

# After Sterling Heights Assembly worker and husband die of suspected COVID-19, Stellantis management announces plant will run through Christmas Eve

Shannon Jones  
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With the Omicron variant spreading out of control in the United States and around the world, management at Stellantis' Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) says it will keep the giant facility open through Christmas Eve. Although the move has been confirmed to the *World Socialist Web Site* by multiple plant workers, it is not clear as of this writing whether the move affects the entire plant workforce or only certain departments.

The announcement follows the death earlier this month of a SHAP worker and her husband, Monique and Anthony Bowen. Plant workers believe the deaths were COVID-19 related, although this has not been confirmed by management or the United Auto Workers. They are survived by a daughter, Quanique Willis, also a SHAP worker.

The provocative announcement of Christmas Eve shifts comes at the end of a "critical status" period in the plant, where workers were forced to work for 90 consecutive days to make up for lost production at the plant due to widespread supply chain problems. SHAP, which produces the highly profitable Ram pickup trucks, is among the most important for the entire Stellantis company.

SHAP workers inform the *World Socialist Web Site* that the union has told them that 300 workers are off for COVID-19 or quarantining at SHAP. The continued operation of the plant through the holidays will inevitably lead to a further explosion in cases.

However, management and the union officialdom, much like they did at the start of the pandemic, are retreating to the safety of their own homes. At approximately the same time that the announcement was made about the Christmas Eve shifts, UAW Local 1700, which covers SHAP, announced it was canceling the December membership meeting and closing its business office between December 24 and January 3.

Public health experts warn that the super-infectious Omicron variant will lead to the largest surge in cases yet, and the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation predicts 2.8 million new cases *each day* by the end of January. But in remarks Tuesday, President Biden rejected new lockdowns of schools and nonessential business on the false grounds that such measures were unnecessary because the country

is better positioned to meet the surge than it was in March 2020. In fact, shutdowns occurred in that early stage of the pandemic in response to a global wildcat strike wave, centered on the auto industry, which forced the shutdowns.

In reality, next to schools, factories and other large workplaces are among the main vectors of transmission for COVID-19. Auto plants, which have thousands of workers crowded together in enclosed areas with poor ventilation, where they are often compelled to shout over deafening industrial machinery, have ideal conditions for the aerosolized spread of coronavirus.

But the state government of Democrat Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, where cases were already surging before the emergence of Omicron, has responded to this not by closing factories, but by discontinuing reporting figures on outbreaks at factories and construction sites.

Already, the number of deaths in the auto plants is rapidly growing. Earlier this week the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* reported the deaths of Omie Smith and Kevin Andrew Railey at the Sterling Stamping plant (SSP), located next to SHAP. A post on the UAW Local 140 Facebook page at the nearby Warren Truck plant reported the death of an unnamed worker due to COVID-19.

"Multiple people in the plant are testing positive," a veteran Warren Truck worker who was infected in early 2020 told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. "They need to shut it down. I read on the Facebook site that people are getting COVID like crazy even though they're vaccinated. Someone needs to stand up and shut them down."

A worker at the Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter* of two deaths at the plant within two weeks this past month. One was a 46-year-old worker and the other was a 51-year-old. The official causes of death have not been publicly confirmed.

A Ford Ohio Assembly worker said, "No additional precautions here. They have really been lax. They aren't even cleaning stations after positive cases.

"The hospitals will be like war zones... marking patients' heads with 'save' or 'no treatment' marks."

The response from management and the United Auto Workers union has an air of unreality about it. A letter from Stellantis management to workers this week acknowledged that COVID-19 cases were rising, but announced no new measures to protect workers, merely advising workers to wear masks, wash their hands and social distance, an impossibility in a crowded auto plant.

The management letter goes on to offer the following advice. “As you make plans for holiday celebrations, being aware of people’s health status before you gather will keep you and your loved ones safe and healthy. Ask the people you will be with in advance if they are vaccinated and if they have been exposed to anyone with the COVID-19 virus in the last week.”

