

Blair Alexander Braden, father of two, dies of COVID-19 at Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant

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On Saturday, October 16, the family of Blair Alexander Braden, an autoworker at Stellantis's Sterling Stamping Plant, buried the 47-year-old father of two small children at Greenlawn Cemetery in Detroit. Braden died tragically of COVID-19 on October 3. He had worked at the plant in the north Detroit suburbs for only a year.

His life was honored in a memorial service attended by family members, who came in from several states, along with friends and co-workers at Sterling Stamping and Android, an auto parts company where he previously worked.

During the tributes, his sister Belinda said, "Blair was outspoken and blunt. But he had a loving and giving heart. He loved his two children, Alexandria and Zachary, and we will always treasure his memories."

His cousin Slim said he and Blair were like brothers. "He called me and said, 'Cuz, I got it, and I can't see you for 14 days. I didn't get that shot.' We all got that shot because he's lying in that casket. Life is too short. We've lost too many good friends this year."

Shalice another cousin said, "We tried to see Blair in the hospital. They wouldn't let the family in, but by some mistake they let me up, and I was the last to see him through the glass. He gave me two thumbs up. He fought it hard to the last. I left the hospital thinking he was going to make it."

According to his obituary, Blair graduated from Redford High School in 1993. "He worked several jobs in his lifetime, including Home Depot, Lowes and Android Industries. He began working at Stellantis North American Chrysler plant where he was employed before his untimely passing. For a short period of time, he worked for Superior Ambulance Services as a paramedic. He called himself the 'Funky Paramedic.'"

The suffering of a family and friends over the sudden death of a loved one from Covid is a tragedy that has been repeated millions of times. There have been scores, if not hundreds, of funerals for autoworkers whose deaths have barely been noted by the media, the corporations or the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

Fifth Sterling Stamping death this year

Braden was the fifth Sterling Stamping worker to have passed away this year. He is at least the second to have died of COVID-19.

In April, two Sterling Stamping workers died two days apart. Millwright Mark Bruce, 62, was the first worker in the plant confirmed to have died from COVID-19. He was followed by crane operator Terry Garr, who died in an accident during a die-set at the end of his shift.

Braden is the third Sterling Stamping worker to have died since late September. The two other workers who passed away were Steve S. Waltos, known as "Big Hoss" by his coworkers, and Michelle King. The causes of death for the other two workers have not been publicly released, but one worker suggested that Waltos's death was due to COVID-19.

There have been 93 confirmed infections out of Sterling Stamping's workforce of approximately 2,000, and COVID cases are once again on the rise. The plant is one of the few where updates on new infections are made available to workers. Nationwide, the United Auto Workers union has collaborated with management to conceal and downplay the extent of the spread, while government figures on specific workplace outbreaks are not public.

According to figures shared with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, infections have been steadily on the rise since July. Seven infections have occurred so far this month. However, given a case fatality rate of between 1 to 2 percent, the loss of two working-age men in the plant suggests that these numbers are a substantial undercount.

Throughout the pandemic, management at Stellantis and the other major automakers have claimed that routine temperature checks, social distancing measures and mask mandates have made workers safer in their plants than in the community at large. However, the figures in Sterling Stamping track closely with the numbers for surrounding Macomb County, where cases have increased from a seven-day moving average of 10 per day in late June, shortly before the elimination of remaining social distancing restrictions by the Biden administration and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, to an average of 309 cases today.

This exposes as a lie the claim, endlessly repeated in the corporate press, that the pandemic is on the wane. Similar self-serving claims to justify the full reopening of the economy were

made over the summer, shortly before those policies produced a massive surge in new infections. The reality is that 1,400 people still die from COVID-19 every day in the United States, and reputable health experts predict another surge in the winter months.

Whatever piecemeal social distancing, masking and other mitigations were implemented by management at the start of the pandemic—and their efficacy and consistent application was always greatly exaggerated—they have been progressively eliminated in recent months. Now, plant management at Sterling Stamping no longer even provides masks except on request. Moreover, the difficulty in obtaining unemployment or paid medical leave creates an immense financial hardship on workers who fall ill, creating an incentive to keep working despite symptoms.

Death toll allegedly reaches 12 at Warren Truck

The death toll at other auto plants is almost certainly far higher than what has been publicly revealed. One worker from Stellantis's Warren Truck Assembly Plant, located a few miles south of Sterling Stamping, informed the WSWS that a pipefitter on the midnight shift died from COVID-19 last week, bringing the total in the plant up to 12, according to the worker. She said the real death toll may be even higher, and many people, including possibly herself, have long-term aftereffects.

"The pipefitter's wife got sick, and then he got it. He went to the hospital and was on a ventilator for two days and died. He was a healthy man. I knew him. They [the company and the union] are not putting this information out. They got us working in there even if we're just putting out a few vehicles per shift because of parts shortages. There is no social distancing, there is no masking, all you have to do is fill out an app before you go in. People know if their supervisors come around saying put on your masks, it's because there's an outbreak or somebody died.

"So many workers have died at our plant. Six died last year in the first few months of the pandemic. There have been at least five more, now six, this year, but I know there's a lot more.

"I hired in as a part-timer in the late 90s and didn't become a full-timer until more than a decade later. I've seen people have heart attacks, and they just roll them over so they can keep the line moving. HR is working from home, so are the UAW officials. But we're in here dying. There are so many long haulers here too.

"I got COVID in early 2020 and had to go to the hospital. I have a family member, who is an electrician, who just got COVID. I have grandkids, and I don't want them dying because they're back at school, and it's spreading there. People are struggling, and they've cut off the stimulus checks. We've got to start coming together to get something done, because the government and the unions won't do anything.

"Everything should be shut down like we did in early 2020. This has to be exposed. The UAW doesn't do anything to help us."

Auto plants must be closed to eliminate COVID-19

The press and both political parties claim falsely that workers must accept that the virus will inevitably become endemic and never go away. But reputable scientists have established that the virus can be eliminated through a comprehensive and aggressive public health strategy, involving masks, social distancing, vaccines and, most importantly, the closure of nonessential workplaces and schools. If implemented, such measures, according to Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary, would eliminate COVID-19 entirely within two to three months. Such measures have already been used successfully in China, a far poorer country than the US with four times the population.

But such measures were rejected out of hand from the beginning in the United States by both political parties and the major corporations, who insist instead that workers must learn to "live" with the virus. This means, in plain language, that countless more working-class families, such as the Bradens, must suffer even more tragedies in order to keep profits flowing into Wall Street. As a result, in a year-and-a-half which has seen 750,000 Americans die, the wealth of America's billionaires has surged by 70 percent to more than \$5 trillion, two-thirds more than the wealth controlled by the bottom half of the population, or 165 million people.

At Braden's funeral, two of his former coworkers from Android, a parts supplier that manufactures wheel components for GM, said, "He was a funny and sweet guy. It's sad and ridiculous that people are getting sick and dying in these factories. They shouldn't even be open."

Michelle, Braden's cousin and a retired Ford worker, said, "All the companies care about is keeping the line moving. If you're sick or dead, they'll just fill in your spot. These plants should be shut down and kept closed until they're cleaned out and safe. If you go to work sick, you can be fired. But if you stay off, they won't pay you. Why put people who build these cars in this position?

"My son is a Chrysler worker, and he told me there is COVID on his line, but he's too scared to say anything because he wants to feed his family. Blair didn't feel good. But they don't give you time off and pay to feed your family. They don't care. They've got someone to replace my cousin already so they can keep the line moving."



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