

With COVID-19 spreading through auto plants, workers report death at FCA Warren Truck Assembly Plant

George Kirby
22 November 2020

Workers are reporting that a temporary part-time (TPT) worker died Saturday morning after contracting COVID-19 at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant (WTAP). Workers circulated messages and posts through social media and are demanding information about their coworker's death. However, management and the United Auto Workers have remained silent and the media has not yet reported the death.

The worker's name has yet to be released, but coworkers say he worked in the factory's paint shop, in a section known as the blackout area. The paint shop has been the scene of several COVID-19 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic. By April 28, at least four workers had died in the plant, which employs 2,600 workers, and one died at the adjacent Warren Stamping plant.

The death, if confirmed, is the outcome of a massive outbreak in the plant, reported by several workers to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. According to one worker, eight teams with six to eight workers each have been sent home due to the virus since September 28.

This is being systematically covered up by the company, with the full support of the UAW. Management has not provided any information on the spread of infections in the plant. "All we were told is the paint shop was being fogged for COVID-19 on Sunday last week," said one worker.

The latest death follows the revelation of the death of Mark Bianchi as a result of a major outbreak at nearby Sterling Heights Assembly Plant. The news of the death was only made public because of Facebook posting by a relative. Bianchi would be at least the fifth SHAP worker who has died from COVID-19. The other four

deaths occurred during the initial surge in March and April. However, the *World Socialist Web Site* has received unconfirmed reports of multiple other recent deaths at the plant. Another two workers died at the adjacent Sterling Stamping plant in the initial surge, and the plant has experienced dozens of new cases over the past two months.

Management, with the support of the UAW, is doing everything it can to keep production going even as the United States continues to shatter records for daily infections. They are determined to prevent a repeat of the shutdown of the industry in March through May, which was forced by a wildcat strike wave by autoworkers in rebellion against the UAW.

They are supported in this by both the Democrats and the Republicans. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer's three-week lockdown exempts manufacturing, even though her office has acknowledged the key role played by factories in the spread of the disease, and the Biden camp has declared it has no intention to carry out lockdowns nationally.

Warren Truck was an important early participant in the spring wildcats. Dozens of paint shop workers walked out on March 16, days after FCA workers across the Detroit River walked out in Windsor, Canada.

Even more so than full-time autoworkers, the conditions of TPTs are particularly precarious. Like their seniority coworkers on the line, they pay full union dues. Yet with little pay and benefits, they are vulnerable to economic destitution. The auto companies have been hiring TPTs by the hundreds during the pandemic to fill absences.

Even before the pandemic, the plight of TPTs was

graphically illustrated by the death of Jacoby Hennings, a young TPT worker at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant who worked a second job at Warren Truck.

"I'm in shock that we can stay open while the membership is still in harm's way," one Warren Truck worker said. "We're just waiting for the next viral infection. We are used just like a pair of old gloves. When someone is out, TPTs are used to plug in the gaps, while the virus continually spreads. They're just looking at it by dollars; how many trucks backlogged, how many lots aren't filled. We the membership, should be working together. The union has to give us the privilege to strike."

Another worker in the assembly side of the plant said, "After you quarantine and come back to work, you're looked as some kind of a heinous criminal [by the company]. Without testing you don't know who is infected. Someone could be running amok who is asymptomatic and spreading the infection. The company says you got it outside and brought it into the plant. The girl at SHAP who had it was told by the union to give names so they wouldn't have to miss work, spreading it across the membership, that's not right!" A UAW rep responded to workers' concerns by defending the company, claiming that it was hard to social distance in an auto plant.

The World Health Organization published a document in May, *Cleaning and disinfection of environmental surfaces in the context of COVID-19*, explaining cleaning and disinfecting surfaces for the virus. It describes that fumigating or misting a surface is ineffective in removing any contaminants from it. Rather, it has the adverse effects on workers, risking eye, respiratory and skin irritation that could cause further health effects. Responding to the WHO statement, the worker said, "Not surprised about the fogging. They don't care about us and they never have."

To stop the automakers' sacrificing of human lives for private profit, workers must take the situation into their own hands by joining with workers at other plants in building the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network. These committees fight for the immediate closure of nonessential production, with full pay guaranteed by the billions in profits made by the major corporations throughout the pandemic, and are formulating critical conditions for any return to work,

including daily universal testing and an end to management harassment.

To join or form a rank-and-file safety committee at your plant, and to report on the spread of the virus, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact