“There was no lockout/tagout system”: Worker from the floor details conditions behind Bradley Clouse’s death at Astemo Berea plant in Kentucky

Milo Stevens
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It has been more than two months since auto parts worker Bradley Clouse was crushed to death at the Astemo America plant in Berea, Kentucky. New accounts from a worker who was on the factory floor when Clouse was killed, together with the analysis of an experienced workplace safety expert, point to the same conclusion: the Astemo Americas plant was operating without a functioning lockout/tagout system, the very protection that would have prevented the horrific death of the 33-year-old maintenance worker.

Clouse was killed early on the morning of Wednesday, September 2, one day after Governor Andy Beshear visited the plant to celebrate a $112 million expansion. He was crushed inside a machine while attempting to stop it from leaking varnish.

A worker who was working nearby spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on condition of anonymity. He described a workplace where the most basic safety procedures were never implemented. “Astemo doesn’t use a lockout/tagout system at all,” he said. “We weren’t trained on one, so I don’t think that’s a thing there.”

He described safety training that lasted “at most 20 minutes,” the bulk of which consisted of the trainer “showing us different spider bites that could occur from spiders in the factory.” Lockout/tagout may have been mentioned in passing, he said, but “we never physically practiced it or anything like that. Not once. I can’t think of any machine I’d ever seen a tag on even.” The only additional training he received came the day workers returned to the floor after Clouse’s death.

The machine in question was pneumatic, ie., powered by compressed air, and applied a plastic varnish to coat copper elements inside. It had been leaking varnish onto the floor throughout the time maintenance worked on it. The worker said the machine is known to break down at least once a week and had malfunctioned several times in the days before the incident. About two hours into the first shift, technicians were sent to work on it. Clouse climbed through the bottom of the machine, unaware that it was still releasing pressure, and was crushed when his upper body was caught in the machinery.

What followed, the worker said, revealed Astemo’s priorities. “I did not hear one of them say ‘call 911.’ It was ‘call the safety manager,’” he said. He could not confirm it, but he believed that it was Clouse’s wife, Chelsea, who ultimately made the 911 call.

The company’s response after the death, the worker said, was “very poor.” The plant shut down for the remainder of Wednesday, and first shift did not return until the following Tuesday, though other shifts resumed within a day or two. When workers came back, the company’s gesture of consolation was a gift card from Chick-fil-A. “I just feel like it was very insulting. I don’t even mean to me personally, I mean directly to Bradley,” he said.

What a real lockout/tagout program requires

Robert Burch, a health and safety professional with 40 years of experience who previously spoke to the WSWS about the forklift accident at GM’s Flint Truck Assembly plant, did not visit the Berea plant. But drawing upon his experience, Burch explained how a properly implemented lockout/tagout program is designed to prevent workers from being exposed to hazardous machinery, concluding that such a program “would have prevented the death of Bradley Clouse.”

A genuine program, Burch explained, must account for every source of hazardous energy, “electrical, pneumatic,

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liquid…anything under pressure which could release and either trap or strike someone." Each component must be identified "alphabetically or numerically so the wrong component is not locked out and the correct one is identified," he said. The worker's account shows that none of this existed at Astemo. Workers would simply turn a key, wait for the pneumatic arm to stop moving, and step into the cage. "No locks, no tag, nothing."

Burch noted that in his four decades in the field, being told to bypass safety protocols to meet production targets is "not uncommon." He recalled a manager at a large manufacturing plant who dismissed safety as "smoke and mirrors," asking, "Doesn't everybody know that? It's just common sense."

The Berea plant, operating first at Hitachi Automotive Systems Americas and later as Hitachi Astemo Americas at the same 301 Mayde Road address, has been cited twice by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for violating the identical machine guarding standard, 29 CFR 1910.212(a)(1). A serious citation in 2016 was followed by a repeat citation in 2020, which the company contested and dragged out for nearly five years. The OSHA case was closed in November 2025, roughly nine months before Clouse's death.

The worker said the machine in question is still in operation and "still continues to break down." He also described the routine shortcuts that define work at the plant. Around the pneumatic arm, workers are supposed to erect a chain gate "around all sides…so nobody can wander in there and get hit." He said he had seen that done only "three times" during his time there.

The pace of work compounds the danger. Machines break down constantly, the worker said, and workers are then expected to "catch up" or face mandatory overtime. "If they break down, we're going to have to try and catch up. And if we don't catch up we're going to ask for it, overtime." Supervisors, he said, "make safety decisions based on whether or not it will be an issue for them later." They're thinking, he said, was "we're going to solve it now and try not to tell anybody. If there's going to be an issue later, we might take the proper protocol to handle it."

The worker said he came to the WSWS because he did not feel "proper action was taken to investigate [Clouse's] death or how the company could have handled it." He was struck too by how the corporate media framed the death, "reporting it as a worker being found dead next to a machine instead of a worker killed by a machine."

Clouse's death is one of many in a mounting toll across American industry. Gregory Knopf was killed at Ford's Sharonville Transmission Plant in March of this year when a press machine activated during maintenance. In the weeks since Clouse was killed, the slaughter has continued: a contract technician died at an Applied Materials facility in Austin, Texas in early September, and in late October, Henry Antonio Marmol Martinez, a 52-year-old maintenance mechanic and father of six, was crushed to death at the McWane Ductile Foundry in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, a plant OSHA had certified under its highest "Star" safety designation.

These deaths are not accidents; they are the predictable product of an industry that subordinates human life to the drive for profit. The 80,000 workers employed by Astemo in Japan, Taiwan, the US, Mexico, UK, Spain and other countries produced nearly $400 million in profits in the fiscal year that ended in March 2026. Jointly owned by Honda Motor Company, JIC Capital and Hitachi, Astemo is listed as the world's 25th largest auto components manufacturer, producing chassis, braking, steering, engine-management, and electric vehicle components.

The Berea plant does not have a union. Although the United Auto Workers union has a significant presence in Louisville and other industrial locations in Kentucky, after decades of collaborating with the major automakers to drive down wages and conditions at supplier plants approximately 80 percent of the 600,000 workers employed in the US auto parts industry are non-union. Astemo made 31 percent of its $14 billion in worldwide revenue in the Americas.

The only way to stop the sacrifice of workers' lives for corporate profit is for workers to organize themselves, independent of the companies and the union apparatus alike. Workers at Astemo and throughout the auto parts industry must build rank-and-file committees with the power to stop production when conditions are unsafe. Rank-and-file committees cannot be subordinated to the Democratic and Republican parties, which celebrate "investment" while workers are killed on the job.

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