

Two funerals in one week at Sterling Stamping Plant: Part 1

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This is the first part in a two-part series. Part two can be read here.

Last week, family, friends and coworkers laid to rest two autoworkers from Stellantis's Sterling Stamping Plant north of Detroit.

Crane operator Terry Garr, 57, died in the hospital the night of Wednesday, April 21, after a fatal accident, which occurred during a die set. Two days later, millwright Mark Bruce, 62, passed away after a fight with the coronavirus. Both were needlessly sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit.

The deaths of these two men are tragedies. Both men leave behind countless loved ones and friends, who had expected to spend many more years with them.

Bruce was born into a large-working class family in Detroit. He spent decades working at Sterling Stamping plant, where was well known and liked among his co-workers. According to his obituary, Bruce was a dedicated father who had served as his sons' Little League coach during their childhoods. He loved sports—according to a coworker, he participated for decades in a fantasy football league inside the plant—as well as boating, fishing and cooking for family. “He had a green thumb and tended his garden in the warmer seasons. Mark could fix or weld anything that he put his hands on,” the obituary says.

Garr was born in Cleveland in 1963, where he spent most of his life and where his family still resides. For many years, Garr worked at Chrysler's Twinsburg Stamping Plant in suburban Cleveland. When the plant closed in 2010, Garr transferred 200 miles away to Sterling Stamping Plant, where he lived in Shelby Township with his wife Clayvonne. His funeral however, was held back home in the Garfield Heights suburb of Cleveland.

Among his relatives, Garr was known for his generosity, his charisma and “youth spirit,” and his sense of humor as well as his legendary barbecue.

“He was my super hero,” one Garr's nieces said during his funeral service last Saturday. She recounted one time when Terry dropped everything and traveled three hours from Detroit back to Ohio to help her fix her car.

She warmly recalled a time from her childhood when “Uncle Terry” picked her up from school on his motorcycle, much to her excitement and the envy of her friends. Her mother, who

spoke after her at the service, remembered being less than enthusiastic, but recalled that Garr assured her she did everything to keep her child safe.

“We were like peanut butter and jelly as kids,” Ronald Garr, Terry's brother, recalled. “He was the best thing in the world to me. He was a family man.”

Around a dozen of Terry's co-workers attended the service. “How on earth did it happen?” one said. “He did his job very, very well. Everything he put his hands on, he had a knack for. That was a good brother.”

Terry's last supervisor also attended the funeral. He recalled that he was a reliable worker, but always stood his ground when he requested that Terry perform tasks outside of his job assignment. “The language could get colorful,” he recalled. But in spite of everything, Terry showed deep compassion and concern for him when he found out that his wife had cancer. He attended to show the same compassion, he said.

A co-worker of Garr, who transferred with him from Twinsburg, traveled from Michigan to pay his respects. “I was on layoff when it happened,” he said. “Someone called me and told me about the accident. I almost dropped the phone. There were quite a few of us in the plant from Twinsburg. To hear of a fatal accident like that, I was shocked. It breaks my heart.”

The deaths of the two men came as a shock to their co-workers at Sterling Stamping as well as to their family and friends. But it was barely acknowledged in the corporate press. Garr's death received only a brief acknowledgement in the Detroit-area newspapers, which reported that an accident had led to the death of a crane operator. Bruce's death was not reported at all, keeping with the press's general policy of avoiding reporting on COVID-related deaths in the factories.

These tragedies were entirely preventable. But they are all too familiar to autoworkers around the country. Fatal industrial accidents rose in 2019, the last year government data is available, reaching 5,333 deaths, the highest level since 2007. The circumstances of Garr's death, who was crushed when a heavy die slipped, are also similar to two fatal accidents in the auto industry in the last several months: Mark McKnight at GM's Marion Stamping and David Spano at Romeo RIM.

