

More workers died of COVID-19 at one Michigan auto plant than all of China in 2021

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Xavier Anderson, a worker at Stellantis' Sterling Stamping Plant north of Detroit, died recently, according to a Facebook post by United Auto Workers Local 1264. While the cause of death was not made public, one worker confirmed to the *World Socialist Web Site* that Anderson died of COVID-19.

The confirmed COVID-19 death toll during 2021 inside the plant now stands at five. Two other workers, Kevin Railey and Omie Smith, died earlier this month, Blair Alexander Braden in October, and skilled tradesman Mark Bruce in April. A sixth worker, Terry Garr, also died in April from an accident in the plant.

COVID-19 cases at Sterling Stamping are continuing to rise. Thirty-five infections have been confirmed in December, close to November's record high of 42 infections. These two months have by far the highest reported infections at the plant during the pandemic and account for more than 40 percent of total confirmed cases. This is all the more significant given that the plant has been working with a reduced workforce for much of the fall and winter.

Over 830,000 Americans have died during the coronavirus pandemic. Worldwide, the real death toll is estimated to be over 15 million. But those who died were not statistics to those who knew them but family members, friends and coworkers whose lives were tragically cut short.

This is the human cost of the disastrous pandemic policies carried out by capitalist governments in the United States and around the world, whose refusal to close down workplaces and schools or implement other critical public health measures have allowed the virus to engulf much of the world's population.

Last week, with the hyper-infectious Omicron variant already spreading out of control in the US, President Biden declared in a televised address that there would be no new shutdowns of schools or nonessential businesses, instead focusing his remarks on encouraging vaccinations. Biden claimed, falsely, that lockdowns were unnecessary because the country is in a better position than it was in March 2020, when limited lockdowns were carried out amid popular pressure, above all, a wave of wildcat strikes in the auto industry.

In a presentation which bore no relationship to reality, Biden claimed that the country's hospital system was better prepared

to handle a surge and claimed, falsely, that new information has demonstrated that lockdowns of schools and workplaces are unnecessary. Biden even encouraged those who are vaccinated not to cancel Christmas travel plans, even though they are not fully protected from becoming infected or transmitting the virus to others.

In fact, government figures have shown consistently that schools and workplaces are the principal vectors of transmission. While the precise extent of COVID-19 in the auto plants is not known—due to coverups of cases and deaths by management and the UAW—the situation at Sterling Stamping is by no means unique.

At the Warren Truck Assembly Plant, at least six workers died in 2020, and unconfirmed reports from workers suggest that at least that many have died this year. At the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, the largest auto factory in Michigan with over 7,000 workers, approximately 300 are currently out for COVID-19-related issues, and a worker and her husband are believed to have recently died of COVID-19.

Lockdowns, quarantining, income support for those affected and other measures have been rejected out of hand by the capitalist ruling class as an intolerable drain on profits and share values, which have surged throughout the pandemic. Stellantis itself has reported a net revenue of \$13.5 billion through three quarters and is on track to make a profit margin for the year of 10 percent, even in spite of a sharp fall in production due to the global semiconductor shortage.

Meanwhile, even as modeling predicts *millions* of new infections a day in the US by the end of January, remaining restraints on profit-making are being abandoned. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced on Monday that it was halving the isolation period for workers exposed to COVID-19 from 10 to five days, a move whose sole purpose is to prevent a labor shortage in the coming weeks as much of the country becomes infected.

An indication of the scale of the social crime being committed in the US and other developed countries is illustrated by the fact that China, a still relatively poor country, has been able to quickly identify and suppress outbreaks through a regime of targeted lockdowns, contact tracing and vaccinations. These measures have limited the human impact of

COVID-19 to such an extent that since January of 2021, only two people have died in a country of 1.4 billion, according to Worldometer.

In other words, Sterling Stamping, with a total workforce of 2,151, accounts for more than twice as many deaths this year as the world's most populous country. On a per capita basis, mortality due to COVID-19 at this single auto plant is roughly *1.3 million times* higher than in China.

China is a dictatorship, ruled by the venal and corrupt bureaucracy of the Chinese Communist Party. Contrary to its claims to be communist, it presides over a capitalist economy with extreme levels of inequality, with the second most dollar billionaires in the world, behind only the United States. But the Zero COVID policy which its government has pursued has been guided by the long-established and accepted science for suppressing and eliminating the coronavirus and enjoys wide support in the Chinese population.

Moreover, the furious attacks by the American corporate press on China's COVID-19 policies cannot disguise the fact that the dictatorship of finance capital in the United States has caused hundreds of thousands of needless deaths during the pandemic.

In comparison to China, where public health measures are still strictly observed, the piecemeal, mostly theatrical measures implemented at Sterling Stamping have been almost entirely dismantled. Even masking requirements, never seriously enforced, were until recently essentially abandoned. A phone app for self-reporting symptoms has gone increasingly unmonitored.

In China, the location and size of outbreaks are widely reported in the news and on the internet in order to facilitate testing and quarantining, and to inform as many as possible who may have been exposed. At Sterling Stamping, on the other hand, workers are not even told—neither by the UAW nor management—which of their coworkers have died of COVID-19. “The union will not disclose whether a death was due to COVID-19 on their own, but if you ask them directly, they will usually tell you,” one worker observed.

As for the Michigan state government led by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, it has stopped reporting on outbreaks in factories since Thanksgiving.

Inside Sterling Stamping, a combination of factors has created an ideal scenario for the spread of COVID-19. According to notifications sent to workers and obtained by the *World Socialist Web Site*, four departments have accounted for roughly two-thirds of new cases since the summer.

“These departments are skilled trades and hi-lo operators, mostly in the pressroom. There are no masks, PPE is not enforced; it is very loud and hearing protection is mandatory. The noise forces workers to conduct close and loud conversations without distancing, accelerating COVID-19 ... the perfect storm,” a worker told the WSW.

One worker sent photos of the entrance to the plant showing

stanchion posts, formerly used to enforce social distancing measures, sitting bunched up and unused in the middle of the hallway. Weathered signs on the walls instruct workers to “self-regulate.” One sign even instructed workers—after they have already entered the facility—to stand near it while putting on their masks.

“Tattered signage, broken safety promises by the company and UAW,” the worker commented. “Broken lives for UAW families. I believe this is criminal neglect [by] the UAW and company.”

While managers and UAW officials around the country retreat to the safety of their own homes in the face of Omicron, no serious measures are offered to protect workers. Last week, management at the plant announced an extra 10-minute break the day before Christmas, and the union called for a moment of silence for the workers who have died.

Workers must draw up a balance sheet of the last two years. In announcing the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic last month, the WSW explained, “Drawing upon the research of scientists, the knowledge of public health experts and the real-world experience of working people and students, the Inquest will investigate and document the disastrous response of governments, corporations and the media to the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. It will seek to expose the political and economic forces and interests that drove the policies that allowed the uncontrolled transmission of the virus and its development into a catastrophic pandemic that has killed millions worldwide.”

The situation at Sterling Stamping and other auto plants must be exposed. To contact the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions in your plant, email us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



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