

Ford Kansas City Assembly worker dies after testing positive for COVID-19

Marcus Day
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A worker at Ford Motor Company's Kansas City Assembly Plant (KCAP) died over the weekend, after recently testing positive for COVID-19, co-workers reported to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. Michael Frazier had been at the plant over a decade and was regarded as kind and hardworking, according to his colleagues.

Frazier, who was Native American, was employed as a cleaner by Team Solutions, part of the Team Group, a global industrial cleaning firm that Ford contracts to provide janitorial services at KCAP. It was not clear at the time of this writing whether COVID-19 was the immediate cause of his death.

A worker at the plant and member of the KCAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that he knew Frazier and that he was "a kind guy, a good person. He was always at work." Those working near Frazier reported that he had recently been looking quite sick, he said.

He and other workers at the plant said the company and the United Auto Workers union have continued their blackout of information on new cases of COVID-19 in the plant. However, workers nevertheless hear by word of mouth of whole teams being sent home to quarantine as cases spread. "Everything is still pretty hush-hush. They use the false claim they can't do it because of HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act]. It's no telling how many people have this. They're not telling anybody anything."

KCAP, currently on its annual holiday shutdown, is one of Ford's largest plants, with over 7,000 workers at the 4.7 million-square-foot complex in Claycomo, Missouri. The factory produces both the Transit van and the immensely profitable F-150 pickup truck, the linchpin of Ford's lineup.

If he is confirmed to have died from the coronavirus,

Frazier would be at least the 10th worker at a Ford facility to have died from COVID-19. At rival Fiat Chrysler, at least three autoworkers have recently died at two Detroit-area factories, Warren Truck Assembly and Sterling Heights Assembly. The virus has continued to spread unabated throughout the auto plants as the companies ramp up production.

For months, the auto companies and the UAW have been seeking to downplay and cover up the extent of new cases in the plants, hoping to stave off a new wave of work stoppages and wildcat strikes by autoworkers, such as those that led to the shutdown of the auto industry in March. As the surge of illnesses becomes undeniable, company representatives have made limited admissions of growing numbers of cases. "We are seeing an increase in the number of positive (test) rates like you're seeing in the surrounding communities," Ford's chief manufacturing officer, Gary Johnson, told the Associated Press last week.

However, both the companies and the UAW persist in claiming that workers are contracting the virus outside the plants—not in the factories where they are crowded together on a daily basis—without providing a shred of evidence to substantiate their claims. At the same time, UAW officials continue to tout safety protocols which were inadequate to begin with and have been almost entirely abandoned.

The Associated Press article stated that "[UAW President Rory] Gamble said much of the fear [among workers] has come from misinformation about workers catching the virus in factories, which is not true. 'They need to have a complete understanding that we're doing everything we can to keep them safe,' Gamble said." In other words, workers should ignore the blatant dangers they see every day, shut up and keep coming to work.

Even as the vaccine begins to be distributed, the pandemic is continuing its horrific rampage through workplaces and communities, with health care facilities, doctors and nurses in many cities increasingly overwhelmed and unable to care for all the patients needing treatment. Nearly half of the hospitals in the Kansas City metro area are anticipating staffing shortages this week, according to the Kansas Hospital Association.

There is growing hostility among autoworkers towards the UAW, which has worked with the company to keep the plant running while the pandemic spreads, the KCAP worker said. “Just the last couple years, I’ve been looking at all the stuff with their corruption and seeing that it’s a big sham,” he said. “A lot of people feel the same way I do.”

With a vaccine on the horizon, but the corporations and UAW insisting that the factories keep running, workers are increasingly determined not to sacrifice themselves so that the auto giants can continue to reap billions in profits.

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network—composed of rank-and-file organizations workers have been forming this year independently of the UAW—last week issued a statement calling for the shutdown of nonessential production and full compensation for workers until the vaccine is available to all. “The beginning of vaccinations makes it all the more necessary to contain the pandemic now and prevent unnecessary deaths and infections,” the statement said.

The WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* is assisting workers in organizing safety committees throughout the auto industry and beyond in order to lay the groundwork for a collective fight for safe working conditions and workers’ interests.

To join the KCAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee or for help in starting a committee at another plant, contact us today.



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