

After two deaths in one week at Sterling Stamping Plant, autoworkers describe dangerous conditions inside Stellantis factories

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After two deaths last week at Sterling Stamping Plant near Detroit, autoworkers are speaking out against unsafe conditions in Stellantis factories.

On Wednesday, crane operator Terry Garr was crushed to death in an accident while performing a die staging. At the end of last week, millwright Mark Bruce died of COVID-19. Bruce worked in the plant's powerhouse on the first shift. He was a senior worker in the plant who participated in a fantasy football league with his co-workers for two decades.

To date, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1264 has not publicly acknowledged Bruce's death, even though it has regularly posted death notices in recent months on its Facebook page. A friend of Bruce told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*: "If a mutual friend didn't let me know of his death I wouldn't have found out. There's no talk in the plant about him. I follow 1264's Facebook page and nothing's been said. They posted the death of a union official's father today, but nothing on Mark Bruce."

UAW Local 1264 encouraged the workforce to wear red and held a minute of silence for Garr on each of the plant's three shifts Wednesday, which was Workers' Memorial Day. However, the UAW has not released any information about the circumstances under which Garr died.

A full and independent investigation must be conducted into Garr's and Bruce's deaths, as a meeting over the weekend of the Sterling Heights Rank-and-File Safety Committee demanded. The UAW has colluded with management in enforcing unsafe working conditions, including constant speedup and overtime

during the surging pandemic in Michigan, thus making it bear responsibility for their deaths, and making further such tragedies inevitable.

The fact that the UAW organized a token memorial for Garr indicates the extreme nervousness within the union bureaucracy over the anger brewing among autoworkers. "I've never seen them do anything like this before," one Sterling Stamping worker said.

"[The WSWS] is right about them being greedy during the pandemic. As you said, this is the world's largest auto stamping plant, and they want to keep this running at all costs. We are working a ton of overtime. To be fair, a lot of it is voluntary. But on Saturdays they can force you to work overtime. In my department we are always working overtime, it's always busy. We have all sorts of 'just-in-time' production nonsense which we have to keep up with."

Referring to the spread of COVID-19 inside the plant, he said, "I've never seen so many people out in my area. We get these text alerts whenever there is a confirmed case. One day we got like 14 texts. But they don't say where they were."

These conditions are far from unique to Sterling Stamping, however. There have been a number of deaths over the past 12 months in the US auto industry, due to both COVID-19 and accidents similar to Garr's. However, an exact counting of COVID-19 deaths is impossible due to a coverup of the figures by the company and the union.

"My plant is a toxic place," a worker at Stellantis's Warren Stamping Plant, also near Detroit, said. "If you have any mental health issues like depression, this is

not the place for you to work. They bring in these young temporary part-time workers and they totally abuse them.

“Initially, when we went back to work [last May], there were new protocols in place. We had this new symptom screening app for our phones, we were having our temperatures scanned going in, boxes of rags were available to help us clean our station, and it went well for a moment. In my opinion the plant is no different now. They haven’t hired any new cleaners to work in the plant.

“We had one hi-lo driver who found out three days after the fact that another worker who was using her same machine had tested positive for COVID. Six people had touched the machine in the meantime. I know they say that the virus doesn’t live on surfaces, but if you don’t tell us anything we have worry about it.

“They try to blame you for not social distancing. But if I am racking parts with someone, that is a two-person job. How can I keep six feet of distance? If he has COVID, and I have been racking the whole day, everyone on the line has been exposed. How is that their fault? We are doing our jobs. There is not a care in the world for management except for getting those parts out. And the UAW does nothing, they are totally quiet.”

Warren Stamping plant lies on the same city block as the Warren Truck Assembly Plant, one of the major hotspots of the pandemic. Despite its relatively small workforce, six workers at Warren Truck have lost their lives to COVID-19. “We lost quite a few [at Warren Stamping] in the beginning,” the worker said. “We had two union committeemen and, I believe, two tradespeople die.

“I don’t think we’ve lost anything recently, but we have had a lot of new cases, especially in March.” This coincides with the recent surge at Sterling Stamping, which also had a record number of cases that month. “They’ll tell us about the cases but not where they were at. So how do we protect ourselves? How are we to do anything? Something has to happen. Shut down and clean up the plant, follow up protocol or more people will be sick and die. It’s too much to bear at this point.

“The UAW does not want a shutdown. I found out that when we are on layoff status, what happens, at

least for the local, is that a lot of the UAW officials are laid off too. I feel like our lives are at stake because the big honchos wouldn’t be making money either and would have to go on unemployment. It may not be a kickback, but it is certainly a kick in the ass for them. We are even working without a local agreement, between the local and the plant. The local president doesn’t say anything about it to management.

“I think the veil is being pulled off the United States, on ‘the American dream.’ We are seeing what things really are like in this country. The trillions they have made during the pandemic is disgusting. At some point, someone told me that Carnival Cruise Line received a bailout. But we got pushed back on \$600 unemployment, on \$1,400 stimulus checks. You know that if the top 1 percent, or even just take Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, if each of them gave every single American about [thousands of dollars], it wouldn’t affect them at all. But that’s capitalism.”



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