

Kentucky autoworker says Dana Inc. forced him out of job for going to hospital for severe injuries sustained at Dry Ridge plant

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Warning: This article contains a photograph of a gruesome work injury that some may find difficult to view.

Jim Kaelin has worked hard his whole life. The 62-year-old is the third of 11 children and began working on the family farm in Kentucky around the age of eight, collecting, grading and cleaning eggs from the family's 1,500 chickens before and after school. His work life spans nearly 50 years, including 30 years as a worker in a tire recapping factory where he prided himself on his excellent attendance record.

In 2020, when Kaelin should have been getting close to the age of retirement, he started working at Dana Inc.'s plant in Dry Ridge, Kentucky, which makes parts for some of the most profitable auto companies in the world, including Ford and Stellantis. While working at Dana, Kaelin says he lost nearly everything he had built up over a half-century of labor.

Kaelin lost his job, but he says he almost lost far more than that. He almost lost his life when he was hospitalized after having chest pains at work in January 2021. He almost lost his leg weeks later when a heavy part fell on his leg at work, and it became dangerously infected. He almost lost his home because he says Dana forced him out of a job by "pointing" him (i.e., penalizing him) for going to the hospital for necessary medical attention.

This is his story. Dana Inc. did not reply to a request for comment.

Kaelin's sister Peggy Cordray wants readers to know what type of a person her brother is. "Jim is an old farm boy," she said. "He soldiers on. He is the hardest worker I know." Kaelin's problems at Dana began in January 2021, when he had been at the company for around six months. In 2021, Dana gave out \$57 million in dividend payments to its affluent shareholders.

"On January 2, I was working at Dana, and we had just gotten back from Christmas break," he told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "My chest started hurting, and I started to feel dizzy. I said to my supervisor that I had to go home, I was sweating so bad that my clothes were wet. My supervisor told me that if I go home, they were not going to give me holiday pay, and they were going to point me. I didn't have a choice, I left and went to the hospital. I felt like I was having a heart attack."

Kaelin's medical records show doctors took this incident extremely seriously and hospitalized him from January 2 to January 6, 2021. Soon after, he went back to work. Though his doctors put him on heavy blood thinners, he says he was not given a lighter workload. "I gave them paperwork from the hospital saying I had to take it easy, but the union didn't try to get me on a lighter job."

By mid-February, things got worse.

"A few weeks later, in February I got hurt bad at work. A heavy part fell on my leg. That thing weighed about 80 pounds. It was early in the morning, and a coworker was stacking too many parts on top of each other. I was trying to teach him not to stack more than three, but he stacked four and one fell on my leg. He took off running, and I never saw him again. He was my only witness, and I was in a lot of pain."

Kaelin, who had previously suffered from an ankle ulcer on the same leg that was injured, says he sat on a box on the shop floor for roughly three hours without medical attention while the company and UAW kept the line running. "For a long time I couldn't get up. When I finally did, I went to the night manager, who told me there was nothing he could do about it. I wrote a report to HR about the injury, but the company later told me it didn't count because I didn't file it within 24 hours, even though I did."

He went to the doctor, had his leg looked at and went back to work. In the weeks that followed, Kaelin worked under immense pain. He says he was in such pain that he would not take breaks, since by the time he was able to walk to the break room, break time would be over.

In March, when Kaelin should have been recovering, he says he was working at Dana when his wound began to bleed through his bandage. "My leg had about 10 bandages on it, plus gauze, plus two wraps, and it still bled through. Dana told me bodily fluid wasn't allowed to be on the shop floor, and they told me to get out of the building," he said.

He checked into the hospital again on March 19, 2021.

A medical report dated March 19 from St. Elizabeth's Healthcare states that Kaelin checked in with a "Wound Infection" and that he was suffering from "recurrent fever, fatigue, and extensive redness and swelling around right posterior calf wound," including a "new increase in odor as well." He told doctors he "was hit by a mechanical tool" when "he was teaching someone how to use it. Has reported increased pain and swelling. Today he felt some chills."

Kaelin told the doctor he was worried about losing his job, but the doctor insisted. He was held in the hospital for three days due to the infection, which he says was incredibly painful.

When Kaelin called Dana to inform them he had to go to the hospital, he says HR told him he was exaggerating the extent of his injury. After being discharged, Kaelin returned to work, but he says his condition did not improve, and the pain in his leg worsened. Weeks later he underwent a procedure for an intravascular venous stent placement.

“I was in the hospital on and off, but because of the pollution in the plant, my wound got infected again, and they told me they may have to amputate. I recall calling HR from my doctor’s office and told her about my diagnosis. The HR lady said, ‘I don’t give a fuck, that is not my problem. You are still going to get pointed.’”

