Automotive Worker Dies in Hot Plant

INCIDENT

Teresa Pickard, 42, went to work on the welding line at Sewon America, an auto parts plant in LaGrange, Georgia at 6:30 am on Wednesday, May 29th, 2013.

Sewon America, located about 70 miles southwest of Atlanta, and a dozen other plants supply a Kia automobile assembly plant in West Point, Georgia, which opened in 2009. Together, the suppliers account for more than 14,000 manufacturing jobs.

She never came home. Pickard complained of chest pains. An ambulance was summoned to the plant about two hours after her shift started, and she died either on the way to the hospital or shortly after arriving there.

NEED TO KNOW

The Atlanta Journal constitution newspaper opined that the "list of workers injured at Sewon is as gruesome as it is long." Teresa Pickard was one of these workers.

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

Ten days after Pickard's death, Sewon America released a statement claiming that " a thorough investigation and preliminary findings from the appropriate sources indicate that her death was not work related." An autopsy by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, released five months later, states that Pickard died of natural causes – a heart attack caused by high blood pressure.

Immediately following the incident, however, workers from the plant complained anonymously to U.S. OSHA about excessive heat inside the facility. The agency opened an investigation.

On June 29, one month after Pickard died, about 50 workers and supporters held a demonstration outside the plant to protest

reports of extreme heat, lack of access to water, and other unsafe conditions.

Following news of Pickard's death and reports of complaints from employees inside the plant, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution undertook a detailed investigation of Sewon America's safety record.

Among the newspaper's findings:

The list of workers injured at Sewon is as gruesome as it is long. Arms and legs lacerated by steel parts. Fingers crushed by machines and pallets. Eyeballs sunburned by welding rays. A scrotum punctured by a "sharp object."

Few manufacturing plants in Georgia, and none in the state's burgeoning auto industry, have been inspected, cited and fined as often as Sewon by the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

From the time the plant opened through the end of last year, ambulance drivers responded to 23 "trauma" calls –cuts, falls, head injuries, fist fights, arms crushed or stuck in machines –at Sewon.

Sewon has been inspected nine times [by US OSHA] and cited for 18 violations. Two of the violations, for welding flash burns and insufficient protective gear, were "willful," or committed by Sewon "with plain indifference to, or intentional disregard for, employees' safety and health," according to OSHA. The feds also cited the company for numerous "serious violations" in which a substantial probability exists for death or serious injury.

OSHA also opined about the list of newspaper findings by saying:

"For a single facility at the same location performing the same type of work, that is unusual compared to other establishments," acting OSHA deputy regional administrator Ben Ross told the Journal-Constitution. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that employees are still unhappy with working conditions and still filing complaints."

But the biggest impact of Teresa Pickard is on her family. She left behind a husband two daughters Shundrick and Shaquitt. Their collective loss eclipses all the fines, costs legal fees, that Sewon had to pay. Money paid by Sewon would never replace the life of Teresa.

STATISTICS

The National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH) is the largest open-access data set of individual workplace fatalities ever collected in the United States. Two-thirds of the cases include names of the deceased workers.

With data from 2015, the Worker Fatality Database has more identifying information about workers and the circumstances of their deaths and is more current than the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI), released annually by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The most recent CFOI, released in April 2015, reports workplace deaths from calendar year 2013. It includes comprehensive aggregate and statistical data but does not have information on individual workers.

BLS data have shown more than 4,500 workplace deaths from traumatic events in each of the past five years. In addition, an estimated 50,000 workers die each year from long term occupational hazards, such as exposure to toxic chemicals and other hazards.

Teresa’s situation is one of those workplace deaths from traumatic events. Her death is likely a result of excessive heat in the workplace. She perished like other men and women who perish every day harvesting our food, building our homes, extracting our fuel and doing all the other jobs that move our economy.

The U.S. Workers Fatality Database shows death so fair in 2015 from 49 states as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Workers have died in 2015 when crushed by machinery, poisoned by carbon monoxide, falling from heights, buried by trench collapses, and from other causes.

PREVENTION

In the present case, there is more than a strong probability that the reason Teresa Pickard died was exposure to excessive heat inside the facility. In the face of extreme heat, lack of access to water there are steps to take to ensure a safe work environment. These are:

- conduct periodic safety inspections.
- provide workers training on hazard awareness like excessive heat.
- ensure that there is access to drinkable water within easy reach of workers.
- provide periodic breaks when there is excessive heat in the workplace.

The key to workplace safety is knowledge and training. Employees must develop and provide training and information programs to all workers who were exposed t the hazards that existed at the Sewon America Plant.