

# “Everybody was traumatized”: 25-year-old Chicago Ford worker dies on the job

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*Work in the auto industry? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end of the article to tell us about your workplace conditions. Your anonymity will be protected.*

On the night of August 29, 25-year-old Sam Hager died while working at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP). According to reports by workers, Sam had a seizure and hit the floor, but the medical response team from the company took over 20 minutes to arrive.

Sam worked at Ford for over six years, starting in 2016, and was in the chassis pit on the C crew shift when he died.

An obituary for Hager stated, “Samuel N. Hager, age 25 of Hammond, passed away on Monday, August 29, 2022. He is survived by his father Joseph (Jennifer) Hager; brother Joseph S. Hager; godchildren Layla and Wesley; his four-legged companion Rosie, and his closest friends Steven, Phelps, Evan, Samantha, and Hannah. Samuel was preceded in death by his mother Brenda and his pet lizard Dexter.”

Friends and family remembered Sam as a warm and funny person in comments posted in tribute to him. “I can’t believe you’re gone,” said Luke. “I remember when you first moved to Clark and how funny you were.”

Another coworker wrote, “My deepest condolences to your entire family. You will always be remembered as the sweet, kind-hearted person you were. It was a great pleasure working with you Sam.”

A third commented, “RIP Sam! I’m truly going to miss you. You were so funny and warm to me. A very good person to know. I will miss your hugs. God bless you my friend.”

Workers who knew Hager spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the circumstances surrounding his death. Multiple sources who were in the vicinity indicated that Ford’s medical personnel took more than 20 minutes to reach Hager.

“I was sitting next to him when it happened,” one said. “He had a seizure and unfortunately hit his head when he fell.” Sam’s coworker reported that the workers, who serve as the volunteer Emergency Response Team (ERT), tried to help Sam as soon as they could, but the official “Ford medical team did take over 20 minutes to arrive.”

Management and UAW Local 551, for their part, issued a perfunctory joint statement on Hager’s death. The initial letter co-signed by CAP Plant Manager Angela Weathers and UAW Local 551 Chairman Alan “Coby” Millender misspelled Hager’s name, stating:

It is with great sadness that we inform you of the recent passing of C-Crew Chassis team member Sam Hagen [sic]. Sam was a valued member of our Chicago Plant team since

2016. For many of us he was a close friend and colleague and will be missed by his family and friends.

The letter referred grieving workers to “UAW ESSP [Employee Support Services Program],” part of the UAW-Ford Joint Trust, while predictably providing no indication that any serious investigation into Hager’s death would be carried out.

## “I saw his life leave his body”

A worker who was not far from Sam the night he died also related what happened. She said, “It was at night, maybe a little after 10 p.m. We work in the same area. He was in the main aisle, and I was on the other side of the car. He was on the driver’s side of the car. I was on the passenger side of the car.

“I was maybe 40 feet from him. He wasn’t in my direct view. There were a handful of people who saw what happened, and they were pulled upstairs to give statements.

“Suddenly I heard, ‘Oh my god, Sam fell!’ Everyone rushed. I saw him, and he was having a seizure at the time. They were putting towels on his body. They were calling for help, and it was more than 20 minutes before he got help. They put a blood pressure cuff on him. Ten minutes after that the nurse came down. She came down to do her version of CPR.

“I saw him on the ground, I saw him having convulsions, his eyes rolled back in his head, I saw his life leave his body.

“It was completely overwhelming. It felt like they left us down there. Everybody was traumatized,” she added, choking up. “We were all shouting, ‘We’re losing him, we’re losing him!’ It was a long night. It was horrible.

“We had grown men in there crying and screaming. Watching somebody’s life slip away and die. Over 20 of us were around him. We were trying harder than the actual Ford management to help him. The emergency response team at our plant is made up of workers that have other jobs they’re performing. There’s very minimal training for them. They’re not professionals by any means.”

She also said she heard Sam might have not been feeling well that day. “From my understanding, he had asked previously if he could go home if they had extra people. He may not have been feeling well. They refused and said that they needed him. So he stayed.”

“He was only 25,” she added. “We got videos of him dancing

around. He was all around likable.”

