

Family, friends and co-workers pay last respects to Detroit Sterling Stamping worker who died September 30

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Family and friends of autoworker Thomas “Tank” McAuliffe gathered for his funeral Saturday in his home town of Grimes, Michigan. The worker died at the Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant in suburban Detroit on September 30, apparently after falling off the plant’s roof. McAuliffe, a veteran electrician, age 67, was well liked and respected by co-workers and friends. He left behind a wife and two children, Shannon and Shane. His brother Jake also works at Sterling Stamping.

The circumstances of McAuliffe’s death are still being investigated. It was not clear why he was on the roof of the plant and how he gained access, since the door should have been locked. Workers reported that McAuliffe had recently been in poor health and was taking medications.

Workers at Sterling Stamping and other auto plants in the area have seen tragedy strike again and again. In most cases the deaths have been unnecessary and preventable. The main factor has been the drive by management to continue production during the deadliest pandemic in 100 years with a diminished workforce. While workers have suffered from overwork, injuries and death, Stellantis has recorded record profits.

After the funeral, several co-workers and friends spoke briefly with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*.

One former co-worker said, “I was very surprised to hear about his death. A guy called me and told me.” He said they had been very close at work. “When I got off work I had the cart, and he would come and get on the cart because he was on midnights and I was on days. We were good friends, he would call me and wish me a

happy birthday. A love between a friend like that was made in heaven.”

McAuliffe went to high school in Flint, Michigan and later served in the US Navy. He married his wife Cathy in 1983.

Many co workers posted tribute to “Tank” as he was known in the plant. Jack Hannum wrote “Tom (Tank) and I became fast friends from day one after we had met at work, with him as an instructor in safety classes. We saw each other normally on a daily basis. He loved to joke around and have a laugh but was all business when it came to his work, he was the best of the best at his job. He had a kind and peaceful spirit, trying never to speak poorly of others. He loved his family and spoke of them often, sharing their successes and achievements, vacations, etc. I will surely miss my friend, but I will never forget him.”

Lisa wrote, “Tom was a great worker, teacher and friend. He was very thorough when he explained troubleshooting and procedures. I am very lucky to have had him as my journeyman when I was an electrical apprentice, he taught me a lot. He always looked out for the females in the trade asking us if everything was OK on a regular basis. He was always cheerful and pleasant to be around. He will be truly and dearly missed.”

A number of workers at Sterling Stamping commented on the fact that “Tank” had appeared stressed and upset in the weeks before his death.

A worker at Mack assembly in Detroit who spoke to the WSWWS said that many workers at his plant had talked about the tragic death of McAuliffe. He noted that workers were pressured on every level to come to work, even if sick or recovering from serious illness.

“We have crazy restriction on FMLA (the federal Family Medical Leave Act). If you have stage 4 cancer you can’t get FMLA for that. If you have heart surgery you can’t get FMLA. A real critical condition is not covered for some reason. They won’t let people take it. We have people who have had chemo and had to come back to work the same week. We’ve had people who had open heart surgery who had come to work, they wouldn’t let them off. If you get really sick, they don’t care. They union is not fighting that.

“You can’t recover like that, and then the job stresses you out. It only will make you more sick. It keeps everyone under stress and pressure.”

The death of McAuliffe is only the most recent tragic death at Sterling Stamping. In December 2021, three workers died, Xavier Alexander, Kevin Railey and Omie Smith, all apparently from COVID. This followed the death in October 2021 of Blair Alexander Braden, age 47, also of COVID.

In April 2021, crane operator Terry Garr, age 57, died of injuries he received at the plant during a die set accident, and two days later, millwright Mark Bruce, 62, succumbed to COVID.

Mack Trucks autoworker Will Lehman in his campaign for UAW president has put health and safety as a top priority. He has called for workers to take matters into their own hands to organize rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to to workers on the shop floor. Workers must assert the right to shut down production if conditions are unsafe. Forced overtime must be eliminated and adequate time off, with full pay, provided to workers recovering for illness and industry.



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