

Deaths of three Detroit-area autoworkers reflect deepening social crisis

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The last several days saw the deaths of three Detroit-area Stellantis workers in tragic accidents that reflect the deepening social crisis, more than one year into the pandemic.

On Friday morning, a 49-year-old worker at the Stellantis Jefferson North Assembly Plant on the city's east side died when her car was struck by a train as she left work at 3:00 in the morning. The railroad crossing is adjacent to the plant entrance and is not protected by crossing arms.

A Stellantis Warren Stamping worker was found dead in a locker room at the plant Thursday evening, apparently of a drug overdose. Warren Commissioner Bill Dwyer said the 56-year-old Chrysler worker was one of three overdose deaths in the city that night. Heroin was apparently found on the scene.

The names of the victims have not been released. According to workers the Jefferson worker, a temporary employee, was leaving the plant after getting off from the evening shift, which typically last 10 hours. The railroad crossing is right outside the plant gate and provides rail access to the giant Stellantis plant.

A Jefferson worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that the woman had tried to cross the tracks even with the warning lights flashing. "It makes no sense. But it is not unusual for people to do that. People are so impatient to get out of there fast and beat the next red light. They are in such a rush to get home they fly out of the parking lot. She made an unfortunate decision. It cost her."

The worker added, "They need to put that crossing gate back up. I don't know who controls that crossing, but there is a lot of traffic there."

A worker posted on Facebook, "JNAP (Jefferson North) at shift change is dangerous! I am surprised it

[doesn't] happen more often. The employees run out of the plant like they are being chased by Satan himself."

While Stellantis has spent billions upgrading its production capacity in Detroit, including the Jefferson plant, apparently no money could be spared to install a railroad crossing arm at the heavily traveled intersection, which thousands of workers cross every day after work.

According to an unconfirmed report supplied to the WSWS, a worker at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant, located across the street from Warren Stamping, also died Thursday of a drug overdose after returning home from work. His alleged death, because it occurred outside of the workplace, would not have been acknowledged by the company.

The deaths were "tragic," one Warren Truck worker said, who went on to describe working conditions in the facility. "[Management] are truly slave drivers. They're taking away all the vending machines, which is the only place we can buy extra water ever since they took out many of the water fountains, they have only one ice machine for all of us. They even stopped the food truck and are making us eat at a tiny new cafeteria at the front of the building, which is too far and too crowded.

"Large rats are running around from all the [construction in the plant], and they are taking people's company-issued small fridges and microwaves away, leaving many with nowhere to heat their lunches or keep water or drinks cold, in spite of the sweltering heat. All cleaning and social distancing protocols have stopped even though almost half the plant isn't vaccinated."

Warren Truck only recently reopened after an extended shutdown due to the global microchip shortage. "Now many of us are working 10 hours, 7

days indefinitely. We have gotten no help from the union.

“I don’t know how many workers haven’t gotten any unemployment since last October, but I know for a fact there are a lot. They say they have nothing to do with unemployment, but among those who did get it, their SUB pay was decreased by the amount the government gave them from the stimulus. I know that’s not legal.”

The deaths of these workers were barely mentioned by the media. Of far more interest than the death of the Jefferson worker was local flooding that damaged hundreds of newly built Jeep Cherokees.

A Stellantis spokesman issued a perfunctory statement of condolences over the death of the Warren Stamping worker and that the company has washed its hands of any responsibility for the tragedy. “While the cause of death is under investigation by local authorities, it appears to be non-occupational.”

As for the United Auto Workers, it has made no public statement on any of these deaths.

Whatever factors were involved in each of the individual tragedies, there can be no doubt that the enormous stress which autoworkers have been placed under throughout the pandemic played a role. For more than a year, management, with the help of the UAW, has kept workers on the line in spite of massive outbreaks of COVID-19 throughout the industry.

Warren Truck has had at least six workers die of COVID-19 during the pandemic, and at least two had died at JNAP which was leaked last fall in a secret management memo on the spread of the virus in that plant. Meanwhile, hundreds of workers have been out at the same time on quarantine or medical leave at the nearby Sterling Heights Assembly Plant several times during the year.

The companies' response to the microchip shortage has been to idle some plants for weeks or even months at a time, while forcing workers at other plants producing the most profitable vehicles to work for 60, 70 or even 80 hours a week. Workers find it impossible to plan out their lives given that management is liable to announce mandatory overtime at any given moment.

On top of this, rapidly rising inflation is even further eroding the mediocre wages which new hires and temporary workers in particular receive. Under the new contract, temporary part-time workers at Stellantis, Ford and General Motors start at less than \$17 per hour.

“My life is harder than ever now” due to the seven-day production schedule and fear of COVID-19 infection, one GM worker in Flint said.

Workers on leave due to coronavirus have found it extremely difficult to collect sick pay due to management’s obstruction, adding to the stress. As a result, some workers have chosen to work while sick, increasing the risk to other workers.

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, emergency medical responses for opioid overdoses are up 13 percent in 2021. There were 5,782 ambulance runs for opioid overdoses between January and May, compared to 5,121 runs during the same time frame in 2020 and 4,500 in 2019.

From November 2019 through November 2020, opioid overdoses increased another 13 percent statewide, according to the Centers for Disease Control. However, those figures were incomplete and probably an undercount.

Health Department officials attributed the increase to isolation, boredom and fear due to the pandemic. In addition, street drugs have become more dangerous because they have been increasingly cut with the more powerful opioid fentanyl. Meanwhile, support services have been cut back.

However, these tensions, which find expression in such tragedies, are also fueling a growing movement of the working class, as seen in the continuing series of strikes by coal miners, health care workers, steelworkers and now autoworkers at Volvo in Virginia.

The problems which workers confront are social, not individual. Workers confront an economic system, capitalism, whose hostility to their interests has been graphically exposed by its sacrifice of millions lives to COVID-19 in order to prop up share values and profit margins. They also face the trade unions, run by well-heeled bureaucrats that are in the pockets of the bosses. The solution to these problems can only be found in a collective struggle by the working class as a whole.



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