

“We’re replaceable parts to GM, not human”: Workers react to accident at Flint Truck plant

GM Flint Truck Assembly Rank-and-File Committee
20 April 2023

Are you an autoworker? We want to hear from you about any safety issues in your plant. Fill out the form below. We will protect your anonymity. To contact or join the committee, email gm.flint.rfc@gmail.com.

The statement issued by the GM Flint Truck Assembly Rank-and-File Committee alerting workers about the near disaster on the chassis line Monday night has been widely circulated in the plant. A young temporary part-time (TPT) worker barely escaped being crushed when a large piece of machinery fell from the ceiling, missing him by only a few inches.

The machine, known as a prop shaft secure gun, is connected to an overhead beam and is used by workers to simultaneously fasten a series of bolts on trucks passing on the assembly line. The entire machine, which weighs between 200-300 pounds, broke free from the bolts that were holding it and came crashing down.

Despite previous complaints by workers, nothing had been done by management or the UAW officials to make sure the machine was properly secured.

According to workers on the shop floor, the damaged prop shaft gun was removed from the line shortly after the accident and later remounted during the lunch break the same day. Because workers had been alerted to the unsafe conditions by the rank-and-file committee and had gathered at the scene, management decided to attach an additional safety cable, which was not there at the time of the accident, the following day.

This elementary measure would never have been taken if matters had been left to UAW Local 598 officials. Left to their own devices, the officials on the joint UAW-GM “safety committees” would have ignored this dangerous incident and written it off as just another day at the office.

But workers would not allow it. Nevertheless, the unsafe conditions throughout the plant and the auto industry remain. As one worker told our committee, “On my line there are safety concerns that have been voiced multiple times and been escalated. But they get shot down or the can just gets kicked down the road, until it’s forgotten.”

After hearing about the near disaster, another GM Flint worker told us, “Workers have issues all the time about unsafe

conditions. When we returned to work after Christmas break, one of the girls had to walk in front of the path of a forklift carrying a rack. She said it was unsafe, and she was concerned about being hit. She was told by management, ‘Just go this way and that way.’ When she continued to question the safety of the situation, she was told, ‘We’re giving you a direct order to comply.’ She was told by the union that all she could do when there’s a direct order to comply, is to ‘comply under protest.’ This is BS!”

A temporary part-time worker (TPT) who works in the Trim Department said, “Before GM, I worked at non-union shops. As a temp at GM, it’s not much different than non-union shops. We pay union dues, and we have no protection or rights. I was glad to see the information about the accident in chassis. We need to know what is going on.”

The worker added, “My part of the plant is much newer than the chassis area. I had to walk through chassis while I was going through my orientation. It was spooky! That side looks like it has not been renovated since the 1940’s or 50’s. The ceilings were bad with massive amounts of flaking paint, and the bathrooms were nasty. At the entrance the steps are old, chipped and crumbling. It’s an accident ready to happen. General Motors is making so much money; workers should not be working in those conditions.

“I’ve been a TPT for two and a half years. Safety training is kind of rushed through. It’s probably the briefest part of our orientation. I had a safety guy tell me during a break once that he would have liked more time to train us. But there’s a big push to get us working on the line; the temps do quite a bit. Trim is at the beginning of the line. By the time the line moves to chassis, everything gets more complex, there’s more to do and more to miss. This is the dilemma.”

A veteran worker on the chassis line added, “They don’t keep up the maintenance of our tools we use daily. So, I’m wondering what is the condition of this structure, which was built in 1947? Forklifts are being driven on the floor above us, and the ceiling is in a state of disrepair. There are areas where we can see rebar, you can see metal bars embedded in the concrete ceiling.”

Last year, he said, the brick wall of the south tunnel was buckling for a few weeks until it was patched up.

“Normally nothing would have happened to the machine that fell from the ceiling, safety-wise. They would have just gotten it up and running. I feel because the Rank-and-File Committee published their statement and it was read and circulated in the plant, the company took some more safety precautions. But many other machines have similar issues, so the safety problem has not gone away.”

A member of the GM Lansing Rank-and-File Committee also commented on the accident at the Flint plant. “Flint workers are dealing with a lot when a kid is almost killed. Here we have safety issues too. Fluorescent lights hang on the ceiling without covers. At GM Lansing Delta Assembly, they were rebuilding racks, drilling and welding, and the smoke filled the entire plant.

“When we complain about anything, they just move you to another line. Workers who complain about safety or harassment are put on harder jobs. The union doesn’t do anything, so why are we paying them? People at work are aware of our committee especially since the union is not supporting them. The union is so worried about people opposing them instead of helping workers.

“They are writing people up for safety issues, likely because it’s a contract year. They sent one worker home because he refused to sign into a job, since he was not trained. He was sent home without pay. He is not certified or trained to do the job, it is a safety issue.”

Another worker from the GM Lansing Rank-and-File Committee added, “It’s out of hand at our plant. We had one incident where a worker had an asthma attack on the line because he was sent back to work with smoke all around the plant.

“Years ago at Lansing Delta, a worker had a heart attack on the line. Management put a curtain on him and kept the line moving. He survived because he was eventually revived. The line should’ve been stopped. We’re replaceable parts to GM, not human. Workers need to access the rank-and-file committee statements to fight. Like in Flint, we need to know the conditions to know how to solve this.

“What happened at GM Flint is what is happening to the entire working class, not just GM. We keep going in circles with the union. People at work are talking about France and the power all of us workers have and why we need to come together. We outnumber the ruling class.

“Imagine when the entire working class is fed up. What the rich is doing does not make sense. We have to take control. People have to understand if we were making decisions, they would be the best decisions. Sure, we would need engineers and technicians, but ultimately it will be our labor. We should have a say-so in how things are run.”

For decades, the UAW has gone along with mass layoffs and the destruction of work rules, which make deadly accidents

inevitable. The number of skilled trades jobs and classifications has been slashed, making it virtually impossible to keep up with maintenance and repair.

We urge our co-workers to join and build rank-and-file committees at all workplaces so workers on the shop floor have control of line speed and safety conditions. We urge workers to collect reports about unsafe conditions and to notify the rank-and-file committee in your plant so the information can be communicated and shared.

The GM Flint Truck Assembly Rank-and-File Committee encourages workers at the plant to maintain their vigilance and oppose the continued sacrifice of workers’ lives and limbs for corporate profit.

We call on workers to demand:

- A full investigation into the April 17th near-fatal accident on the chassis line. Because no confidence can be placed in management or the UAW bureaucracy, this investigation must be led by trusted workers, nominated and elected by the rank and file.

- This committee must have full access to management’s maintenance and repair records concerning the prop shaft gun and similar machines and a record of all prior warnings and safety grievances concerning these machines.

- All incidents involving unsafe conditions, accidents or injuries must be immediately communicated to all workers on the shop floor.

- This committee should have access to all building inspection reports concerning the condition of the structure built in 1947 where the chassis line is housed.

Our committee fights for the abolition of the UAW apparatus and all of its labor-management committees and the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor. To protect workers’ lives, these rank-and-file committees must fight for workers’ control over line speed and all health and safety matters.

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