

“This is intolerable”: US workers face scorching temperatures without protection during heat dome

Our reporters
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Are you being affected by the high temperatures at your workplace? We want to hear from you. Fill out the form at the bottom of this article to tell us what conditions are like. All submissions will remain anonymous.

With more than 100 million Americans currently affected by high temperatures, working conditions are becoming dangerous across the country.

Heat-related illnesses and deaths are becoming increasingly common in the US, especially amid rising temperatures due to global warming. In 2022, 51 people died due to workplace exposure to extreme temperatures, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The government also counted 33,890 work-related heat injuries and illnesses involving days away from work between 2011 and 2020.

Factories typically have no air conditioning, meaning temperatures can often surge past 100 °F (37 °C). One auto parts worker at the Dana factory in Pottstown, Pennsylvania sent a picture to the WSWs of a thermometer in his plant reading 112 degrees.

In Detroit, Michigan, the heat wave was compounded by mass power outages due to rain storms. Approximately 36,000 people were without electricity, and therefore air conditioning in most cases, on a day when the heat index reached as high as 95 degrees.

A worker at Ford's Rouge complex near Detroit said, "The plant is hot as hell. The day shift on the final line were sent home early, at 3pm."

It was not clear why management cut production an hour early, he said, adding:

I doubt the United Auto Workers had anything to do with it. They haven't said a word about the heat. There are fans around, but we have to get our own water.

In the months since last year's sellout contract, there have been multiple injuries and deaths at the sprawling industrial complex, where workers have been subjected to a regime of forced overtime and speedup. This includes Tywaun Long, a 46-year-old worker who died of a heart attack on the assembly line in April.

One Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) worker said that his

coworker was taken out on a stretcher Saturday due to the heat.

He added:

We got up to 100 a couple days. They took one out on a stretcher on Saturday. They are not passing out water or anything.

Another CAP worker said:

It's hot, sweaty and uncomfortable! I'm tired of that every year. 100 degrees it feels like. And Ford is comfortable with their employees working in these conditions.

A Stellantis worker at the company's Detroit Assembly Complex said:

We have been told we can't have plug-in fans, just as the heat has reached over 90 degrees! That is unfair and unacceptable! And why doesn't the job provide huge fans on the ceilings or something!?! Not everyone can afford one of their own.

A General Motors worker in Flint, Michigan, said:

It's honestly hard to breathe. This is intolerable. I am lucky enough to have an air conditioner nearby, but my shirt is soaked in sweat still. Everyone looks miserable and it's hard to move around because it's muggy and so hot.

One woman posted on Facebook, "How many people have to pass out before they close the shop?"

At the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania,

management is running the plant at full tilt after several recent down days due to parts shortages. One worker told the WSWS:

They are running full tilt in the worst heat. It wouldn't surprise me if the company is intentionally stressing workers in order to drive higher paid workers at risk into injury or worse. And the UAW is complicit in all of this.

Another Mack Trucks worker said:

You'd think they'd have a little mercy. They don't. They could care less about us. I don't think the line has been down all night. All they care about is making money off of us.

His co-worker added:

The plant has been 90 degrees or hotter every day this week that we've been in. It's partially this hot because they have this plant painted dark grey to look modern. It just makes it hotter in here. There was an injury on day shift, they have something up on the TV about it being a slip and fall. Everyone is exhausted, that's why there's injuries.

Delivery and logistics workers are also being heavily affected. This includes workers at UPS, where both warehouses and delivery vehicles have no air conditioning. A sellout contract pushed through last year by the Teamsters claimed to guarantee air conditioning for drivers, but this only applies to new vehicles. Given that older vehicles can remain in service for decades, this means the vast majority of drivers will go without air conditioning for years to come.

A UPS warehouse worker from Southern California sent a photo from inside his facility. He wrote:

The conveyor belt is full of junk. The facility is covered in a thick layer of dust. Obviously, the air quality is poor. Stuffing 600-900 packages in these trailers is back-breaking work.

They haven't changed out the water filters in like two years. Asking them for water is like they're doing you the greatest favor, and they bring only one bottle if they have it. Most of the time they say they don't have it. But I have seen literally pallets of water in the front offices, and they choose not to give us any.

A gig worker for Uber Eats and Instacart in eastern Washington said:

I have to do deliveries for the next three days using my own vehicle. I can't run the air conditioning because it uses up a lot of gas, and I can't afford enough gas if I run the A/C. I don't have A/C where I live either. I'm over 60 years old.

Stacy, an Amazon worker in Detroit, told the WSWS:

It's been over 90 degrees inside the warehouse. Everybody is complaining how hot it is, and there are no fans. The fans used to be connected to the plastic wrap they stuff the boxes with. In order to save money, they are using paper now, so they took away the fans.

The only air conditioning is in the break rooms. We are ready to call [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration] to see if it's legal for them to keep us from taking time off even when you are sick. If you don't have any UPT [unpaid time off] and you go to the hospital, you can lose your job.

Postal workers are also heavily affected by high temperatures. Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of the death of letter carrier Eugene Gates in Dallas, Texas. Gates, who was 66 years old, collapsed on a day when the heat index in the city reached 113 °F (45 °C). Gates had recently been written up for the first time in his nearly four-decade career with the US Postal Service, a result of the invasive new TIAREAP monitoring system.

A Detroit letter carrier said, "I almost melted to death. It's hot. When the rain came, it cooled off a little, but the mail got wet and my bag got heavier to carry." Commenting on the bipartisan plans to cut more jobs at USPS, she said, "I don't know how long a future we have. We need to have money for the things we need here, not for war."



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