Forklift safety expert calls for independent investigation into catastrophic accident at GM Flint Assembly

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Following the August 13 forklift accident that left a worker at General Motors' Flint Truck Assembly plant with "life-altering" injuries, questions remain about the workplace conditions which contributed to the accident.

The worker was struck by a reversing forklift on the box line between 3:00 a.m. and 4:30 a.m. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that one of her legs may have been severed and the other badly mangled. She had reportedly signed her retirement papers only days before the accident. GM kept production running as she lay bleeding and waiting for emergency responders.

The accident occurred amid a broader wave of deaths and injuries in the auto industry. A memorial will be held Saturday for James Brasher, a 57-year-old Stellantis worker who died August 1 at the Center Line National Parts Distribution Center. Brasher, who had more than 30 years' seniority, fell approximately 25 feet into a trash bin while discarding decommissioned equipment from the second floor.

Robert Burch, an independent heavy equipment accident consultant with more than 40 years of experience, including forklift safety, has frequently served as an expert witness in accident litigation. He emphasized to the WSWS that explanations for such accidents focusing only on the individuals involved were totally inadequate. A serious investigation, he insisted, must examine the conditions surrounding the operator and the movement of material throughout the plant.

"Forklift drivers are routinely placed under pressure. It's about moving products quickly and making profits," he explained. "I've seen it time and time again where forklift operators are pressed to move as quickly as possible," he said. "Yes, there are rules about operating forklifts, but production demands affect how work is carried out."

Across all industries, deaths and injuries involving forklifts are incredibly common. In 2024, 84 workers died in incidents involving forklifts, order pickers or powered platform trucks. During 2023 and 2024, these vehicles were involved in an estimated 25,110 injury cases resulting in days away from work, job restrictions or transfers. Around 60 percent required at least one day away from work.

At Flint Truck Assembly, workers reported that the plant is producing approximately 380 trucks per shift. GM added a sixth production day in June, requiring thousands of workers to labor mandatory overtime. The plant operates around the clock on three shifts, producing approximately 1,100 Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra heavy-duty pickups each day.

In 2023, GM announced more than $1 billion in investments at Flint Assembly and Flint Metal Center, including $788 million to prepare Flint Assembly for the next generation of heavy-duty pickups. GM's 2025 annual report states that its "near-term profitability" depends particularly on full-size pickups and SUVs, which generate its highest margins.

This financial pressure from Wall Street creates conditions in which accidents are inevitable. Between 2021 and 2024, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 87 fatalities in the auto industry. At least three of those were accidents involving forklifts.

At Flint Truck Assembly in January 2020, a 50-year-old worker became trapped between a vehicle-conveyance carriage and the conveyor system. He suffered severe trauma to both legs and required multiple surgeries.

MIOSHA (Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration) initially fined the company $16,100, but a formal settlement deleted two out of three citations, and the remaining violation was reduced, and GM paid $3,780.

Questions workers must raise

Burch said an investigation should examine not only the actions of the forklift operator but the conditions under which the vehicle was being operated. "In some instances, it's not possible to see everything behind the operator," he said.

This raises an immediate question about what safety equipment was installed on the forklift involved in the Flint accident. Burch said proximity and collision-warning systems can be installed on forklifts, but they do not necessarily come as standard equipment. "They're not automatically there, I don't believe, from the manufacturer, unless they are specifically ordered and paid for," he said.

The contrast with the vehicles produced at Flint Assembly is striking. GM advertises the 2026 Chevrolet Silverado HD with forward collision alerts, automatic emergency braking, front

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pedestrian braking and other driver-assistance systems. Buyers can order as many as eight cameras providing up to 14 views, including blind-zone and backing assistance.

Speed can also be controlled mechanically. “The company could put governors on those forklifts so they can only travel at, let’s say, seven miles an hour, Burch said, “but they’re not going to do that.”

Investigators should establish what equipment was installed on the forklift, whether it was functioning and what the operator could actually see along the route where the accident occurred.

Burch also stressed the importance of examining the operator’s training. “Number one, I would inquire about the individual operator who was operating a forklift, his specific training,” he said. Investigators should establish, he continued, “who provided the training, when, where and how.”

Training records alone therefore do not settle the question of whether an operator was prepared for the actual conditions in which the equipment was being used. Burch cited a case he is currently involved in where an employer pointed to an online certificate as evidence that an operator had been trained.

Burch said investigators should determine “if there have been near misses in the plant, if there have been additional accidents in the plant in the last few years.” He said they should review the plant’s OSHA 300 log for previous incidents.

The investigation into the latest accident should determine whether there have been previous forklift-pedestrian near misses, complaints about traffic conditions or warnings about visibility and speed, and what action GM and UAW officials took in response.

Burch said effective prevention also requires an investigation independent of the company.

“The best method of prevention is audits,” he said. “You have to have a good safety inspector, a safety officer who is ... really independent of the company, because if they’re working for the company, they’re going to do what the company tells them.”

He added that an outside auditor could enter the plant and “give an honest opinion.”

But such an investigation will not be carried out by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy.

The current UAW-GM contract establishes joint union-management health and safety committees which examine major incidents and participate in accident investigations. The broader funding agreement states that joint programs are intended to make GM and its employees “more competitive in a global economy” and to promote labor-management cooperation.

The contract also restricts access to the results of this work. Safety survey results remain GM property and cannot be released without the company’s written permission. Photographs and videos are confidential. Reports from joint plant audits also remain company property.

Even when a joint committee member concludes that an imminent danger exists, a machine or operation is removed from service only “upon joint recommendation.” Management must agree.

A separate contract document establishes a joint “Pedestrian/In-Plant Vehicle Team.” Its assigned tasks include keeping pedestrians and vehicles separate, maintaining clear aisles, eliminating blind corners and improving driver visibility. The contract identifies a notebook and CD produced in June 2003 as the team’s principal guide to best practices. The 2023 agreement promises to update the publication and provide additional tools.

During the interview, Burch was asked whether a joint UAW-management investigation could be considered independent if union officials themselves support management’s drive to increase production and keep the line moving.

“I agree,” he said when told that under such conditions the UAW apparatus could not be considered independent.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls for an investigation conducted independently of GM management and the UAW apparatus, with the direct participation of workers inside Flint Assembly.

Such an investigation should collect testimony from workers familiar with the accident and the conditions in the area where it occurred. It should document previous near misses and safety complaints, the equipment installed on forklifts, training practices, production and material-delivery pressures and the actions taken by management and the joint safety committees. Workers who provide information must be protected from retaliation.

Workers should seek answers to the following questions:

• What safety equipment was installed on the forklift involved in the accident? What mirrors or other visibility aids were available?

• Who trained the operator? When and where did the training take place, and what did it consist of?

• How much pressure are forklift drivers and other material-handling workers under to keep parts moving and maintain production? What is the impact of job cuts, cost-cutting and speedup?

• How many forklift-pedestrian near misses or similar incidents have occurred at Flint Assembly?

• Had workers previously complained about visibility, traffic, speed or other hazards in this area?

Workers cannot rely on GM or the joint UAW-management committees to obtain the answers to these and other questions, let alone hold accountable those responsible for sacrificing workers’ lives and limbs to corporate profit. Rank-and-file workers themselves need access to the facts surrounding the accident and the conditions that produced it.

The WSWS calls on GM Flint workers with information about the accident, previous near misses or conditions inside the plant to contact us. All submissions will be treated confidentially.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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