The hypocrisy of this statement is staggering. If they were seriously concerned about exposing the families of autoworkers to COVID-19, they would have shut down the plants long ago. While they encourage autoworkers to ask if family members have been exposed, thousands of autoworkers themselves have been exposed, often without their knowledge given the systematic cover-up of cases by management and the union, which has left many relying on word of mouth to follow the spread of cases in their plants.

Management, clearly fearful that anger in the plants is reaching the boiling point, have been suddenly rushing up and down the lines at some plants to enforce masking requirements which they had left unenforced for months, workers inform the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Channeling their inner Marie Antoinette, Sterling Stamping management attempted to placate rising tensions in the facility by announcing an additional 10 minutes for the workers’ lunch break on Thursday! Workers responded on social media with disbelief and sarcasm. “Great negotiating guys!” one worker said, in reference to the UAW.

UAW Local 1264, which covers Sterling Stamping, issued a call earlier this week for a “moment of silence” “to reflect and honor those we have lost.”

One Sterling Stamping worker responded: “Ten minutes extra, hugs and prayers—the UAW is paid to protect us and the company is criminally neglectful [for] manslaughter by not enforcing COVID protocols. The UAW is criminally responsible and a tool of management.”

Remarking on moves by management to more strictly enforce masking, a worker commented, “It is about time. We are here to make a living, not die. ... some of us die to make auto parts for a company that only cares about a profit. ... [and] a union that has left employees to die.”

The situation is being made worse by economic blackmail, in which many workers, unable to do without a paycheck for two weeks during the expensive holiday season, feel pressured to work through exposures and even infections. One worker at the Stellantis Mack Avenue plant in Detroit said, “It’s insane in the plant. The scariest thing is that you can be exposed multiple times in a single day. Everyone is sick.

“So many workers are going home sick, that a lot of times, there aren’t enough workers to start shifts. The TPTs (temporary part-time workers) are being forced to do 12 hours shifts to fill in. Then there are workers who are coming in sick because if they take off, they won’t be paid over the holidays. People need the money and

are doing whatever they can to stay at work.

“People are losing their parents. I’ve signed two sympathy cards this week for my co-workers. One lost a mother and the other a father.

“The company and the union aren’t doing anything to inform us when a worker gets COVID. But we’re finding out on our own and we’re talking to each other. There’s only one reason why a worker would be sent home now when they need all the workers they can get. It’s because they got COVID.”

A worker at the Stellantis Tipton, Indiana, transmission plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “Something that is seriously bothering me is knowing we the factory workers are forced to come to work with a deadly pandemic, that’s one thing, but the other part [is] that the company and union are allowing the regional reps and international reps and all that work for them ... to work from home.

“If that doesn’t tell people that their union dues mean nothing... Workers are being looked at the same way farm animals are looked at. When they die they will just hire more. Not one person who works at Chrysler means anything, especially to the company and the international [UAW].

“A worker’s husband was found dead last week,” he added. “They are trying to keep it quiet, because this worker tried to tell them there are workers testing positive for COVID-19, but afraid to say anything because they can’t afford to go without a paycheck. This is where the company and union are at fault. The really bad part is knowing that the company and union know what’s going on inside the plants.”

All sections of the political and corporate establishment as well as the unions are committed to a policy of putting profits before human lives. Workers cannot accept the proposition that their lives and the lives of their loved ones are expendable, a mere cost of doing business. Decisive action is required to fight for the shutdown of the factories, nonessential businesses and schools and full compensation for workers until the virus can be eliminated. The experience of China and other countries demonstrates that this is an achievable goal.

The fight for this requires workers build their own organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporate-controlled unions. The Socialist Equality Party and the *Autoworker Newsletter* will assist workers interested in building and expanding rank-and-file committees at their plants.



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