

Co-workers say Detroit Fiat Chrysler worker died after being told to pay \$800 for ambulance ride to hospital

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The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter will host a call Thursday, December 5, 7 pm EST to discuss a strategy to fight the sellout of FCA workers and mobilize autoworkers against the global assault on jobs and wages. To register, go to: wsws.org/autocall.

On Saturday, November 23, family, friends and co-workers paid their final respects to 29-year-old Detroit autoworker D'Andre Brown, who died November 8 after leaving work complaining of chest pains.

The death of the young worker, employed at the Fiat Chrysler (FCA) Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, has left many unanswered questions. According to reports received by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, D'Andre worked on the "C" crew and died of an apparent heart attack after seeking hospital treatment.

According to co-workers, several weeks ago Brown went to the plant's medical office complaining of chest pains but was sent back to the assembly line. He returned on November 8 asking to be sent to the hospital but was told he would have to pay \$828 out of pocket for transport by an EMS vehicle. As another option he could sign a waiver and drive himself to the hospital, Brown was reportedly told. According to fellow workers, Brown drove himself to the hospital where he died shortly after his arrival. Later, a notice of his funeral was posted in the factory and on the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 7 Facebook page.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Wayne County Medical Examiner and the Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Administration (MIOSHA) seeking to obtain further details, including cause of death. Mike McElrath, director of communications for Wayne County, told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that an "autopsy is pending" over the death of D'Andre Brown and results should be known next week.

Neither the UAW nor Fiat Chrysler has released any statement on this tragedy.

A worker pointed out that the \$828 demanded by FCA for ambulance service was significantly more than the typical weekly paycheck for an in-progression or temporary worker. Whether earlier medical attention could have prevented Brown's death is a question deserving serious investigation. Brown's death follows a pattern of union and management collusion to cover up job-related deaths in the auto plants to protect management from potential legal action.

That same day, a fire on the assembly line at the Jefferson North plant caused an evacuation of the facility. Although the burning vehicle in the plant had the potential to cause serious injuries, the UAW and FCA did not issue any public statements, and the news media did not even report the incident.

The murky circumstances surrounding the death of Brown recall the still unknown causes of the death of young autoworker Davion Rice, age 24, who was found dead in the bathroom at the Ford Sterling Axle plant north of Detroit in the early morning hours of September 13, 2018. According to reports, he had complained to co-workers of feeling ill.

An autopsy performed by the Macomb County Medical Examiner and obtained by the *Autoworker Newsletter* listed the cause of death as cardiac arrhythmia, possibly due to a genetic defect. It also found a patent foramen ovale, a hole, between the left and right atria of the heart. The report noted, however, that, "these findings don't usually cause sudden death at this age."

As in the case of Brown, the UAW and Ford management never issued any statement on the death of Davion Rice. No explanation was given why the young worker had not been given medical attention if he was feeling ill or how long he had been dead before management even noticed. Although not yet confirmed, reports from Ford workers received by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* indicate the young worker may have hit his head on a piece of machinery as he left the assembly line.

The death of D'Andre Brown at Jefferson North also

recalls the death of 41-year-old Lee Duncan, a team leader, who died at the plant on May 6, 2015. MIOSHA initially told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* it was not investigating the incident, saying Duncan's death was due to unspecified "natural causes." Workers in the plant were told he had a "heart attack."

In fact, Duncan had been struck and killed by a vehicle while working on the assembly line. This fact was documented in subsequent MIOSHA findings. According to a report posted on MLive, "Duncan was working on a vehicle on the assembly line, which is on a moving conveyor belt. He was struck by a vehicle moving on the conveyor and thrown into a large toolbox where he received serious head trauma before falling to the floor. He died from traumatic brain injury."

There is no innocent explanation for how this could be mistaken for "natural causes." Apparently, management felt it could lie with impunity, confident that its paid stooges in the UAW would not contradict its assertions.

A token \$7,000 fine was levied by MIOSHA over the incident, but was appealed by Fiat Chrysler and later withdrawn by MIOSHA. The UAW posted a two-line note on Duncan's death on its website one year later.

In December that same year, just before Christmas, a contract worker, David Scott Ford, was crushed to death at the Ford Kansas City Assembly plant while working to repair a conveyor. For its part, the UAW sided with management, claiming the deceased worker "was injured inside a restricted area."

In another case, the UAW and management initially stonewalled the release of information about the death of 41-year-old electrician Ivan Bridgewater at Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville. An investigation later determined that Bridgewater died while attempting to repair a dock lock in a poorly lit area while working alone. A semi-trailer backed into the loading dock, which pinned him against a wall, crushing him.

Ford was eventually hit with token fines over the death, which it contested.

In all of these cases, joint UAW-management health and safety committees worked to cover up for management and present as little information as possible to workers. No serious penalties were ever assessed.

The experiences of workers confirm the allegations made in the lawsuit filed last week by General Motors (GM) against Fiat Chrysler. The lawsuit states, "The FCA Group bribery scheme also purchased efficiencies in handling potentially costly and disruptive labor grievances." Citing the sentencing memorandum for Nancy Johnson, a top aide to former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who negotiated the sellout 2015 UAW-FCA contract, the GM

lawsuit noted, "Instead of zealously pursuing union grievances and health and safety issues, senior officials of the UAW sought to line their own pockets with money and things of value provided to them by Fiat Chrysler."

However, instead of demanding damages be paid to Fiat Chrysler workers, GM is demanding billions of dollars for its own bank account, complaining it should have been allowed to take full advantage of the same corrupt deal with the UAW. In reality, GM and Ford enjoy most if not all the advantages the UAW has granted FCA. This is shown in the new four-year labor agreements at GM and Ford that will close plants, drive out higher-paid experienced workers and replace them with an unlimited number of temporary workers. These workers will be subjected to speed-up and unsafe conditions overseen by labor-management committees, which will test new technologies, including video monitoring, to drive workers even harder.

Whatever the immediate cause of the death of D'Andre Brown, autoworkers know that such tragedies are waiting to happen under conditions where management is trying to achieve ever-higher rates of production off the backs of workers, secure in the knowledge that the UAW will not raise any opposition. No confidence can be placed in the UAW, management or MIOSHA. Only the independent initiative of workers can break the conspiracy of silence, uncover the truth and prevent further slaughter on the shop floor.

This underscores the importance of the call by the *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees independent of the UAW to investigate all workplace deaths and accidents and fight for workers' control over production, including health and safety conditions. These committees should establish links between the major auto factories, parts supplies and workers internationally.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* will do everything to assist workers in this fight. We encourage workers who are familiar with the circumstances of D'Andre Brown's death, or other workplace safety issues, to contact us. All sources will be kept confidential.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact