

Death of UAW official from COVID underscores danger in John Deere plants

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United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 450 bargaining committee chair Curtis Templeman died Thursday after contracting COVID-19, one day after the UAW and agricultural manufacturing giant John Deere announced the ratification of a new six-year contract covering some 10,000 workers in Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Georgia and Colorado.

Commenting on his death, UAW Local 450 posted on Facebook, “He fought through what he thought was ‘the sniffles’ to finish these negotiations.” It added, “When it was done, he went to seek medical treatment and was diagnosed with COVID.”

On October 31, Templeman announced on Facebook he had contracted the deadly virus. He said, “Just wanted to make sure that everyone is aware. I felt like crap for the whole last week at bargaining. But I wanted to get that TA wrapped up. So, I just tried to work through it. When I got home yesterday I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t hardly walk without choking to death. So, I went to the doctor within 10 minutes of getting to the house. I found out I have COVID, and pneumonia in both lungs. And the doctors are going to keep me in the hospital for at least the next five days.”

His condition continued to deteriorate, leading ultimately to his untimely death. It is not known if he was vaccinated.

According to UAW Local 450’s website, he was the shop committee chairperson and chief bargaining officer. Commenting on his death, a Deere worker who is part of the Local 450 said, “His position was pretty much in my opinion the most important position in the locals. He had the vice president and president above him. But grievances and all the issues dealing with CIPP, labor relations, and community outreach went mostly through this position.”

On Wednesday, October 20—the same day Tom

Vilsack, the US secretary of agriculture, appeared at a Deere workers’ picket line—a pro-business judge granted Deere an injunction against striking workers at its plant in Davenport, Iowa. Chief Judge Marlita Greve, appointed by Vilsack when he was Iowa governor, prohibited strikers from using chairs and fire barrels. The UAW allowed the injunction its full force. UAW Local 281 in Davenport at the time posted a statement on Facebook ordering workers to obey the order without criticizing it.

For his part, Templeman testified in court during deliberations on a similar injunction sought by Deere at the Ankeny plant. The *Des Moines Register* reports Templeman said during the court hearing, “We’ve quelled everything that [Deere’s lawyers have] talked about. … Those videos that we saw, when people were trying to impede traffic, we’ve talked through all of those. We’ve tried to alleviate all of those. We’ve done everything that we could because we don’t want them either. We want a safe picket.”

As chief bargaining officer, Templeman participated directly in initial rounds of talks between Deere and the UAW, which produced the first widely hated contract that was voted by a 90 percent margin, leading to the first Deere strike in more than 35 years. The UAW then brought another contract widely viewed as falling far short from workers’ demands, which was again voted down. The so-called ratified contract announced Wednesday night—itself a near replica of the second contract—was rammed through using intimidation in a sham election.

Amidst a raging pandemic, the new contract includes nothing on mitigation efforts to reduce the spread of the virus at Deere’s operations. The death of Templeman underscores the unrelenting dangers of the pandemic. As one Deere worker told the WSWS, Templeman’s

position was an office job.

If Templeman contracted the virus outside of working in a plant, what of the Deere workers who are now returning to the factories, working side by side as the pandemic continues to rage?

Worksites have been major sources of COVID spread and outbreaks. A worker at the John Deere Des Moines Works told the WSWS, “I wasn’t here for the worst of it but I talked to people who said that there were a lot of people missing. How many I can’t tell you. They have an official number somewhere but when I talk to guys about that they said who knows if the official number is true, it is probably more than that.”

In Waterloo, Iowa, the site of the large UAW local at Deere, with 3,000 workers out of the 10,000 nationwide, sits Tyson’s largest pork plant in the US, where last year a major scandal broke out. Tyson managers were found to have been taking bets on how many workers would become infected. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) played the filthy role of keeping workers on the job as the virus spread like wildfire, agreeing to \$500 “thank you bonuses” for workers who did not miss a shift for three months in a row.

The bonuses took advantage of poor and indebted workers and encouraged them to stay on the job even if they were sick with COVID. In the US, at least 59,000 meatpacking workers have contracted COVID-19 and 269 workers have died.

The capitalist ruling class has determined that profits must be placed over lives with governments across the country enforcing their murderous agenda, culminating in the policy of letting the virus rip, also known as “herd immunity.”

Republican Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds has been among the most savage proponents of the “herd immunity” policy, along with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, opposing any minimal protections for the population. Iowa’s transmission rates have been essentially uncontrolled since August and are growing worse. Some 510,000 Iowans have contracted the virus, and 7,268 have died from it.

It is the same for the Democrats. Illinois, under the billionaire Democrat J. B. Pritzker, pursuing the “mitigation” strategy and keeping schools and workplaces open with only loosely enforced mask

requirements, has fared similarly, and cases are spiking rapidly in the state, up 80 percent from two weeks ago. Both parties, with the support of the unions, have pursued strategies that place profits over workers’ health and lives.

It is necessary for workers to mobilize nationally and internationally to put a halt to this murderous policy. Deere workers should study and follow the example of autoworkers who played the leading role in shutting down the auto industry and broader economy in March 2020, by launching wildcat strikes to halt production and protect workers as the virus spread rapidly in the early stages of the pandemic. The wildcat strikes were an international phenomenon, taking place in Europe and North and South America.

On October 24, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees held a webinar titled “How to end the pandemic.” This event brought together a panel of leading scientists, epidemiologists and doctors to explain the case for the global elimination of the COVID-19. The information in this webinar is critical for workers in understanding how the virus ends and how it can be stopped. It should be shared widely and discussed with workers across different plants in different industries.

As the WSWS insisted, it is necessary to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to prepare strike action to close schools and all non-essential production, and demand full compensation for workers and small businesses until the pandemic is brought under control.



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