Corporations are rarely held accountable for the maiming and killing of workers on the job. The Detroit automakers utilize the

services of the United Auto Workers (UAW) to cover up the circumstances of workplace accidents and fatalities through the medium of joint union management safety committees. However, the only safety these committees are concerned about is protecting corporate profits. The same can be said of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which, besides been vastly understaffed, only has the power to levy token fines.

A larger number of autoworkers have died due to COVID over the past 14 months, but the exact figures are not publicly available due to their suppression by management, with the support of the UAW. Few if any of these deaths will be officially counted as workplace fatalities once the figures for the past two years are released because of management's position that all such deaths were from cases contracted outside of the plant.

Bruce is the first autoworker confirmed to have died from COVID at Sterling Stamping. But at nearby Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), at least five workers died from the disease as of November 2020, before the latest surge of cases in Michigan. At Warren Truck Assembly Plant, at least six workers died last year. At Jefferson North Assembly Plant, a leaked management report last October revealed two deaths.

Over the last two months, COVID-19 has ravaged the auto workforce in the state of Michigan. Sterling Stamping itself recorded its largest ever one-month total of confirmed infections in March, with 28 new cases. At SHAP, the situation is even more dire. At least 550 workers were quarantining at the start of the month and 498 were out on short or long-term medical leave, according to UAW Local 1700. It is unknown how many workers have died at SHAP over the past two months.

But despite government figures showing that manufacturing and construction sites are, together with schools, the leading source of outbreaks, nothing has been done to limit the spread of the disease in workplaces. Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, briefly presented in the media last year as an antidote to the right-wing, anti-scientific policies of then-President Trump, has rejected out of hand any new lockdowns of nonessential businesses. At any rate, the shutdowns last year were due to a wave of wildcat strikes by autoworkers in March 2020 carried out in a rebellion against the UAW's agreement with the companies to keep the plants open.

As for the companies, while they have been forced to idle production at plants throughout the world due to a shortage of critical microchips, they have maintained production as much as possible in spite of the threat posed by the deadly virus to the lives of workers, who are treated as expendable.

While some areas in Sterling Stamping have been on layoff recently due to the shutdown of the assembly plants they supply, the plant itself is being kept open at all costs because even a short closure could cost Stellantis hundreds of millions of dollars. It is the world's largest stamping plant, with a

workforce of more than 2,000, which supplies much of the company's North American-based assembly operations.

"I get about two or three of these alerts on my phone each day, saying that somebody else got COVID," Terry's friend said.

The situation is even worse across the street at SHAP, which produces the highly profitable Ram pickup truck. Production workers have endured forced overtime for months, and skilled trades are now working a grueling 84-hour workweek, with one week off in between.

This breakneck pace creates conditions not only for the continued spread of the virus, it contributes directly to fatigue and pressure from management that create the conditions in which fatal accidents are more likely.

These conditions are only possible because of the support the companies receive from the UAW, which has strained for more than a year to keep workers on the job, no matter the costs. By virtue of its ownership of billions of dollars of stock in GM, as well as the tens of millions in corporate money transferred every year into the coffers of the union through national training programs and other schemes, the wealthy bureaucrats who run the UAW have a direct financial stake in keeping production going in the teeth of the pandemic.

Local 1264 at Sterling Stamping, is one of the few locals of the UAW that provides workers with data on infections with any regularity. However, even it waited several days before publicly acknowledging Bruce's death on its Facebook page, and did not inform its members of the cause of his death, who found out mainly through word of mouth.

This is why the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network, an independent group of autoworkers formed last summer after the restart of production, is calling for an emergency four-week shutdown of nonessential production, with full compensation for workers during layoff.

"The Biden administration and the ruling class have demonstrated they will not take the necessary health measures to control the pandemic because they are beholden to the corporations," the group explained in its statement. But "Today, as was the case a year ago," when autoworkers rebelled against the UAW and stopped production, "only the independent action of workers can save lives."

"I think there needs to be a shutdown. What else can you do?" Terry's friend said. "Something has to be done, more than what is going on now. We can't keep going the way we are going."



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