.’ We need to unite internationally, the better it is for everyone. They’re doing this to all working class people. There’s no regard to life or family.”

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