She went on to condemn Ford and the working conditions at the plant. “There’s a lack of care, a lack of humanity with Ford. No rush, no sense of emergency with safety issues like this for workers. The first response person didn’t even know what to do. We had to get the stretcher! The workers had to put him on the stretcher. Then the supervisors came for five minutes, and they said, ‘If you need to talk to me, there’s my office upstairs.’ It was just BS talk. They don’t care about anything.

“Management doesn’t care, they just want the line running. The UAW also does nothing for us. Another woman had a seizure last year, her eyes were back in her head. They pulled her out of the line and started the line back. They didn’t even get her a stretcher. It’s just scary.

“These companies don’t care. They never say a person died there. People have had heart attacks on the forklift or bathrooms and they think they are sleeping. People are so overworked at Ford. You won’t even know if they’re sleeping or if they’re dead. People are so tired they take naps sometimes on their breaks, so you won’t know if someone died like that.

“I have carpal tunnel. I can’t squeeze the gun anymore. Everybody I know has had corrective surgery. I know people who have had carpal tunnel and nerve damage all over their arms. I know people who’ve had knee surgery and more.”

#### **“I hope he gets the justice he deserves”**

Another friend and coworker of Sam said, “They took a while to come and get him, and when they did get there, they tried to put a blood pressure cuff on him. They seemed to not know what they were doing.” She added, “I hope he gets the justice he deserves.

“I used to work on the same shift as Sam. I switched shifts about a year ago. It’s sad. His birthday was just on the 13th. Makes you not feel safe working there.”

She remembered Sam warmly, adding, “It’s hard to describe. He was very funny and he was caring as well. He was very close to his dog Rosie and always talked about his god daughter. He had a care-free attitude and that’s what I loved about him most. He always had jokes to tell.

“He was an awesome person to know. Truly. We talked a lot prior to his death and that is why I’m so at peace now. I do really hope he and his family get their justice because it’s not fair that he isn’t here anymore. Accountability needs to be claimed by Ford.”

Another worker who knew Sam also spoke on the unsafe conditions in the chassis. “Sam worked under the vehicle. They call it the ‘pit.’ You’re underneath the vehicle there. I worked in that area. There’s been many times I’ve hit my head on the clamshell. The clamshell is basically two arms that hang down from the chain, and they secure the car from underneath. It’s basically a big metal clamp that the car rides on. One day I hit it, and I probably had a concussion. It took me 10 seconds to get up from the ground. Many people have hit their heads on the clamshell.”

#### **“It’s our lives on the line, so we have a right to set the conditions**

#### **we work under”**

Every day over 340 workers die in America’s hazardous workplaces, which include unsafe conditions and intolerable working conditions. There were over 3.2 million work-related injuries reported in 2020. And over 4,700 workers who died on the job in 2020, not to mention the over 1 million dead now from the COVID-19 pandemic that has ravaged auto factories, schools and countless workplaces.

Some of the recent workplace and industrial deaths include: two brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey, refinery workers at BP Husky in Ohio; Travis Baker, an autoworker in the Belvidere Assembly Plant; Cassen Garcia, a Tyson meatpacking worker; and Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old Caterpillar worker who died a gruesome death after falling into a molten iron crucible.

In a case which bears certain tragic similarities to Hager’s, Danny Walters, a worker at a Dana auto parts plant in Dry Ridge, Kentucky, died after suffering several seizures on the night of June 1-2, 2021. After Walters collapsed from a first seizure at work and was taken to the hospital, neither the company nor the UAW informed his wife, who was away visiting relatives. Walters died later that night while home alone after suffering a second seizure.

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file candidate for UAW president, has drawn attention to the “carnage in America’s workplaces” in recent statements, writing that the “rights of workers, including the right to a safe and healthy workplace, must take precedence over the profit interests of big business.”

Responding to the report of Hager’s death, Lehman told the WWS, “I want to extend my deepest sympathies to Sam’s family and his coworkers. These companies and the UAW bureaucracy don’t care about our lives, and that’s why rank-and-file workers ourselves have to fight for safety and better working conditions.

“I’ve seen poor safety conditions in my plant just as every autoworker has. Poor safety allowed by the company and UAW has claimed the lives and limbs of many of our co-workers. The questions of safety and adequate support for workers who have medical conditions must be addressed, but to do that, we have to take the power into the hands of all workers on the shop floor, through the formation of rank-and-file committees. It’s our lives on the line, so we have a right to set the conditions we work under.”



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