

Illinois autoworker Travis Baker died after being injured at the Belvidere Stellantis plant; one month later, his family has no answers

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Autoworkers: Share your experience with unsafe conditions in your plant. Fill out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Watch rank-and-file worker and UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman debate Ray Curry on Thursday, September 22 at 6 p.m. Eastern. For more information visit, www.willforuawpresident.org/debate.

Travis Baker was a 49-year-old autoworker and father of four sons, with more than 27 years with the company once known as Chrysler, then Fiat Chrysler and now Stellantis. Baker died on August 18 after being injured Friday, August 12, on his day shift in the Stellantis plant in Belvidere, Illinois, near Rockford.

The circumstances of Baker's death are not clear, and his family is anxiously awaiting answers from the Winnebago County coroner's office as to how he was fatally injured in the plant.

A member of the Baker family spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on Travis' experiences as an autoworker and on the shock, grief and financial burden following his sudden death.

Initial reports received by the family about the incident indicate that Baker left the paint shop early in his shift on August 12 to use the bathroom. Some minutes after leaving the line, he was discovered by a maintenance worker, unconscious and bleeding on the ground with a three-inch gash on his forehead. Baker was placed in intensive care, never regained consciousness and succumbed to his injuries several days later.

A family member told the WSWS, "If there were enough microchips, he worked six days a week, upwards of 60 hours per week for several weeks at a time. That was the situation in the days leading up to his death. The company cut the other shift, and they're being worn down

and worked very hard, inhumanely.

"Imagine the line is moving and you're doing not one, but two or even three jobs on the line. That's not safe. It's like they want them to get worn down."

After Chrysler closed its Fenton, Missouri, plant, Baker sacrificed to stay on with the company, moving to Illinois to work at the Belvidere plant—more than 300 miles away—and seeing his wife, Judy, and their two sons, Samuel and Joseph, back in Missouri only twice a month. Travis also has two adult sons, Justin and Alex.

Travis was also only two and a half years away from retirement. "He was at the tail end of his career and that's what makes this so bitter. Many workers were taking the early buyout and the conditions were made miserable, so they would choose to leave early and Travis refused. He was a very hard worker.

"Travis loved his coworkers and he loved and had confidence in his work."

Neither Stellantis nor the United Auto Workers have offered the family any form of assistance or sent even a condolence card. His family members are relying on a GoFundMe page to get by.

Before Travis died, his son Samuel wrote on the GoFundMe page, "My father is currently hospitalized, and according to the doctors, he has only a few days more to live. He is the sole provider for a family of four, my mom, my younger brother of 16, and myself. These funds would go towards helping our family by covering our daily living costs, bills and potentially higher education for myself as we face this challenging time in our lives.

"This past Friday, the 12th, my dad Travis Baker suffered a severe incident at his place of work. He is in the ICU and has been in critical condition for the past three days. The rest of my family and I are in a state of shock right now and are still trying to process what is

happening; we are getting constant updates from the hospital, and after this last call, they said we should prepare for the worst.

“As we struggle to comprehend what is happening right now, my family also faces the struggles of the day-to-day costs of life as we attempt to arrange one last visit to my father before he passes. The funds given to us by you kind people will go towards the needs of my family and will also contribute to paying for my higher education. However, as things stand, I will likely be seeking employment to help support my mother and brother in these rough times. Thank you for taking your time to understand my family’s situation, and I ask for your hopes and prayers as we face this terrible time in our lives.”

“I have a low opinion of the safety in the plant”

An autoworker with more than 10 years in the Belvidere plant told the WSWS that safety is a major problem. “They are really big on turning off lighting to save money. They also enjoy turning off ventilation to save. Fumes build up if they don’t turn on ventilation. I have a low opinion of the safety in the plant. It is the worst.”

The Belvidere plant has also been subjected to unrelenting cuts and layoffs. In May 2021, the company announced the indefinite layoff of the entire second shift, or 1,641 hourly workers or half of the plant’s workforce, by July 26. But Stellantis management implemented this on June 1, significantly speeding up the timeline, and placing enormous pressure on the remaining workers.

Last March, the UAW announced that Stellantis planned to further reduce Belvidere to “603 non-skilled and 199 skilled trades employees.” The layoffs were anticipated to affect even those workers with decades of seniority at the plant, going back as far as 1994. In advance of the contract expirations between the UAW and the Big Three, speculation has grown in the media that Stellantis may target Belvidere for permanent closure.

At the start of the year, Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares was awarded a \$20.5 million pay package. More than half of the company’s 2021 profits of \$15.2 billion, a three-fold increase over 2020, came from its North American operations.

In May 2021, the WSWS identified the risks these cuts posed to the remaining workers as the pandemic raged.

One Belvidere worker shared with the WSWS the reality workers face: “We have no air conditioning, it stinks. It’s a tin can, standing out in the sun with aluminum all around and having the sun beat down on it. We’ve had several people die. They won’t declare someone dead until they’re out of the plant. An electrician, he was sitting down on the chair, stayed there sitting there so long, and he was dead. This was about a year and a half ago.”

The coroner’s office has indicated to the Baker family that an investigation is underway, and they are still awaiting a death certificate from Winnebago County. Given the record of Stellantis and the UAW, which has overseen the sweatshop conditions in the plant and whose leaders are serving prison terms for taking Chrysler bribes and embezzling workers’ dues, any official investigation will be a coverup.

Workers increasingly confront dangerous and even deadly workplace conditions overseen with indifference by the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy. Earlier this year, Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old Caterpillar worker only on the job for five days, died in a horrific accident, falling into a crucible with molten iron at the company’s Mapleton, Illinois, foundry.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAW has worked with the companies to cover up the spread of the virus in the plants, concealing the number of COVID infections and deaths at nearly every factory.

With the corporations and the unions unwilling to make any significant improvements to safety that would impede profit-making, the dangers workers face will only be overcome through workers’ independent action and organization. Rank-and-file factory committees are required in order to ensure workers can exert democratic control over workplace conditions, fight back against understaffing and exhausting schedules and speed-up, and ensure that no more workers’ lives are sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* asks Belvidere workers to come forward with any information about the death of Travis Baker and conditions in the plant. Your identity will be kept confidential.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact