



Chemicals, mold, bats, broken bones: Workers concerned over safety at BlueOval SK plant

By: Olivia Evans and Connor Giffin for the Louisville Courier-Journal

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GLENDAL, Ky. — When Amanda Johnson, the first production supervisor hired at the massive BlueOval SK Battery Park, started her job in 2023, the single mom of a child with autism called it an “answered prayer.”

The job provided a pay increase and an opportunity to play a role in the growing electric vehicle industry.

In her 19 months at the plant, she went beyond her job description by creating tools to track cleaning and safety measures, advocating for other workers and making period bags for female coworkers during the construction phase, when only portable toilets were available.

But in January, managers terminated Johnson’s at-will employment.

She believes her firing was retaliation for speaking up about safety concerns, including workplace injuries and hospitalizations, and questioning management’s anti-union strategy in the new battery factory.

While currently seeking legal retribution through the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, she remains worried about the wellbeing of her former coworkers.

Employees have filed a slew of occupational safety and health complaints about the facility with authorities — often multiple per month — prompting state investigations. As of April 16, officials had open investigations related to 15 complaints.

The Courier Journal reviewed thousands of pages tied to those investigations, in addition to photos and employee-provided MyChart medical records.

The review found: dozens of workplace injuries; hospitalizations related to respiratory issues; unshakeable mold contamination; a bat-infested training facility; blocked emergency exit doors; and chemical exposure risks.

After two employees wrote an op-ed in the The Courier Journal describing their safety concerns at the

plant, BlueOval SK began publishing advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, featuring an unidentified person calling some of the workers' claims in the piece "inaccuracies" and "blatant lies."

Contractors and BlueOval SK workers said they feared termination for speaking up or filing complaints to state labor officials. One complainant "stated he would like to be kept anonymous to the company, because they terminate anyone who reports any issues," state records show.

"If you want to stay employed, you do what you're told," Chad Johnson, who works in the plant's quality module lab, told The Courier Journal.

State law prohibits discrimination or termination of workers for filing labor complaints or requesting a state inspection.

A contract worker left a voicemail with state officials, describing sickness and lung irritation from mold in the plant, and said his supervisor told him, "Don't tell anybody."

Workers believe health issues are tied to their job

Through interviews and by sharing medical records, BlueOval SK workers outlined how working conditions at the Glendale plant could be affecting their health.

"My health took a drastic turn when I started going in the plant every day," Amanda Johnson told The Courier Journal.

During her time working at the plant, she had to visit a doctor repeatedly. She was diagnosed by a Baptist Health provider with allergic rhinitis and developed mild intermittent asthma, medical records show.

Workers push to unionize Glendale plant

In Kentucky, safety concerns have been a driving factor in workers' efforts to unionize the Glendale plant with the United Auto Workers.

But BlueOval SK has worked hard to curb this effort.

Through advertisements on social media, in addition to paper flyers and other communication, the company has sought to convey a simple message: Working in the plant is safe, and the UAW is an unwelcome distraction.

"Bringing in a union would slow progress, force new training, and reset everything we've built," a Blue-Oval SK ad says. "Don't let unnecessary changes hold us back."

But some workers are hoping the UAW can help demand changes at the plant and accountability over safety.

"If you're not pro-union when you go there, it won't take very long," Chad Johnson said, "once you see what you have to put up with."

READ THE FULL INVESTIGATION ONLINE

A UNION FOR OUR HEALTH & SAFETY.



Read the Courier-Journal story here.

We are forming our union at BOSK to improve our working conditions and our lives. We've experienced hazardous conditions on the job, including the recent dangerous fire. Next time, we might not be lucky enough to avoid people getting hurt—or something even worse.

When we filed for a union election in January, we said health and safety was a top issue. Instead of respecting the workers' choice, Ford is delaying—and escalating its anti-union aggression.

We know we can win safety protections and life-changing raises and benefits like battery workers at Ultium Cells when they joined the UAW. It's time to win our fair share at BOSK.

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