

“They are sweeping it under the rug”: Metalsa Kentucky auto parts workers denounce cover-up of fatal accident, express support for Will Lehman for UAW president

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Will Lehman’s campaign is holding a final election rally on Sunday, November 6, at 2:00 pm EST. All workers are encouraged to register and attend. For more information on the campaign, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

On Friday, supporters of United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman spoke to workers at a Metalsa automotive parts factory in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, about the hazardous conditions that led to the death of a 24-year-old worker earlier this year. On June 7, Lance Winemiller was struck and killed by a heavy duty forklift at the plant, which is located 45 miles south of Louisville.

The plant employs more than 2,000 workers, who manufacture the metal frames for Ford vehicles, including the F-150 pickup truck, the company’s most profitable vehicle, generating some \$49 billion in annual revenue. Starting wages for production workers at the plant are \$15.53 an hour, with temps earning even less.

Metalsa is a wholly owned subsidiary of Monterrey, Mexico-based holding company Grupo Proeza, which has revenue of \$1 billion a year. Sitting on its board of directors are executives from US-based automotive suppliers who have spent decades slashing labor costs and overseeing sweatshop conditions.

In 2010, Metalsa bought 10 structural metal plants in the US, Argentina, Australia, Venezuela and Brazil from Dana Holding Corporation for \$150 million. Before that Dana had colluded with the UAW to impose two-tier wages and other concessions in a bankruptcy restructuring that became the model for

General Motors and Chrysler in 2009.

Metalsa has been repeatedly cited by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for serious and willful safety violations at its Kentucky plants. On June 17, 2020, 58-year old maintenance tech Michael Curcio was killed in Hopkinsville after he was crushed by falling equipment while performing maintenance inside a welding cell. OSHA also cited the company for the September 2021 death of a worker who contracted COVID-19 at the Glendale plant.

Lance Winemiller was killed at the Elizabethtown plant in June while working the night shift in a yard where heavy forklifts load frames onto railroad trains. Asked about this incident, a temp worker told Lehman’s campaign, “They are sweeping it under the rug and acting like nothing happened.”

A young worker, James, described the circumstances of Winemiller’s death. “Nothing is done to improve safety until someone dies. The worker who died was an outside repairman checking on the frames that were being loaded onto the trains. There were no rules set in place to be safe. He had a vest, but he was hit by a Taylor forklift. These are not the small forklifts, but big, heavy-duty ones that pick off the tin stacks and load them onto the trains. He was hit in the yard. We hear rumors, and we haven’t been given the facts, but we heard the worker was walking where he wasn’t supposed to, but there are no clear stipulations.”

Another worker, Nadia, said, “I attended the funeral. The family just lost their main breadwinner and the union wouldn’t even pay for the funeral. I think that

says it all about how much the union cares about us. Inside the building they hung up some raggedy-ass flowers over a picture of him the size of a flyer and called it a ‘memorial.’”

In October, a 25-year-old worker was killed at a non-union Metalsa plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan, which supplies local Stellantis (Chrysler) plants. According to OSHA, the forklift she was driving tipped over when she took a turn, tossing her out of the vehicle and crushing her beneath it.

“We heard about the death of the worker in Detroit,” an Elizabethtown worker told campaigners. “They say the worker was not wearing a safety belt and she was tossed from the forklift before it fell on her. It’s terrible. They are hiring a lot of very young people. They get a four-hour class and a short test drive. Then they get a certification, and the company says, ‘Now drive a forklift and a tugger’.”

A veteran worker who operates forklifts said, “They just stick anybody on these jobs without giving them proper training. Sure you can drive a forklift after a quick course but that doesn’t mean you can operate it safely.”

Referring to the lack of training for younger workers, a worker with seven years at the plant said, “They don’t walk you around and say, ‘This is this, this is this.’ Instead, they say, ‘Here you go, run this op here. Here’s how to do it, now do it.’ They just throw you out in the field without good training.”

He continued, “It’s just bad management in my book. And, I’ll be honest with you, the union doesn’t work for us, they work for Metalsa. Just about anybody here will tell you that.”

After a campaigner explained that Will Lehman was saying that the workers on the shop floor, not the UAW apparatus, should be in charge of decision-making, including on health and safety, the worker replied, “Right, exactly. I don’t even notice there is a union here, except for [what they take from] my paycheck. Ford is controlling all of this, but they aren’t helping us out on wages.”

James, a young worker with four years at the plant said, “The union holds meetings for workers to voice their opinion, but we never know whether this is told to management. A lot of guys opt out of the union because they don’t see why it’s worth being in.”

He went on, “We’re paying three hours of our wages

every month to the UAW. I figured it out, there’s 2,500 workers in the plant and that’s almost \$2 million a year. We have no idea what our dues money is being used for. They throw a Christmas party that no one goes to and that’s about it.”

Metalsa workers expressed widespread support for Lehman’s campaign, taking leaflets and posters and posing for photos holding up campaign posters for the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president. During the hour-long leafleting for Lehman, company security guards never approached campaigners.

Shortly afterwards, however, two security guards ordered campaigners off of company property. When asked if they had been instructed by management or the UAW to remove them, the guards refused to say. It soon became clear who was behind this, however, when UAW Local 3047 Skilled Trades Representative Gary Parr followed Lehman’s supporters to their car and photographed their license plate.

When they told the UAW official that he was interfering with a federally protected UAW election activity, the union bureaucrat hurriedly left without saying a word.

The UAW officials who oversee the poverty wages and deadly sweatshop conditions in the auto parts industry are well aware that workers have nothing but contempt for them. Their greatest fear is that Will Lehman’s campaign is giving a voice and direction to the struggle of workers to put an end to the sacrifice of their lives and limbs to corporate profit.

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