

Legionnaires' disease reported among two Stellantis Warren Truck workers

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Last week officials from Stellantis' Warren Truck Assembly (WTAP), located just north of Detroit, released a statement that two workers at the plant had contracted Legionnaires' disease, a potentially deadly form of bacterial pneumonia.

The fact that two workers at WTAP have contracted Legionnaires' disease indicates that the more than 3,500 workers at the plant may have been exposed to the bacterium which causes the disease, either within the factory or somewhere else within the community.

Legionnaires' disease is caused by the *Legionella* bacterium infecting the lungs. Infections typically spread through breathing contaminated water mist, most often from air conditioning or other water systems, or by accidentally breathing contaminated water while drinking. Symptoms include muscle pains, fever, headache, coughing or shortness of breath.

The last decade has witnessed a substantial increase in reported cases of Legionnaires' throughout the state of Michigan, and more recently the unhindered spread of COVID-19 throughout factories and the broader community as the companies, politicians and United Auto Workers officials abandoned any semblance of workplace safety or public health policies.

In its statement, the company—which manufactures Jeep, Ram, Chrysler and numerous other brands—asserted that they did not yet know the source of the infections. It continued, “However, out of an abundance of caution for the safety and welfare of our employees, we have mobilized a team to begin testing water sources, and are following appropriate and

established protocols at the plant. As part of our thorough investigation, we will contact and cooperate with all proper agencies as necessary.”

The health status of the infected workers was not immediately clear.

Following the incident Stellantis officials told news station FOX 2 that the company shut down three water test operations and carried out a deep clean.

A member of the Warren Truck Rank-and-File Committee told the WSWs, “I haven't heard anything since they reported that there were cases, when the company said they don't know if they contracted it from work or somewhere else. Of course they will say that, they don't want to take the blame if in fact they did contract it in the plant.

“People do drink out of their water dispensers. I've never seen anyone come in and change the filter, or clean it.

“At one point they had to shut down an ice machine because they had had mold in it. That lets you know how often they change the hoses, the filters, any of that stuff.”

Other workers at WTAP also told a WSWs reporting team that they remain skeptical about the company's claims. They stated that they were never contacted by any officials from the UAW about the Legionnaires' cases among workers at the plant.

UAW Local 140, which covers WTAP workers, has yet to issue a statement on the spread of Legionnaires' disease on their website.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about “one out of 10 people who gets sick from Legionnaires' disease will die.”

The number of Legionnaires' cases in the US have grown substantially over the last two decades, with major outbreaks occurring in Michigan prior to the

COVID-19 pandemic. The CDC has reported that between 2000 and 2018 the reported cases of Legionnaires' disease increased by nearly 900 percent, but specified that it is unclear if the increase is the result of a greater spread of the disease or an increase in reporting.

Over a two-week period in July 2021, Michigan health officials reported a 569 percent increase in reported cases of the disease from the previous year. From July 1 to 14, the state had 107 cases in 2021 compared to 16 cases over the same period in 2020 and 41 cases over the same period in 2019.

Flint, Michigan—whose water system was devastated through a bipartisan plan that resulted in lead leaching into the water supply—experienced an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease impacting 90 people between 2014 to 2015. Officials eventually tied the outbreak, which killed 12 people, to a water tower at McLaren Flint Hospital.

There have also been a number of incidents of *Legionella* being found in auto plants in recent years, both in Michigan and others states.

In 2019, officials from the Ford Dearborn Truck plant, located outside of Detroit, announced that *Legionella* bacteria was discovered within the factory. *Business Insider* later reported that the bacteria was found in three separate locations, two bathrooms and a medical department. When a WSWS reporter contacted a UAW official about the spread of the bacteria, they were informed that the union had not sent any notifications to workers about the infection.

Ford officials in 2017 had previously discovered the bacteria inside a cooling tower at the Kansas City Assembly Plant (KCAP) in Missouri. The discovery of the bacteria came only after a worker at the plant contracted Legionnaires' disease and had to be put into a medically induced coma. Ford officials then issued a statement, which bears a striking resemblance to the one made by Stellantis, that they “regularly test for *Legionella* out of an abundance of caution” and that all “test results have been negative throughout the entire year.”

Ford officials later contradicted themselves, claiming they had discovered a “very low” amount of *Legionella*, but dismissed the danger this posed to workers.

The infection of two workers with Legionnaires'

disease at Stellantis has also coincided with a surge of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. CDC data reported COVID-19 hospitalizations nationally have climbed from 6,450 to 9,056 admissions per week over the previous month. Last Tuesday, Michigan health officials reported a doubling of new COVID-19 cases from the previous week, as new cases rose from 761 to 1,864.

The spread of COVID-19 and Legionnaires' disease throughout factories and working class communities is the result of a deliberate ruling class policy of neglecting even the most basic public health measures, which would inevitably come into conflict with the profits of the auto companies and their backers on Wall Street. Managers, politicians and UAW bureaucrats have all sought to keep workers on the job regardless of the unsafe conditions.

In 2021, Stellantis claimed no workplace-related deaths the previous year, despite at least six WTAP workers succumbing to COVID-19 in 2020, more than were reported at any other auto plant in the US.

This official indifference points to the need for workers to take their safety into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, encompassing workers on the shop floor, will provide a means for workers to ensure their health and safety are not subordinated to profit, and that production is shut down when workers deem it to be unsafe.

The WSWS encourages autoworkers at WTAP to join the Warren Truck Rank-and-File Committee, and for workers at other factories to join the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to organize against unsafe conditions, layoffs and concession contracts.



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