

“It is being covered up and we’re not being told anything”

One week after fatal accident killed crane operator Terry Garr, millwright dies of COVID-19 at Sterling Stamping Plant

Our reporters
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One week after the death of crane operator Terry Garr at Stellantis' Sterling Stamping Plant north of Detroit, the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has learned that another worker, millwright Mark Bruce, has passed away from COVID-19. Multiple sources confirmed the death to a reporting team during a shift change on Tuesday afternoon.

Sterling Stamping, the largest automotive stamping plant in the world, saw its largest one-month surge in new infections in March, with 28 confirmed cases, up from one in the entire month of February. This coincided with a record-breaking surge in cases throughout the state of Michigan, driven primarily by school reopenings. The *Autoworker Newsletter* had previously learned of severe cases in the plant which required hospitalization, but this is the first confirmed death in plant.

While United Auto Workers Local 1264 has run several death notices of autoworkers and their family members over the last two months, it has yet to report on Bruce's death. One worker said the UAW and the company were concealing information about outbreaks of COVID-19 in the plant. He said he knew Mark Bruce for a long time. “Mark died of COVID last Friday and nothing is being said about it. I only learned about it because another worker texted me.

“We’re getting notices, sometimes seven times a week, about new COVID cases. But they aren’t saying where and what workers could have been exposed.”

Nationwide, the UAW has helped management impose a blackout on infections and deaths in the auto plants in order not to instill “panic.” This prevents

workers who are potentially exposed to the deadly virus from taking the necessary measures to protect themselves, co-workers and family, ensuring even more infections and death. In addition to covering up infections, management is penalizing workers who contract the virus or stay home with symptoms, thus encouraging workers to report to the job when they are sick.

Amid widespread anger over the death of Garr, crushed to death during a die staging at the end of his shift last week, the UAW went into damage control on Tuesday, announcing a token, one minute of silence each shift to honor Garr on April 28, Workers Memorial Day.

While workers want to know the truth about the circumstances which led to his death, in a statement posted on the UAW Local 1264 Facebook page at the plant, LaShawn English, the local president, offered prayers and condolences but no new information on the tragedy. Neither did English outline what steps the UAW is taking to investigate Garr’s death or encourage workers with information to come forward.

A preliminary report from the Michigan Occupational and Health Administration (MIOSHA) indicates Garr was staging a die, which was lifted by a crane. However, the die was not aligned with the locating pins.

While standing between the die and the press, the crane operator maneuvered the die onto the bolster pin. “The misalignment of the hoist to the center point of the die caused the die to swing to the home position, resulting in the die striking the crane operator,” the

report said. Garr was transported to an area hospital, where he later died, according to Sterling Heights police.

A full report from MIOSHA may take months to produce, according to the *Macomb Daily*, which originally reported on the preliminary findings.

A worker who contacted the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* in the wake of the accident 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 a job done that management assigned towards the end of shift.”

While Bruce and Garr died of different causes, the common factor in both deaths is management's determination to maintain production in the teeth of the pandemic. While Stellantis, like the other major auto companies, has been forced to idle much of its production due to a global chip shortage, the company is determined to keep open Sterling Stamping Plant, which produces critical body panels for much of the company's North American assembly plants, at all costs.

Across the street at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, which produces the company's best-selling and highly profitable Dodge Ram 1500 pickup truck, production workers have been on forced overtime for most of the year, and skilled trades are working on a brutal new 12-hour day, 7 days per week work schedule.

During a shift change on Tuesday, workers said that the death of Garr coming at the time of surging COVID-19 infections underscored the fact that workers take their lives in their own hands every day they come in to work. “We are signing up for risk every day we work here,” one said.

Said another, “I’ve heard from other workers who said when the plant manager first heard about the accident, he asked if Garr was wearing a hard hat when he was killed, as if that would have saved him.

Other than that, “we haven’t heard anything. Maybe he was working alone when he shouldn’t have been. Maybe they were rushing him to finish a job. All I know is that it is being covered up and we’re not being told anything.”

The situation at Sterling Stamping underscores the urgent need for a four-week national shutdown of

production, a demand raised in a statement by the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network. This is not only necessary to prevent new infections spreading outward from plants into surrounding communities, but to put an end to the reckless and dangerous regime of speedup and overtime imposed by management with the support of the UAW.

A veteran worker at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant commented, “Last March, workers stopped the line and that saved lives. We did it out of pure fear. We were afraid for our lives and the lives of our families, and we were asking, ‘Doesn’t anybody hear us?’ Six workers have died at Warren Truck and the company and the union did nothing. The UAW are management’s spies and muscle. They are totally corrupt and in cahoots with the bosses.

“Workers getting killed in the plant and dying from COVID is like going back to the immigrant garment workers who were killed in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire. It took a lot of tragedies before things changed. Today, there are tragedies and there are no improvements. Now we have two entities against us, the UAW and the company.”

We urge workers to support the call by Sterling Heights Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee Sunday for a full and independent investigation of the circumstances surrounding the death of Terry Garr. For more information contact autoworkers@wsws.org .



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