

Fumes force evacuation of Stellantis Mack Avenue plant in Detroit

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Are you a Detroit autoworker? Tell us what you think about Wednesday's incident. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The day shift at the Stellantis Mack Avenue assembly plant was sent home Wednesday after workers complained of fumes inside the facility of unknown source.

Workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* said that they had gotten little information from either plant management or the United Auto Workers about the source or nature of the smell inside the plant, which caused eye irritation and other complaints. Multiple workers also told the WSWWS that several workers collapsed on the line due to the fumes.

The incident follows the issuance of yet another fine against Stellantis by state of Michigan environmental authorities for spreading paint solvent odors into the neighborhood around the Detroit Assembly Complex – Mack plant (DACM). Those living in the struggling, mostly African American, working-class neighborhood near the plant have complained for years that the paint odors are making them sick.

It also follows a series of similar incidents in American factories. Last week, a fire broke out at the Dana auto parts plant in Warren, Michigan, filling the plant with smoke and fumes. Workers accuse management of having initially locked the doors, creating a delay in evacuating the plant, which was still ongoing by the time fire engines arrived on the scene.

In late March, six workers died in an explosion at a chocolate factory in Reading, Pennsylvania. Survivors reported earlier smelling gas in the facility but that management had refused to shut down production.

The Mack plant, supposedly one of the most state-of-the-art assembly plants in America, was opened in 2021

to much fanfare and builds the new Jeep Grand Cherokee. The state of Michigan handed Stellantis hundreds of millions in tax abatements and other subsidies for the plant, the first new auto assembly plant built in the city of Detroit in decades.

A worker leaving the Mack plant Wednesday told an *Autoworker Newsletter* reporter, “It smelt like burning rubber in there. I had to get out. I’m old and have respiratory issues.”

Another worker going in said, “They didn’t even inform us. It’s ridiculous. I’ve got breathing issues, too. All they want to do is keep production going. They don’t care about us.”

Another source reported that management had told workers it was just the normal welding smell. After that story fell through, they were told it was from a coolant leak. But workers on the floor said they were familiar with those smells, and it wasn’t any of those things.

A second shift worker said that his shift had briefly stopped production after complaining of fumes in the air. “People were standing on the blue line and said they were feeling irritation in their eyes. They shut down production, basically. It lasted 15 minutes. It was the second time I had seen something like that. The first time was during COVID.

“Management claimed OSHA [The Occupational Safety and Health Administration] had tested the air twice and it was safe. They threatened to fire anyone who didn’t get back to work.

“I think a lot of people were also angry because it was so hot inside the plant. It gets to be 95 degrees in there during the summer months. They usually don’t have the air on at all.”

A temporary part time worker on day shift told the WSWWS that he had lost a whole day’s pay because of the incident. “They said they were trying to identify

where the smell was coming from. The only thing they knew was that it was chemical smell in the building and didn't know what it was. I couldn't tell what it was.

"OK, so you don't know what it is, at the same time you want us to go in to work and then send us home and not get paid for it? And it's not our fault. You have to pay for gas to go to and from work after they say there is nothing they can do about it? We didn't get paid anything. That doesn't make sense.

"We are struggling to pay our bills because we have this one job to survive on. We were there for close to two hours. When I tried talking to the union, they were busy doing something else. People are mad. We have to feed our families."

There was considerable speculation among workers about the source of the fumes. Some said a chemical spill, others a fire or even a gas leak. The lack of definite information created considerable confusion and anger.

The second shift worker said, "If they had told us what was going on, workers wouldn't have been so upset. We never saw a union official all day. We have the most useless local union."

"Of course OSHA says everything is fine. They say what management wants. They are a corrupt organization."

Workers have every right to be skeptical of management's claim that the fumes posed no danger to health. The fine slapped on Stellantis for polluting the neighborhood around the plant is the sixth citation issued against the company over the issue of paint fumes. The company has also been cited two times for the plant exceeding limits for Volatile Organic Compound emissions.

The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy fined the company \$136,832 for the most recent violation. Stellantis has also received similar citations for emissions at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant north of the city.

The state is also requiring Stellantis to install a new "regenerative thermal oxidizer," system to remove paint fumes, and to have it up and running no later than June 30, 2023. Stellantis had claimed that the problem with the fumes had been already resolved.

Stellantis reportedly responded to the citations by requesting that the state approve higher emission levels at Warren Truck and Mack.

According to an April *Craw*'s report in *Business*, a child living in a home near the DACM plant was diagnosed with "reactive airway disease" earlier this year. A medical report on the child's condition cited "strong odors or fumes, such as from exhaust, paint, or chemicals" as contributing factors

The second shift worker said, "They have absolutely destroyed air quality in the neighborhood. The fine is just pennies—just a business expense for Stellantis. The paint smell is always there.

"We are used to it. We always get an air quality warning: 'may be dangerous for sensitive groups.' What does that mean exactly? Who knows?"



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