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Autoworkers call for independent investigation into worker death at Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant

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There are growing calls among autoworkers for an independent investigation into the death of Terry Garr, a 57-year-old crane operator at Stellantis Sterling Stamping outside Detroit who died in a tragic on-the-job accident April 21.

Underscoring the need for an independent investigation and accounting, there have been no official accounts of the death of Garr outside of a sketchy police report. It seems the death occurred while a press machine was being lifted by a crane when it suddenly shifted, crushing the worker. The *World Socialist Web Site* has learned that the United Auto Workers union has been removing Facebook posts reporting the tragedy.

This was corroborated by a Sterling Stamping worker who complained about the removal of a post from the UAW members' page. The worker went on to report that Garr and a coworker “were assisting in performing a die set when the tragedy occurred. There was something they suspected was not right about the rigging.”

Garr then stationed himself down low adjacent to the die to inspect it, the worker said.

“The other crane operator commanded the crane to lift the die with the remote but the load block overhead was not centered over the die. As it lifted, the die swung like a pendulum and trapped Mr. Garr between the die and the outside of the press. That crushed him and led to his fatal injuries,” the worker told the WSWS.

These comments follow a letter to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* the day after Garr's death that suggested the tragedy had been caused by management pressuring die setters to “disregard safety over production.” The fatal accident was due, the worker wrote, because of “Management being in a hurry and pressur[ing] Die Setters

to hurry up and get job done that Mgt. assigned towards the end of shift.” As a result, “a worker at FCA Sterling Stamping is dead, crushed between dies while being forced to hurry up by Mgt.”

Both the UAW and Stellantis offered the family perfunctory statements of condolence, while offering no further details of the accident.

The death of Garr took place under conditions where Stellantis has been attempting to maintain full production in the midst of a raging pandemic. In March, Sterling Stamping had a record 28 COVID-19 infections. According to a report in Bloomberg at the adjacent Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) last week, 10 percent of the workforce was either infected with COVID-19 or out on quarantine. Earlier this month, Stellantis, with the collaboration of the UAW, imposed a 12-hour, 7-day schedule for skilled trades at SHAP in an effort to squeeze more production out of a diminished workforce.

Even as the UAW collaborates in imposing a brutal production regime in the auto plants, the *Detroit Free Press* published a laudatory interview with UAW President Rory Gamble, praising the veteran union functionary with saving the union apparatus from federal trusteeship in the wake of the exposure of massive corruption with the leadership. The newspaper absurdly presented Gamble, who pocketed \$244,772 in salary and expenses in 2019, as untainted by corruption. This from a loyal UAW hand-raiser who never wavered in his support for the union apparatus even as successive presidents were marched off to jail.

At a meeting Sunday of the Sterling Heights Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which workers established independently of the UAW last summer, workers passed a resolution calling for a full and independent investigation

into the death of Terry Garr to uncover the truth and to help prevent further such tragedies. The committee stressed that no confidence could be placed in the joint UAW-Stellantis safety body or the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) to carry out an investigation. During the whole course of the pandemic, both the UAW and federal and state safety agencies have been shown to be arms of corporate management in whitewashing unsafe conditions in the factories.

In calling for an investigation, independent of management, the UAW and pro-company state safety regulators, the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee reiterated the demand for an emergency four-week shutdown of the auto industry with full pay to affected workers to address the massive surge of COVID-19 infections in the state of Michigan that have led to record hospitalizations of younger people.

At the SHAP meeting, workers described the relentless drive of management to maintain production at the expense of workers' health and lives. One SHAP worker said, "I am trying to figure out what is going on right now. COVID has been running rampant in our plant and no one is telling us about it."

A spokesman for the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee said about the death of Garr, "This was a shocker. You hear stories about that from long ago, but when it happens, it is a real eye-opener.

"It is unfortunate that when a worker perishes there is not even a break to let people come to grips with that. This is not the army, it is a manufacturing plant, these are everyday working people. Death in the factory is not something we include in our everyday lifestyle.

"This shouldn't be happening, especially at a time when (the virus) is killing people left and right."

He said the only concern of management and the UAW was to make sure production continues despite the pandemic. The rise in infections, he said, required that "a shutdown must be put in place. It will take the mobilization of the workers for that to happen. Management in those offices are not going to do that. A lot of workers understand that. We have to get the word out to let workers know they have the power to make this happen. Workers need to understand they are not alone."

A worker from the Stellantis Trenton engine plant said she was outraged that management and the UAW would lie about and cover up the dangers facing workers.

"The games they are playing in these plants with COVID are unbelievable, and the union is allowing the company to tell all these lies. They are playing with peoples' lives. If someone has COVID, why aren't they notifying the people around them? People are dying in these plants every day

while they are at home or behind Plexiglass. This needs to be addressed ASAP.

"I am not scared to fight for what is right," she continued. "If I had it my way, the plants would be shut down. I don't care how much money you lose. What they are saying is all lies, and they are being allowed to get away with it."

The worker added, "It is unbelievable that this is being allowed. Where do we go as workers if the union is not fighting for us? They are on management's side."

A member of the Faureica Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety Committee from Indiana replied that workers had to build their own organizations, independent of pro-company unions, to defend their lives. He said he understood what the workers at Sterling Stamping were facing. "We had a propane tank explode and burn a woman so badly they had to put her in a coma to save her life. Then the company turned and tried to blame it on her.

"They had to backstep after too many people stood up and said 'no.' She was driving into the refueling station when the explosion happened. For two or three months, people had been complaining about smelling propane and nothing was ever done. The woman will be scarred for life physically and mentally. To them you are only a number. If something happens to you, someone else will be put in your place."

Pointing to the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the worker said, "The International is welcome because we can get together all over the world on an even keel. They still treat us like slaves. It is time for us to take over and show that we can run these businesses better than the ones they stick in place."

A worker from the Stellantis Kokomo, Indiana transmission complex said her plant had a lack of cleaning material and proper personal protective equipment and that the UAW was colluding with management. "The workers don't matter. Numbers mean more than their lives," she concluded.

While a full investigation into the death of Terry Garr is needed, it can only be carried out through the independent intervention of workers. We call on workers with information on the circumstances of this tragedy and other examples of the violation of safety protocols to email the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* at autoworkers@wsws.org. We also call on workers to join and build rank-and-file safety committees at your plants.



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