

As workers mourn death of Sterling Stamping worker Terry Garr, few facts made public

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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.

Workers expressed shock and sadness following the death of Terry Garr, age 57, of Shelby Township, a veteran crane operator at Stellantis Sterling Stamping plant in the north Detroit suburbs Wednesday evening. Garr died in an industrial accident when he was crushed by a heavy die toward the end of his shift.

Few facts have been made public regarding the circumstances of the tragedy. According to Sterling Heights Police Lt. Mario Bastianelli, a worker was using a stamping press when it seemed to shift the weight load. “The initial investigation shows the worker was lifting the press machine with a crane and apparently the weight shifted and fell on the employee,” Bastianelli said. Garr died later at an area hospital.

Such deaths are all too common at industrial facilities in the US. In 2019, the last year for which data is available, 5,333 workers died in workplace accidents in the US, the largest number since 2007. There were 164 fatal workplace incidents in Michigan.

According to the United Auto Workers Local 1264 Facebook page, two other Sterling Stamping workers have died since March. The UAW has not reported the causes of those deaths.

On December 30, 2020, Mark McKnight, a contract electrician at the General Motors stamping plant in Marion, Indiana died when a 4,500-pound partition wall made of tubular steel fell on him. In mid-November, a 42-year-old auto parts worker, David Spano, was crushed to death by a 25,000-pound manufacturing mold at the Romeo RIM plant in suburban Detroit.

In all too many cases, the official state investigations of such deaths amount to a whitewash of management. They drag on for months and typically result in at most wrist-slap fines, which are often waived on appeal. As for the UAW, the supposed representative of workers, it does little more than parrot the line of management.

Garr’s coworkers reported that he had previously been employed at the Chrysler Twinsburg, Ohio stamping plant that closed in 2010, one of many facilities shuttered under provisions of the 2009 Chrysler bankruptcy. Garr, like thousands of other workers, was forced to relocate hundreds of miles, far from family and friends, to maintain his job.

A former coworker posted on Facebook, “To my former Chrysler family, Terry Garr who worked at Twinsburg with us, was killed at Sterling Stamping. I guess he was working on a die, it shifted and he was crushed. God bless ya Terry, you will be missed! So sad.”

Another worker posted, “He was my very best friend. We worked at the Twinsburg stamping plant. (The most profitable stamping plant they had.) If they kept us open he would be alive today ... love you my brother ... f*** you FCA & Stellantis, seen too many coworkers die for you ... first got crushed taking inventory ... in Twinsburg.

“3 months after coming to Kokomo Claud fell 30 ft., then an oiler died while driving a forktruck, enough is enough.. I am outta here first chance I got ... Bad hips, bad knees, bad ankles, bad back, bad hands, bad wrists, you do not care about us...”

A veteran worker at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant spoke to the *World Socialist World Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* on condition of anonymity. Like many autoworkers, he has worked at a number of different plants across the Midwest and witnessed the

dangerous conditions in every plant year after year, which the UAW has done little to nothing to address.

“I used to have to go into the Ford stamping plant in Flat Rock every night to work and I always was looking up when they would move the presses with the crane. They would move presses in and out for different parts 20, 30 feet in the air. I used to watch them move them in and out and saw how they repaired the dies. Not a job I would do today. I could have gone to Chicago Stamping, but I chose not to because of the danger.

“I try to work safe and be careful, and try to tell everyone. I have seen a lot of people that have gotten hurt or that have died in those plants. I remember one guy got his head cut off by a machine at St. Louis back in the day. I was being very careful every day, but one day, just one day, I let my guard down and I got hurt badly after 35 years of watching out. It only takes a few minutes or seconds.”

Workers must demand a full and independent investigation into the death of Terry Garr to prevent further such tragedies. No confidence can be placed in the UAW-Stellantis joint safety committee, which will inevitably seek to carry out a whitewash. Nor can the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) be trusted one iota.

The necessity for an independent investigation is underscored by the criminal cover-up carried out by the UAW over the spread of COVID-19 in the auto plants. The UAW has enforced full production at the auto plants despite the fact that manufacturing plants are major vectors of virus transmission, according to figures from the Michigan state government.

The auto companies and the UAW have conspired to cover up both the number of infections and deaths in the plants in order not to create “panic;” in other words, to prevent workers from comprehending the true extent of the danger to which they are being subjected daily.

According to the state of Michigan, since March of last year employers have reported more than 40 worker deaths from COVID-19, certainly a vast undercount. Meanwhile, MIOSHA has received more than 12,000 complaints from employees alleging COVID-19 hazards in the workplace. The vast majority of these complaints are not investigated, or are dismissed out of hand.

There is every reason to believe that the push by

management to maintain production levels despite high absentee rates is further undermining safety conditions. This has been compounded at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant by the imposition of an impossible 12-hour, 7-day work schedule for skilled trades workers in an apparent attempt to squeeze out more production. Such Dickensian working conditions are a recipe for accidents and deaths.

Only the independent action of workers can secure the right of workers to safe and healthy conditions. We call on workers to build and expand the network of rank-and-file safety committees. For more information about building a committee at your plant, contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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