

Tragic death of forklift driver in suburban Detroit parts plant shocks area autoworkers

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The death of a young female auto parts worker Sunday night in a tragic accident at her workplace has shocked and saddened workers in suburban Detroit. The 25-year-old woman, whose name has not been released, worked at Metalsa in Sterling Heights, Michigan. The accident occurred while she was driving a hi-lo (forklift).

The plant temporarily halted production after the tragedy, causing a temporary suspension of production at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant and other Stellantis plants in the area due to parts shortages.

According to a statement issued by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MiOSHA), “The employee took a turn too quickly and was ejected. The powered industrial truck tipped over and fell onto the victim.” The worker was pronounced dead at the scene. No further details have been released about the accident.

Metalsa is a privately held Tier 1 automotive supplier of chassis and metallic structures for light trucks and other vehicles and supplies Stellantis, as well as Ford and General Motors. Its plant in Sterling Heights is nonunion. Metalsa is a wholly-owned key subsidiary of Grupo Proeza, headquartered in Monterrey, Mexico and operates plants in Michigan, Kentucky and West Virginia, as well as Mexico and six other countries.

Metalsa operations in the US have been the scene of several recent workplace deaths and have received numerous citations for safety violations. In June of 2022 Lance Winemiller, age 24, died in an accident involving a forklift at the company’s plant in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where workers are members of the United Auto Workers. About 2,000 workers are employed at that facility making vehicle frames for Ford. According to news reports, Winemiller was working the night shift outdoors when he was struck

and killed by a piece of equipment used for moving heavy materials.

Another Metalsa worker in Kentucky, Michael Curcio, a 58-year-old maintenance technician, died in June 2020 at a Metalsa plant in Hopkinsville. According to reports, he died during a service and maintenance task on an automated welding line used to construct van frames.

A Metalsa facility in Glendale, Kentucky, was cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for the death of a worker who died of COVID-19 in September 2021.

A Stellantis worker at the Mack Avenue assembly plant in Detroit said that reports of the tragic death had caused “shock on the shop floor.”

“It was not a great day to be at work,” he said. Powered industrial vehicles, PIVs, are the second deadliest cause of automotive industry deaths outside of falls. Hi-los are poorly designed; they tip over easily.

“A lot of people are killed by PIVs, Hi-los, tuggers and golf carts, as well as trucks on the loading dock. At Mack, it would be unusual to have such a young girl on a hi-lo. Here, it is usually someone in their 40s or older. She probably did not have sufficient training. It has a lot to do with cost cutting—‘fisting.’ That is where Stellantis puts the squeeze on suppliers.

“At some of the auto parts suppliers like Yanfeng and Dakkota, you have hi-los all over the place in crowded areas. Material handlers can work 16-hour days drinking Red Bull to stay awake.”

A worker responding to news reports of the tragedy posted on social media, “I drove forklifts for 27 years until the constant bouncing on bumpy roads with no suspension forced my L5 Vertebra out of alignment. The majority of forklifts are pieces of crap as other drivers can attest to, and while driving outside it’s a

very rough ride! I have never personally seen a forklift fall on anyone, but I saw someone shatter both their legs running a 3,000-pound pallet off a truck with a pallet jack and get slammed against the forks of a lift that had them raised about 10 inches off the ground. Oh, the blood!”

According to MiOSHA, the worker at Metalsa was the 36th worker to die in an industrial accident this year in Michigan. At least eight of the deaths involved forklifts or other powered industrial vehicles (PIV).

In Fowlerville, Michigan, a worker at RheTech Compounding, a maker of automotive thermoplastics, was found dead at the scene. According to MiOSHA, “a 31-year-old shipping/receiving handler was moving pallets in a warehouse using a Hilo. The pallets contained nylon sacks of plastic pellets weighing approximately 2,200-2,300 pounds. Coworkers later discovered the employee unresponsive on the ground, with one of the nylon sacks on top of them.”

Also in August, 59-year-old William Kyle died in the hospital following an industrial accident at the Stellantis Mopar parts facility in Center Line, Michigan, outside Detroit. According to MiOSHA, the worker was “standing near a double-stacked cardboard bale, conversing with a fork truck operator. As the operator drove away, they witnessed the cardboard bale—“a cardboard bale—weighing approximately 2,000 to 2,500 pounds—slide off the bottom bale and onto the victim, pinning him to the ground against the fork truck.”

Following the death of the worker at Metalsa in Sterling Heights, rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who is running for UAW president, issued the following statement.

“The death of the as yet unidentified forklift worker at the Metalsa plant is tragic, but these are the conditions we are forced to work under. I’ve spoken with many workers who have been forced to work in unsafe conditions at the risk of their own health up to risking their lives.

“Corporations like Stellantis, who is supplied by Metalsa, see this as a necessary cost of doing business. In their response to the accident their primary concern was not the death of the worker but its impact on production. No doubt they’ll make every effort to avoid blame, but these are the conditions they have set up and these are the conditions the UAW apparatus

allows us to work under.

“No worker should lose their life for their workplace’s profit. Corporations will continue forcing us to risk everything unless we stand up together and stop them. The fight for all of our safety is in our hands, to prevent tragedies like this worker’s death.”

For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



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