Kaelin says he asked the HR representative if she would like to speak to his doctor, and the representative said “no,” to his doctor’s surprise. Kaelin also showed HR pictures of his infected wound, and an HR representative said, “I don’t want to see those fucking things.” He recalls clearly that HR used foul language in both conversations.

His sister Peggy said that Jim always sent Dana the proper paperwork about his heart attack and leg injury. “They would say bring a doctor’s note, and he did, and I know because I was the one doing a lot of the faxing for him. I tell you, Jim would go into work after the doctor’s appointment, and they would say ‘we didn’t get it,’ but they did. I know because I sent it and it went through.”

Kaelin says the UAW did not take action to help him.

“The UAW didn’t say anything. I told them about what was happening to me, I showed them the pictures of my infection. Every time I talked to the UAW people they just walked away from me. They don’t care about the workers, so why should I pay union dues?”

Shortly thereafter, he came back to work and was called up to what workers refer to as the “birdhouse,” an elevated part of the plant where workers are called for disciplinary meetings. Kaelin described what happened:

“I said I couldn’t get up to the birdhouse, because it has very high steps. But the superintendent said, ‘get up here,’ so I did. When I got up there, they said they called me there to write me up for going to the hospital. They gave me points for going to the hospital for my leg infection and for going in January for my heart problem, even though you are supposed to get pointed immediately, and not months later. The union rep was up there too, and I tried to explain that I wouldn’t have had to go to the hospital if I didn’t get hurt at work, but nobody defended me. The union didn’t help me out. They said it wasn’t their fault.”

Kaelin remembers the humiliating and painful climb down the stairs from the birdhouse, with management and the UAW looking down on him. He says one manager shouted at him: “What are you going to do, take all day? Get back to work!”

At the time of this incident, Kaelin had another doctor’s appointment scheduled for the coming days. Aware that the company was going to fire him for “pointing out” as a result of this appointment, he walked out of the plant and did not return. In legal terms, Kaelin did not “quit,” he was “constructively discharged,” which is the equivalent of being fired.

Kaelin says his workers’ compensation claim was denied. Without an income, he quickly ran out of options.

“I almost lost my house,” he said. “I didn’t have any money for 10 months. I didn’t have any [money] for gas, for food, I couldn’t get anywhere. Now I get \$2,000 a month in disability, and I’m broke. I am always out of money. I get my check at the beginning of the month, I pay my bills, and I buy \$100 in groceries and try to make it last all month. I’ve been eating one hot dog a day, and that’s it.”

Kaelin was able to qualify for a state program that delayed foreclosure on his home, but he says this protection is expiring and that he may lose his home in a matter of weeks. “In April I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

In the two years since Kaelin’s heart attack and injury, his sister

Peggy has provided him with what little support she could. “Jim will call me and tell me he has \$5, and he needs money to drive to the doctor so they can scrape his wound. Since all this happened I’ve given him about \$6,000, helping pay bills.”

Peggy is a foster parent and has taken on more foster children under the respite foster care program to help her brother. Respite foster care is where one foster parent temporarily cares for another family’s foster children.

“Paying has been the hardest thing for me. I am on disability myself. I also do respite foster care, and it’s \$32 a day. We are trying to make sure Jim gets to the doctor, to make sure he gets food. He just wants to work. It’s all he talks about. It is driving him crazy.”

Peggy added, “My heart bleeds for Jim and for anyone else that has to go through this. How does anyone get away with making people work all day, around the clock, 12-13 hours a shift, on top of being hurt and in such pain? How can they get away with that? As far as I know there was no real communication from the UAW. Never. I don’t think he was ever called; they never asked how he was doing, nothing. It’s like what they did to Danny Walters, it breaks my heart. How can they get away with this? It blows me away. I can’t imagine that this kind of thing is happening nowadays.”

Jim Kaelin’s story is just the latest in a shocking series of reports by workers over the abuse suffered because of Dana Inc. and the UAW. Across the country, Dana workers are beginning to conclude that enough is enough.

A March 7 statement published by the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee demands the rehiring of all fired workers with back pay, as well as workers’ control over hiring and firing at all Dana plants. The statement concludes:

“An injury to one is an injury to all. The company and UAW use tactics to distract and divide autoworkers, many times through our roles and positions at the workplace. But we, as the working class, share the same interests. We come from different ethnic backgrounds, races, religions, nationalities, yet we all share the same oppressor.

“To all workers at Dana and beyond: We have the right to abolish the UAW bureaucracy because it takes our dues money and is not representing us. Therefore we the rank and file must begin representing ourselves.”

If you are an autoworker who would like to join the rank-and-file committee, text or call 248-602-0936 today.



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