

Family and coworkers cope with tragic suicide death of Stellantis autoworker in Toledo

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Workers at the Stellantis Toledo Assembly Complex in northwest Ohio were shocked and saddened this week by the apparent suicide by hanging of a 60-year-old plant electrician, John Ballard. According to press reports, the incident occurred at the plant around 3:35 p.m. on Monday.

Following the discovery of Ballard's body, Stellantis halted production in that area of the plant, where the Jeep Gladiator is built. The entire second shift was sent home and no production was run that evening. The area of the plant that builds the Jeep Wrangler was not affected by the shutdown. The Jeep complex employs about 5,700 production workers running two shifts.

Stellantis spokeswoman Jodi Tinson released the following statement on the death: "Our thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of a Toledo assembly plant employee who was found dead at the plant around 4 pm on Monday. At that time, the production environment was not up and running. We worked with the Toledo police to conduct an investigation and arrange to provide counseling support to our employees. We will respect our families and will not confirm the victim's name or other details. The second shift on the Gladiator side of the complex was canceled on Monday night."

As of this writing, the United Auto Workers has made no public statement on the tragedy.

According to an obituary posted on legacy.com, Mr. Ballard was a lifelong resident of Toledo, attending Woodward High School. He married his companion, Lori, in 1988. He served in the Navy as a sonar technician and worked at the Jeep plant since 2005 as an electrician. John was a musician and played the bass guitar in several local bands and was noted for his love of cats.

He is survived by his wife Lori, son Andrew, two

sisters and two nieces.

In a Facebook post Monday, Lori wrote: "I lost the love of my life yesterday and I'm not sure how I'm going to continue on I feel so many emotions right now it's hard to process anything. I just know that the next few weeks are going to [be] extremely difficult as my health is already in a compromised situation and the stress is just going to make it worse."

No one can be certain of the precise reasons Mr. Ballard made the tragic decision to take his own life. Whatever the combination of circumstances, it took place under conditions of a global pandemic that has taken at least 5 million lives and perhaps as many as 15 million, according to models of unreported deaths. Autoworkers and other nonessential workers have been forced to labor through the pandemic in close quarters in poorly ventilated factories. As the pandemic enters its third year, many Jeep workers have been sickened and an unknown number have died.

During the pandemic, production has been erratic, with the plant down for extended periods due to a shortage of microchips, cutting into workers' income. Adding to the stress and uncertainty, management and the United Auto Workers have been concealing the number and location of COVID infections, making it difficult for workers to protect themselves and family members. Workers forced to take sick leave or quarantine have faced significant hurdles in obtaining paid time off.

To make up for production lost during earlier shutdowns and supply chain shortages, Stellantis is now running the Jeep plant at full tilt, with production workers on the job up to 60 hours a week. One Jeep worker, who wanted his name to be confidential, told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, "We are doing six 10s [i.e., 10-hour shifts a week],

both sides of the plant. Two shifts, day shift and night shift. It is called the 40, 50, 60 pick program. We are allowed based on seniority to choose our day off.

“We can work as low as 40, 50 and up to 60 hours in a given week. There is forced overtime based on the contract language, which we don’t like. You can work 84-hour weeks back-to-back, but the most they can force you to work is 60. The whole point of the union was the 40-hour workweek and here we are at 60 hours; it’s ridiculous.”

The worker added: “His wife had been ill. When you are working up to 60 hours a week it is not good for you. And these guys [electricians] do 12-hour shifts and they are there up to 70 hours. Some guys volunteer for it. I don’t know if he did. They try to force electricians to do a lot of stuff, a lot of hours.

“They sent the second shift home at 5:30 p.m. I want to say they did it out of respect for John, but I know it was to prevent people from taking pictures and posting it out there. The fewer people are there the less likely things are to get out.

“People in the plant didn’t even know what was going on until a couple of hours later from postings on Facebook. The facts did not come out for several hours.”

Last year there were 48,344 deaths by suicide in the United States, the 10th leading cause of death. The suicide rate for military veterans is 50 percent higher than for the general population.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide risk is elevated in several major occupations. Second on the list are repair and maintenance workers, after mining and construction.

While relatively rare, workplace suicides had been rising prior to the onset of the pandemic, reaching a record 304 in 2018. While mass layoffs during the pandemic depressed the number, stress on the job has increased.

In March 2021 Evan Seyfried, a 40-year-old dairy supervisor employed at Kroger in Milford, Ohio, died by suicide. His body was discovered by the man’s father in his home. Family and coworkers assert that Seyfried committed suicide after facing abuse by the store’s manager, who harassed him for insisting on wearing a mask. The United Food and Commercial Workers did nothing about the manager, who had mistreated other employees as well. The family has

filed a lawsuit against Kroger.

In October 2017, 21-year-old autoworker Jacoby Hennings, a temporary part-time worker, died in what police said was a suicide at the Ford Woodhaven Stamping Plant south of Detroit. The young worker had been employed at two separate temp jobs at the time, hoping to secure a full-time position. Police say he shot himself shortly after meeting for one hour with three UAW officials at the plant over an unspecified grievance. The content of that meeting has never been made public. Aside from a perfunctory statement following Hennings’ death, the UAW never issued any further explanation of the circumstances of the tragedy.



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