

Dana Fort Wayne workers speak on death of their coworker

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John Saraceno passed away at the age of 62 on January 31 while working at Dana Incorporated's Fort Wayne plant. Dana is a major auto parts supplier and Fortune 500 company.

According to his obituary, he is survived by his wife, Patricia Saraceno of Fort Wayne; daughters, Angela (Zach) Gibson and Jacquelin Saraceno both of Fort Wayne; granddaughter, Alora; and siblings, Patty Gavrilis, Linda Bowers, and Michael Saraceno. He worked as a mechanic for over seven years at the plant.

His death struck his fellow workers deeply. While the cause of death was not made public by the family, neither the United Steelworkers (USW) nor Dana have provided any substantive details to workers. Beside a brief listing on the USW Local 903 website, workers only heard about the incident by word of mouth. Those working at the plant that day reported it to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

According to a fellow worker, John Saraceno was sitting at a break table with another worker when she noticed he was not looking well. But he said he was okay and went back to work.

Another worker had only kind words to say about him. "Yes I was there, not sure what happened to John. Spoke to him just about every day ... good guy." Many workers were shocked that his death was not widely discussed by management.

A second-tier production worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "He was on second shift in the garage, and it took first responders more than six minutes to get to him because the speakers are hard to hear. [It is] messed up in places throughout the plant."

A seniority worker described the ongoing issues with safety. "The door for the ambulance hasn't worked from the day it was installed. It was reported to [Dana] management two times; nothing came of that. The safety director here is a joke; workers don't even get basic safety training."

"Dana said they were bringing outside contractors for the PA systems, but things have not changed," he continued. "Supervisors drive around in these carts taking pictures of people to get them fired rather than checking on the health of workers."

"The mask to the O2 bottle wasn't in the bag," the worker reported. "The wrench to turn on the O2 was not easy to find. Since this happened the AED [automated defibrillator] hasn't been put back in case of another incident."

Sarcastically, he remarked, "Very nice that no card has been passed around [by Dana]. Shows how little they care about us."

The circumstances of Saraceno's death remain unclear, but in light of the longstanding safety issues at the plant, the apparent eagerness to sweep it under the rug, and the unfolding social catastrophe of the pandemic in the background, workers have every right to want to know more about what precisely happened to their friend and fellow worker.

Saraceno's death occurred during a period when significant numbers of workers are dying from COVID as well as other industrial accidents. Meanwhile, according to a US Labor Department Office of the Inspector General report issued in 2021, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA] conducted 50 percent fewer on-site inspections and issued fewer than 300 COVID violations in 2020, even though complaints increased by 15 percent and state workplace safety agencies issued five times as many citations and fines as OSHA.

Early September 2021, a production worker at Dana's Fort Wayne plant handling parts inside a robot cage stepped on a loose controller cord, fell and slammed her head twice on the concrete floor. After management sent her back to work despite her injuries, the following week she collapsed from a seizure and was sent to the emergency room but was sent back to work once again. In

the same month, workers say they were sprayed with a chemical disinfectant, Aspen One Step, supposedly to prevent the spread of COVID, despite the chemical having serious warnings regarding inhalation or bodily exposure. Workers were held on the line while they began to suffer from headaches and nausea.

Workers are subject to dangers when climbing into confined areas to handle parts when machines break down. The USW has largely acquiesced to these conditions.

Last month, the USW announced they would ratify the contract that was overwhelmingly rejected by workers at Fort Wayne. For months the USW claimed they were waiting on national leadership for instruction. To crush the opposition, the union is now using legalistic loopholes to enforce the contract, stating that the bylaws were not drawn up by lawyers.

The seniority worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that workers are facing a struggle on two fronts, against both the union bureaucracy and management. “Dana has no regards or respect for employees,” he said.

“Now with the contract being ratified, the union is going back and changing things with the company and contract,” he continued. “Workers don’t have benefits and wages are cut. With last week’s storm, workers should have been allowed to leave much earlier than 7 p.m. It jeopardizes safety. COVID seems like it slowed down in the plant, but it’s still going around since all of the counties are in ‘red.’”

According to the Indiana COVID-19 dashboard, almost all counties outside of four are designated red, meaning 200 or higher weekly cases per 100,000 residents. In Allen County, where the Fort Wayne plant is located, weekly cases are at 390 per 100,000 residents. With the possibility of further surges of the coronavirus and new variants, the state’s official death toll of 21,335—itself an underestimate, based on models of unreported deaths—has the potential to increase substantially.



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