

Autoworkers speak out following tragic death at Stellantis Belvidere plant: “When will it stop?”

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Work in the auto industry? We want to hear from you : Fill out the form at the end of the article to tell us about your workplace conditions.

On August 12, Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) worker Travis Baker died after suffering a severe injury during his shift at the Belvidere Assembly plant, near Rockford in northern Illinois.

Nearly two months after his death, the circumstances which led to the tragedy remain unclear, and his family still does not have a death certificate from the Winnebago County coroner’s office.

Manufacturing workplaces have increasingly grown to resemble industrial slaughterhouses, with preventable accidents occurring with appalling regularity. On September 30, another Stellantis worker, Thomas “Tank” McAuliffe, died after reportedly falling from the roof of the Sterling Stamping plant in suburban Detroit. Just 10 days earlier, two brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey, were killed in a fire at the BP Husky refinery plant near Toledo, Ohio.

A number of workers at both Belvidere Assembly and at Ford Assembly in Chicago contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* after reading about Travis’ death to speak out on dangerous conditions in the auto industry and the related loss of health and life.

A Stellantis Belvidere worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “I was there the day that happened and I was told that he was found dead and the security team and Fire Marshal tried to revive him and he was taken by LifeLine. No Chrysler personnel did anything to help. Poor man. And he died a few days later.”

“Stellantis is too cheap to pay for anything. Our gates

are falling apart and the factory needs a lot of upgrades. They don’t want to fix anything.

“I had a fall and injured myself because of the poor conditions. The only thing they did was finally fix the floor after many, many complaints on it. Every day, workers complain about the poor conditions.”

Another worker at the plant said, “At Stellantis Chrysler in Belvidere, they turn off lights at 6 p.m.! It’s pitch black, can’t see nothing. And they turn off all the air.”

The worker also explained that sub-contract workers at the plant are owed back pay: “We just made it to 17 bucks and were supposed to get a raise in March 2022 but didn’t get it until August 2022. No one has said anything about back pay or nothing. Nobody cares what the contract or the union book says. They do what they want, when they want. With nobody here watching them, how would you know what is going on?”

“This is the worst company I’ve ever worked for. They want us to come to work with COVID, and don’t care if you had family members die from it. They keep it secret and never tell when an employee has COVID. This plant is messed up. I’d always wanted to work here and now it’s like I did all that to just to be underpaid, overworked and not appreciated.”

A Ford Chicago Assembly worker, commenting on the death at Belvidere, told the *WSWS*, “What happened to Travis is very sad. I feel bad for his family. Safety is not important to any automotive factory, I

know that first hand. I have seen people die in Ford plants. But Ford always says that the person didn't die in the plant, the person always died at the hospital. So that way these companies don't have to pay. When will it stop?

“And also very sad that no one from the UAW has talked with his family. That is one of my biggest fears, that I would die inside of one of Ford's plants. That's another reason why I am retiring next contact in 2024. Safety is not important to them. I hope for the best for his family.

“I have had friends that have died inside of Ford St. Louis and Chicago. One of my good friends died just six months before retirement, at almost 62. She was waiting till she turned 62 years old and she didn't make it! I still think about her all the time. She had the same seniority as I do.

“I have always been very safe at Ford, always watching everyone and everything. Never got hurt in 32 years, but one day I lost focus for one minute and I got hurt badly at Ford Chicago. It had been my fourth plant and never got hurt until then.

“Chicago Assembly is very unsafe. Most people don't understand what autoworkers go through on a daily basis.”

As the companies have pushed speed-up and ever-greater productivity demands, in the relentless pursuit of profit, the United Auto Workers union bureaucracy has repeatedly worked to whitewash dangerous conditions and corporate negligence, including covering up the deadly impact of COVID-19 in the plants.

But the sacrifice of workers' lives to private profit has also produced growing anger and opposition. Will Lehman, a candidate for president of the UAW, has called for the transfer of power to rank-and-file workers and control over workplace safety. Writing in a recent statement on fatal workplace accidents, he said:

In opposition to the coverup of industrial injuries and deaths by the corporations, government safety regulators and the union bureaucracies, I call for independent

investigations by rank-and-file workers to uncover the truth and hold accountable all those responsible for the ongoing carnage in America's workplaces.



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