

32-year-old Ford Chicago Assembly Plant worker dies of COVID-19

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To tell us about conditions at your plant, email autoworkers@wsws.org. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On January 13, Caleb Mateo Dye, a young worker at Chicago Ford Assembly Plant (CAP) in Chicago, Illinois, died after a long battle against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Caleb had been in the hospital for infection with COVID-19 since December 10, according to Facebook posts by his wife.

A Facebook post announcing Caleb's death January 13 in a UAW Local 551 Facebook group received over 400 comments and reactions from workers who mourned the loss of their coworker and expressed condolences for his family.

An obituary posted on Facebook reads, "Caleb Mateo Dye, 32, of Chicago and Miami, OK passed away on January 13, 2022, at Ingalls Memorial Hospital in Harvey, IL. ... Caleb was known as a loving husband and father. He was so gentle and playful, and brought joy everywhere he went. He will be remembered for his sense of humor, his encouraging spirit, his hard work ethic, his love for bringing people together, his kindness and generosity.

"Survivors include his father (Charles Dye), mother (Rose Mary Marshall-Dye), wife (Alma Dye), daughter (Lali), and four brothers: Jason (Chicago), Brian (Chicago), Chuckie (Indiana), and David (New Hampshire) and several nieces (Jocelyn, Chloe, Kendra, Lily Rose, and Olivet) whom he loved dearly."

On December 13, Caleb's wife Alma wrote, "My husband Caleb Mateo Dye has been in the hospital due to covid since Friday. His body is fighting to clear the pneumonia in his lungs and he's on a bypap machine that's assisting him to breathe at 100%. Without the machine his oxygen levels go from 88-93 to a low 70... They have stopped feeding him and giving him water as a means to keep him 'dry.' This is frustrating for him... They're avoiding intubation so please pray he will not need that."

"Day and night I'm praying for my beloved to heal and come back home!"

In the week after his hospitalization, Caleb's health seemed to improve very slowly. But like many reported

experiences of COVID-19 patients, his condition subsequently worsened, and he was eventually intubated on the morning of January 12. After being placed in a medically induced-coma to aid resuscitation efforts, he succumbed to the virus and his life tragically ended the night of January 13.

The story of Caleb's illness—and the suffering of his friends and family—paints a devastating picture of the reality that over 874,000 Americans and millions worldwide have been subjected to. The majority of those who have died from COVID-19 are from the working class, which has been forced by the corporations and the capitalist political parties, aided by the trade unions, to work under conditions that virtually guarantee that the virus will infect them, their coworkers and their families and loved ones.

In a callous display of indifference, neither management nor the United Auto Workers union has stopped production to allow workers to grieve, or apparently even felt the need to tell all workers that their coworker died.

"Thanks for letting us know about the forklift driver who died. We both drive forklifts and no, we haven't heard anything about it," a Ford CAP forklift operator told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* upon hearing about Caleb's death.

At Ford CAP, infections across the plant have accelerated during the past eight weeks since the Thanksgiving holiday ended. "The team leader on the line across from me came in here with COVID last week," the worker said. "I know four people in the same area were sick and medical had to come down and take them away. I know there is a supervisor that was on a ventilator and he wasn't doing good, 28-year-old guy on night shift.

"Neither the union nor Ford never tells us when someone dies or they get sick," he said. "I believe it's very dangerous in here."

Workers from the plant have told the *Autoworker Newsletter* and raised concerns on social media that employees are encouraged to come in sick. Another CAP worker said that those who have been reinfected with the

virus—an increased likelihood with the highly mutated Omicron variant—are not being provided paid COVID leave by Ford. “Ford will only pay you when you’re positive the first time,” he said. “Second, third, they’re not going to pay you. It seems to me unfair. If you’re coming to work and being exposed so much, they should be paying you when you get sick.”

The minimal safety measures that Ford implemented in the spring of 2020 have either been abandoned or are hardly enforced. Workers are not given high-quality N95 or KN95 masks by the company. Instead, they are provided with flimsy surgical masks that break easily and are far less effective against the aerosolized virus.

As is the case throughout the auto industry, the United Auto Workers union hasn’t lifted a finger to ensure the safety of its members at CAP. “It is wrong for them to keep us in here, and the union people won’t do anything,” the forklift operator said.

The dangerous conditions at CAP are neither unique to the factory nor the company itself. Workers from auto plants in Michigan have written to the *Autoworker Newsletter* to expose the same conditions in their workplaces and the UAW’s criminal negligence in ignoring the immediate threat to workers’ safety and health from the spread of the Omicron variant.

Autoworkers are well aware that the UAW has been helping plant management to cover up reports of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the factories since the pandemic started in 2020. Workers have said they are even threatened with firing if they contract or are exposed to COVID-19 and seek to let other workers know so they can get tested.

“I heard of 10 people who died at Kansas City since Christmas from COVID,” a worker at Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant, which builds the Transit van and F-150 pickup, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “The union did not say anything about it from the plant. They’re protecting the company.”

At Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant north of Detroit, Michigan, at least three workers have died from COVID during the past holiday season. Management and the union continue to keep workers in the dark about the true extent of the spread of the virus.

Like the other Big Three auto companies, Stellantis and General Motors, Ford has reaped a profit bonanza while workers in its plants labor under pandemic conditions. Last year, US automakers reported earnings that beat analysts’ expectations, driven by the ramp-up of production and the refusal by company management and the UAW to shut down, provide income to workers on furlough and stem the spread of COVID.

“More people at Ford Chicago are getting sick,” the first

worker said. “But Ford keeps running junk, even scheduling overtime on Sunday and Saturday. I agree that they should shut down again. It’s only getting worse.”

Opposition is growing to the ruling class’s murderous policy of letting the virus spread without restraint. In the last two weeks, educators in Chicago voted to force a shift to remote learning in order to stop the spread in schools and among children’s families. Their courageous action was sabotaged and betrayed by the Chicago Teachers Union last week, which reached a deal with the city’s Democratic Party administration to reopen schools with no serious improvements to safety.

Just last Friday, however, thousands of high school students in Chicago themselves took action, walking out of schools and demanding a transition to virtual instruction and the resignation of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who has brutally enforced the reopening of in-person learning while the virus surges.

Autoworkers across the US have formed rank-and-file safety committees in response to the immediate crisis. The *Autoworker Newsletter* has published their statements demanding necessary safety measures to stop the explosive spread of COVID, including:

- The immediate closure of all schools, non-essential plants and other workplaces, with full income for workers affected
- Regular, free testing for all workers
- The provision of free, high-quality N95 masks for all workers
- A program of rigorous contact tracing and quarantining for at least 14 days of symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals

The fight to end the pandemic is not primarily a medical question, but a political one. As long as corporations like Ford are in control of health and safety measures in the plants and dictate government policy, subordinating workers’ lives to the profit interests of Wall Street, more tragedies like Caleb’s are inevitable.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to take matters into their own hands and organize independent rank-and-file committees, in order to prepare walkouts and force the shutdown of COVID-infested plants, and fight for the deployment of all necessary public education and health measures to combat the pandemic. Fill out the form below to get involved today:



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