"It could have been prevented"

Sixth worker dies from COVID-19 at FCA's Warren Truck plant

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At least one more worker from the paint shop at FCA's Warren Truck Assembly Plant (WTAP) north of Detroit has died of COVID-19, according to reports from workers.

This is at least the sixth death from the virus at WTAP, following four deaths by April and that of newly hired Temporary Part Time (TPT) worker Stevie Brown last month, making WTAP the deadliest plant among the Detroit Three's factories in the US during the pandemic, based on the limited data on workers' deaths available. At least one worker at the adjacent Warren Stamping Plant also succumbed to COVID-19 in the spring.

Both the worker who died most recently, Stephanie Weems, and Stevie Brown worked in WTAP's paint department. According to workers, from late September to November eight teams with six to eight workers each had been sent home from WTAP to quarantine.

Weems' death is a tragedy, a worker at WTAP told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. "It could have been prevented. The factories ought to be shut down and workers compensated for lost time until we get this virus under control."

Further details about Stephanie are as yet unknown, along with the status of the other employees who worked with Stevie in the blackout area of the paint shop, where freshly painted vehicles are sent to cure before being re-introduced to the assembly line. The deaths of Stephanie Weems and Stevie Brown have not been reported by the company nor the union, but they are a clear indication that the pandemic is out of control in the plants.

FCA is determined to keep the public, and most importantly, its thousands of employees in the dark about the extent of the outbreak raging through its factories. Spiraling outbreaks have been revealed in recent weeks at FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant , where one worker, Mark Bianchi, also died, and Sterling Stamping, both just a few miles north of WTAP. Over 20 cases each were also reported at General Motors' Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Wentzville, Missouri, plants last week.

Like the other auto companies and their lackeys in the United Auto Workers union, FCA fears that if workers knew the full scope of the pandemic's spread they would revolt and shut down the plants, as happened in March in a wave of wildcat strikes, including at WTAP.

Despite the danger to employees, FCA is hell-bent to prevent another shutdown of production. For this they are relying on the UAW, which is withholding information about the spread of the virus and insisting that workers cannot take action to protect themselves. Instead, the UAW is falsely seeking to paint the WSWS as fake news, hoping to keep workers from reading the primary source of information on new outbreaks and workers' efforts to organize struggles independently.

The current uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in the plants and growing number of worker deaths makes clear that the safety protocols previously touted by the companies and the UAW are totally inadequate. When the plants reopened in May, FCA claimed that it had "developed and is implementing a comprehensive program of enhanced safety measures to protect employees, their families and the surrounding communities from the spread and transmission of COVID-19."

Workers know otherwise. Social distancing is not maintained on the shop floor and break areas nor during

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shift changes. Bathrooms are dirty and hand-washing facilities are sometimes without hot water. Temperature checks and screening questionnaires, to the extent they are even still followed, are incapable of catching the significant numbers of those infected who do not yet show symptoms.

On the contrary, with large numbers of workers taking leave due to concerns for their safety, the companies have increasingly exerted financial pressure on workers to keep them in the plants, delaying or withholding pay from those who self-isolate or quarantine.

The only explanation for the lack of information—which workers have the right to know—about the number of infections and deaths within the workforce is that the company and the union are desperate to make sure workers are at their stations generating profits.

Workers often have to rely on sharing information by word of mouth or social media, one worker said. “My friend caught the virus a couple weeks ago and tested positive three times. Now he is on a ventilator,” they added.

The companies and the UAW have sought to prevent any independent sharing of information, however. In recent months, workers at FCA were sent a letter threatening them with termination for taking photos or posting about conditions in their workplaces on social media. Workers at other companies, such as the parts manufacturer Lear, have also reported that they have been warned against even self-disclosing positive COVID-19 test results on Facebook.

A worker who retired from Warren Truck after more than three decades at the plant spoke to the WSWS last week about the indifference of the company and the UAW to workers’ lives. “I read the about the TPT who died at Warren Truck,” he said. “They should not be working under conditions where they can become ill and die.

“I can tell you though, even if they keep falling down and dying on the job, the company won’t shut down the line. I have seen where somebody would have a heart attack and they would just start the line right back up again. They don’t want to miss a minute. Every minute is profit for them.

“The union is not going to tell anyone what is really going on because they don’t want anybody to rock the boat. They don’t want walkouts, they don’t want anything like that because they are in bed with management. They are more concerned with profit.”

With the COVID-19 pandemic infecting and killing an unknown but growing number of workers, demands are rising for the shutdown of the plants. Opposition to brutal working conditions and job insecurity is breaking out internationally, with workers at GM and Kia plants in South Korea and Toyota plants in India striking in recent weeks. In the US, autoworkers at plants such as FCA Sterling Heights and the Faurecia Saline auto parts factory have initiated rank-and-file safety committees independent of the UAW in order to fight for measures to stop the pandemic while also securing workers’ income.

No more workers’ lives must be lost so that the companies can continue to turn a profit. The scale of the danger posed by the pandemic—with as many as many as 250,000 more deaths possible by January—requires emergency action. The plants must be shut down and workers fully compensated for lost wages. Rank-and-file safety committees must be expanded throughout factories and other workplaces to prepare strikes and walkouts in order to save workers’ lives.

To join this fight, contact the Autoworker Newsletter *today: autoworkers@wsws.org.*

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