

Crane operator crushed to death at Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant in suburban Detroit

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The Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a meeting, “For an emergency four-week shutdown of SHAP and other auto plants!” on Sunday, April 25, at 1:00 p.m. Eastern time. Sign up to attend here.

On Wednesday, crane operator Terry Garr died in an industrial accident at the Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant north of Detroit. The death was acknowledged earlier on Thursday in brief statements by Stellantis and the United Auto Workers.

Sources from inside the plant reported to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that Garr was crushed by a heavy die towards the end of his shift. This was confirmed later in the evening by a police report obtained by the *Detroit Free Press*.

It is unclear how Garr could have been crushed by a die that was being lifted by a crane he was operating. However, according to one worker, who wished to remain anonymous, management was hurrying the die setters in Garr’s area to finish their work before the end of their shift.

Garr is at least the second worker to die in an industrial accident this year in a stamping plant operated by a Detroit auto company. In January, Mark McKnight was crushed to death by a 7,000-pound steel wall that fell from a forklift.

In November 2020, David Spano was killed in a similar accident at parts supplier Romeo RIM in Romeo, Michigan. Spano died when a 12-ton mold fell from a wall.

While the particular circumstances of Garr’s death have yet to be revealed, such deadly incidents have been made more likely by the chaotic and inherently dangerous situation inside auto plants, as automakers scramble to keep production moving in spite of widespread microchip shortages and the spread of

COVID-19.

This has been particularly severe in Stellantis plants since the company was created in January from a merger between Fiat Chrysler and French automaker PSA. “It’s horrible a man died in the plant but not surprising,” a veteran worker at the nearby Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant told the WSWS. “They are sending workers to all different areas of the plants because of a shortage of workers, and a lot of workers don’t know anything about the safety or COVID protocols in these areas.

“They are short workers because so many are out sick. Some people are even afraid to get the vaccine because if you get sick and need time off, the company won’t honor it unless you have sick time. One worker got the shot and was feeling terrible, but they wouldn’t let her go home because she didn’t have time off.

“They are also TPTs (temporary part-time workers) everywhere, and they are working them in departments they ... know nothing about. They don’t talk to the union because they have no rights. We work in a big plant, and four or five workers have died from COVID since the pandemic began. Nobody should be in there now because of how bad the pandemic is in Michigan.”

Across the street from Sterling Stamping at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), production workers have been working six days a week for most of the year in order to maintain output of the company’s best-selling, highly profitable Dodge Ram 1500 pickup trucks.

Skilled tradespeople at SHAP have also been shifted to a new Alternative Work Schedule, composed of seven 12-hour days a week, followed by seven days off. This creates the conditions where fatigue and burnout can lead to dangerous situations.

Stellantis has been forced to idle other plants

throughout the country in response to the global semiconductor shortage, which has decimated production in the auto industry. Warren Truck was forced to idle earlier this month, and two out of three shifts at Jefferson North Assembly Plant are scheduled to be laid off at the end of April.

However, management has evidently made the decision that SHAP and Sterling Stamping must continue to operate no matter what the costs. Chips and even temporary workers from Warren Truck were shifted northward along Mound Road to Sterling Heights during that plant's shutdown. Jefferson workers will reportedly follow suit.

Sterling Stamping is no less critical for company. The largest stamping plant in the world, it produces body panels for many of the Dodge, Chrysler and Jeep brands. Even a temporary halt to production in the plant would force much of Stellantis' North American operations to close.

The plants remain operating in spite of the rampaging COVID-19 pandemic, which has surged to the highest levels on record in the state of Michigan. No new nationwide figures on deaths or infections have been released in the auto industry for nearly a year. However, Bloomberg reported last week that nearly 10 percent of SHAP's workforce was out either on quarantine or after having tested positive.

Sterling Stamping saw its highest ever one-month total this March, with 28 confirmed infections. The *Autoworker Newsletter* has learned that at least some of these cases required hospitalization.

According to UAW Local 1264's Facebook page, which has been dominated by death notices in recent weeks, Garr is the third active worker in the plant to have died since the beginning of March. The union did not reveal the cause of death for the other two workers.

The response of the UAW to Garr's death, as its response has been to all deaths from COVID-19, was indifference combined with outright coverup. Local 1264 acknowledged the death in a short, misspelled Facebook post declaring: "we loss a UAW 1264 member today," without even informing workers that Garr had died in an accident inside the plant. The union announced that grief counseling was available to workers inside the plant—production would continue as scheduled.

In brief remarks to the *Free Press*, UAW President

Rory Gamble presented the death as a tragedy for which no one in particular was responsible. "Today one of our members will not return home because of a workplace injury," Gamble blandly stated.

UAW Vice President for Stellantis Cindy Estrada declared that the union is "working with our joint UAW-Stellantis Health and Safety Department to get more information on this fatal workplace accident and providing the necessary support for our Local 1264 brothers and sisters during this crisis." In other words, the UAW is collaborating with Stellantis to shield it from any responsibility.

The death at Sterling Stamping only underscores the need for an emergency four-week shutdown, with full compensation for laid off workers, a demand issued last week by the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network in response to major outbreaks in Detroit-area auto plants.

Workers are not only confronting a massive surge in new COVID-19 infections, but they are facing relentless speedup imposed by the companies and the UAW which wears down their bodies and endangers their lives. A four-week shutdown would not only allow workers to social distance to fight the spread of the virus but allow them to recover after months of forced overtime and prevent other horrific workplace deaths from taking place.

The fight for an emergency shutdown requires that workers organize themselves independently of the bought-and-paid-for company agents in the UAW. "The union is not saying don't come back to work because of COVID," the Warren Truck worker said. "They are not doing anything about being transferred to strange departments. You have these outbreaks in the factories and meatpacking plants, but the companies are making a killing, and they don't care. They're boasting that they are making a profit, but at the cost of how many lives?"



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