

Two funerals in one week at Sterling Stamping Plant: Part 2

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This is the second part in a two-part series. Part one can be read [here](#).

The forced relocation of Terry Garr from his home in the Cleveland, Ohio area to the Detroit suburbs is an experience all too familiar to autoworkers, who have been hit by wave after wave of layoffs and plant closures over the last 40 years. When the United Autoworkers agreed to the closure of Twinsburg Stamping in 2010, workers were forced to seek transfers to other plants in order to maintain employment.

“Twinsburg was a great place to live,” Terry’s friend said. “Cleveland is right up the street; Akron is right down the street. It is centrally located. They have this festival called Twins Days, where twins from all over the country would gather.

“But I haven’t been back there since it closed. I don’t want to go back.”

The closure of Twinsburg “was traumatic,” he said. “We all unceremoniously left the plant, many of us never got to see each other again. I worked at Twinsburg for 25 years. I lost a lot of great friends. Some of us were transferred to Kokomo, Indiana, some of us went to Belvidere, Illinois. We are kind of spread out around the country now. We left the plant, and, in my department, we literally had to turn out all of the lights and lock the doors. To see grown men crying, that was pretty emotional.”

Ohio’s auto industry was once the nation’s second largest, behind only Michigan. General Motors operated a major assembly plant in Lordstown and had a very large presence in Dayton. The city of Toledo produced much of the glass used by the automotive industry, and Akron was famous for its production of tires.

Ohio was frequently the site of major struggles by autoworkers, including the famous rebellion over speed-up at Lordstown in 1972, then a brand-new, state of the art facility, driven mostly by younger workers. GM was the largest employer in the state, with more than 63,000

workers as late as 1995.

Twinsburg Stamping over time had also gained a reputation of militancy. Terry’s friend recalled two strikes since he began working there in the early 1980s. Twinsburg workers stopped work in 1966 over working conditions, forcing the temporary layoff of 38,000 workers in Chrysler assembly plants.

The auto industry in Ohio is now a shell of its former self. From a workforce of over 98,000 in 1995, the “Big Three” Detroit automakers employed only 17,000 in 2019. GM’s workforce in the state declined by 93 percent over that period, and Chrysler/Stellantis by 45 percent. A major blow came in 2019, when General Motors shut down Lordstown Assembly, a move later ratified by the UAW in a national agreement it pushed through after a 40-day strike that fall.

The closure of the Chrysler Twinsburg Stamping Plant where Garr worked was a consequence of the forced bankruptcy and restructuring of the auto industry under the Obama administration in 2009. Under the terms of the bailout, tens of thousands of jobs were destroyed and wages for new hires were slashed by half, accelerating the industry’s transformation into a low-wage sector.

Only a deeply corrupt, anti-worker organization would have agreed to these terms. Indeed, in exchange for its support for drastic attacks on autoworkers, including slashing wages for new hires by 50 percent, the United Auto Workers was bribed with tens of billions of dollars in corporate stock. At the time that Twinsburg Stamping was closed, the UAW was briefly the majority shareholder in Chrysler.

The grotesque levels of corruption exposed in the UAW, which has led to the jailing of two union presidents, demonstrate the degeneration of the organization into a criminal enterprise. The same week in which Garr and Bruce were being laid to rest, sentencing hearings began for former UAW president Dennis

Williams, who pleaded guilty to embezzling millions in dues money to finance lavish getaways for top union officials at Palm Springs. Williams, however, ultimately received a wrist slap sentence of only 21 months.

In addition to illegal bribes and kickbacks, starting in the 1980s the auto companies have funneled literally billions of dollars into the UAW through various corporatist arrangements, including joint training centers. On top of this, the auto companies offloaded their retiree health benefits to the UAW, providing a multi-billion dollar slush fund to union executives financed by corporate stock.

Today, the former site of Twinsburg Stamping is an industrial office park, containing the CLE5 Amazon fulfillment center as well as warehouses for Fedex and O'Reilly Auto Parts. These low-wage employers pay a fraction of what autoworkers once earned. Yet, so far have wages fallen, Amazon is now considered one of the area's premier employers.

The claim was made earlier this year, during the RWDSU union's campaign for recognition at Amazon's facility in Bessemer Alabama, that the unionization of Amazon would lead to a marked improvement in workers' conditions. However, the low wages and brutal conditions at Amazon are tied to the betrayals of the unions, which have collaborated in driving down wages to in many cases near starvation levels.

It is common practice for Amazon to move into areas which have been devastated by factory closures, such as Twinsburg, Bessemer and Detroit, where the \$15 per hour starting wage appears relatively attractive to young workers with few job prospects and older workers with little retirement savings.

"My uncle worked at an auto factory in the area," a young Amazon CLE5 worker in Twinsburg told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "He retired and now has a nice house down in Florida, paid for kids to go to college and his wife never worked a day since they got married. Meanwhile, I can hardly afford rent.

"Deindustrialization, high rates of inflation, stagnant pay, rising cost of living has basically obliterated the middle class in this area. Growing up, I was kind of aware this type of thing was happening. It is kind of depressing. Why do you think my whole generation is not having kids? We all know what is happening; we are not stupid."

When asked about COVID-19 cases inside the Amazon facility, he said, "there is a rumor that this is one of the worst places for person-to-person transfer. This is a small warehouse, there are only a couple hundred of us in here.

But it's a small footprint. It is very cramped inside on the floor."

An older Amazon worker at the same worksite said, "There are a lot of younger people here, but also a lot of people who are older. A lot are from Cleveland or Akron since the warehouse is midway between the two."

What was the attraction of working at Amazon, a WSWs reporter asked? "The money, the \$15 an hour wage. This is considered a good job these days, if you can handle the hours and the work. You're on your feet standing the whole time.

"You'd be surprised how many people in here are 55 and over. I am basically retired and didn't expect to go back to work. But here I am.

"A friend of mine mentioned that when her grandparents were still around, in the surrounding area it was the rubber plants that people got jobs in. Now it is this. The situation I guess is a little better at least in Akron now because they have a new Amazon plant there. But we've had a big problem with opioid addiction in this area over the last year or two."

The deaths of Terry Garr and Mark Bruce are tragic. But more than that, they are crimes that express the brutal logic of a capitalist system that subordinates all questions of health and safety to the mad dash after profits. To prevent further such needless deaths workers must draw the lessons of the past experiences. Not the slightest confidence can be placed in the UAW, which is seeking to sweep the deaths of Mark Bruce and Terry Garr under the rug as soon as possible.

Workers must demand a full investigation into these deaths and demand that all relevant facts be made available. To carry forward this fight we call on Sterling Stamping workers to build a rank-and-file safety committee at the plant as part of the growing network of rank-and-file safety committees, in auto, Amazon, education and other workplaces in the US and globally.

Workers who agree with this fight should contact autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact