

Moses Kur, 37-year-old auto parts worker, dies in industrial accident at Ventra's Grand Rapids plant

George Kirby
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Last Wednesday morning, 37-year-old Moses Kur of Kentwood, Michigan died in an industrial accident at the Ventra auto parts plant in Grand Rapids. Family and friends created a GoFundMe page to support Kur's family.

Coworkers took to social media to express their shock at Kur's death and support for the family. "He was a really great guy," one coworker stated. Another said, "Saw it on the news today and assumed it was a press or robot fatality based on the company. RIP to the employee and their family. Can't believe they [Ventra] are allowed to still operate if their history is this clouded."

Ventra is a subsidiary of Flex-N-Gate, owned by billionaire Shahid Khan, who also owns the Jacksonville Jaguars NFL franchise. Flex-N-Gate produces metal bumpers, plastic interior and exterior parts, lighting, signals and metal assemblies at 64 manufacturing plants around the globe employing 24,000 people. Ventra made \$574 million in global parts sales last year.

An investigation by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) is ongoing, but according to the initial report, obtained by a local TV news station, Kur suffered his fatal injuries while adjusting a sensor on a plastic welding machine, causing the machine to cycle while he was reaching through the access door, crushing him. Whether this account, which appears to lay the blame on a mistake made by Kur, is entirely accurate remains to be seen. Regardless, the accident is not the product of individual error but of an unsafe environment which has persisted for years at the auto parts maker, the product of continuous speedup long working hours that are

common throughout the industry.

In 2015, Wanda Holbrook, a skilled journeyman technician with 12 years' experience, was crushed to death at Ventra's Ionia plant while maintaining robotic machinery used for stamping and molding. Wanda was working within the "100" cell of the weld department around 2 p.m. when a robot "hit and crushed" her head between two hitch assemblies. She was pronounced dead at about 2:39 p.m. when first responders arrived. The lawsuit by her husband against the company and the machine producers is still ongoing.

In 1991, Ricky Dora, 21, and Stephen Eilar, 25, were crushed at the Ionia plant from the chest up under 1,300 tons of pressure as the Weingarten press they were operating cycled out of turn. The two had been working at Ventra for only a few days. At the time the plant was operated by American Bumper & Manufacturing Company.

A MIOSHA investigation uncovered 216 safety violations, among them that management had deliberately disconnected the wiring to the brake monitor on the press Dora and Eilar were operating in order to make the presses run faster. American Bumper was fined just over \$1 million, at the time the largest ever for a Michigan plant, but ended up paying only \$435,000.

Former temporary workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions they faced in early 2020. "When we first started work here [Ventra Ionia], no supervisor or manager mentioned the incident from 2015. There was an incident the other day with the robots. It took two and a half hours to repair. The same brake mechanism that was disconnected in 1991 was malfunctioning. The doors in the press were locked and

would not go up or down. It's really dangerous!"

In recent years, several autoworkers around the country have died in similar accidents. At Ford Lima Engine plant in Ohio, Patrick Archer was killed in a machine operating accident, the details of which have yet to be reported. Earlier in the year, Terry Garr died at Stellantis' Sterling Stamping plant after a heavy die set slipped and crushed him. Garr's death followed by only a few months the death of Mark McKnight at General Motors' Marion Stamping Plant in Indiana when a floor-to-ceiling wall unit of 4x4 metal tubing fell on top of him.

Overall, fatal industrial accidents are on the rise across the country. Deaths rose in 2019, the last year government data is available, to 5,333 deaths, the highest level since 2007. Moreover, an unknown number of autoworkers have contracted COVID-19 at work and died. At least six deaths occurred at one plant, Stellantis' Warren Truck Assembly Plant, in 2020, although workers report to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the death toll has since climbed to as high as 12.

Notwithstanding the spread of COVID-19 and the disruption to global supply chains which have crippled production across the industry, the industry as a whole is expecting a rapid financial recovery over the course of 2022. Moreover, the industry has limited the financial impact of shortages by running certain key plants, such as Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, around the clock, and in parts plants around the country 84-hour workweeks are increasingly the norm.

In spite of the social catastrophe unleashed by COVID-19 and the continuing unsafe working conditions at Ventra plants, owner Shahid Khan told a virtual meeting of Original Equipment Suppliers Association that he sees an immense upside. "I'm a big believer chaos is opportunity... As we've grown, some of the best growth spurts we've had have been when the status quo was getting disrupted."



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