

Hundreds attend Detroit funeral for Ford worker Tywaun Long

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Hundreds of family members, co-workers and friends attended the funeral of Ford worker Tywaun Long on Detroit's west side on the morning of Friday, May 3. The 46-year-old worker collapsed on the assembly line at the Dearborn Truck Assembly Plant on April 17 and reportedly died of a heart attack.

The seats were filled at the New Life Apostolic Church in an outpouring of respect for the grieving family and well-loved worker who spent ten years at Ford. Affectionately known as "Pee Wee," Long left behind his wife, Cheborah, 28-year-old daughter Da'ziah Stokes, 15-year-old son Tywaun Long Jr., four stepchildren and nine grandchildren.

One of the tributes was delivered by Alex Smith, a close friend and co-worker at Ford who described Long's devotion to his family, his love of sports and his impact on the morale of fellow workers. "His laughter would fill the factory with love and joy," Smith said, and "he would turn even the toughest days into good ones." Long was "a steady presence in a world filled with uncertainty," Smith said, adding that his loss was a great tragedy for his family and co-workers.

Another major factor in the large turnout was the understanding among autoworkers that the exhausting hours and speed up in the auto industry directly contributes to premature death and the same fate that befell Long could await any autoworker.

"They have us on five days, 10 hours, and it's hard to make doctor's appointments and stuff like that," Smith told the *World Socialist Web Site* after the service ended. "Before we were working 10 hours, four days, and you had time to go to the doctors on Friday.

"But now with five days, 10 hours, it's kind of hard to go to the doctor and keep yourself ready to go...and to repair yourself. You have two days off to rest and that's about it. If you want to go to the doctors, you have to request a day off. It's very tough."

There are many unanswered questions surrounding this tragedy. According to co-workers, Long asked supervisors to be relieved because he was not feeling well, but his request was denied. After he collapsed, workers say, it took nearly a half hour for an ambulance and medical personnel to arrive, even though Ford has multiple medical departments and an Emergency Response Team on site at the Dearborn Rouge complex.

United Auto Workers Local 600 officials have said little or nothing to workers about the circumstances surrounding Long's death. The UAW apparatus has the closest ties to Ford, including a workplace health and safety "partnership" at the automakers' Michigan plants, which has been in place since 2002. Three years before, six workers were killed in an explosion at the Rouge Complex's antiquated power plant, after management and the UAW ignored repeated grievances and warnings from power plant workers.

The Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), which has long praised the "cooperative and non-adversarial" labor-management safety scheme at Ford, is reportedly investigating whether Long's death was "work-related." The WSWs has requested information about the cause of Long's death from the Wayne County Medical Examiner but is still awaiting a reply.

Conditions in the factories have gotten substantially worse since UAW officials pushed through the supposedly "record" national agreement, covering nearly 150,000 Ford, GM and Stellantis (Chrysler) workers last year. The deal gave the auto companies a green light to slash thousands of jobs, including 1,400 at Ford's Rouge Electric Vehicle Center, and impose unlimited amounts of overtime on remaining workers.

Asked whether overtime and job cuts seriously undermined the health and safety of workers, Howard Riley, a longtime friend and former temporary part-time

worker at the Stellantis Detroit Assembly Complex-Mack plant, said, “Yes, a lot. When I was a TPT, they forced us to work 12-hour days whenever they wanted.” Riley described how a fellow worker at the plant collapsed on the line and “management pulled him to the side and told us to keep production going.”

Conditions had gotten worse since the UAW agreement, Riley said. “We signed that contract expecting certain things and none of us got anything ... We got the signing bonus but weeks after that you started seeing people disappear. They were slowly getting rid of people...They had them work one week, and then they would be off for the next 3-4 weeks. Then they would bring them back. They tried to smash them in with other shifts and kick everybody else out with lower seniority.”

Temporary workers, also known as “supplementary employees,” were told they would be rolled over to full time positions immediately after the contract was ratified, he said. Instead, more than 2,300 SEs were fired, with the agreement of the UAW.

After giving Chrysler years of “hard work and dedication,” he said the company let him go. “The union rep that walked me out the door, did it with a smile on her face and never answered her phone again for me.” Fired workers got a retroactive paycheck, Riley said, “and the union took their fees out of it, but you can’t answer my phone when I try to get my job back?”

The company and the UAW treated workers like “numbers, no different than prison,” he said.

Derek Johnson, an auto parts worker who described Long as a “big brother to a lot of us,” told the WSWS, “Everybody has to stand up” to the oppressive conditions in the factories. Johnson was working 12-hour days and it “breaks you down.” If you “are working from six at night to six in the morning, when I get home, the only thing I have time to do is sleep... I wake up and I’m back to work the next day—for peanuts while they’re making millions.”

In contrast to the anger of rank-and-file workers, UAW Local 600 building chairman at the Dearborn Truck Plant, Nick Kottalis, never uttered a word about these conditions during his perfunctory remarks at the funeral service. Instead, Kottalis boasted that he had looked up Long’s work records and “couldn’t find any AWOLs, meaning he didn’t come to work, he didn’t tell anybody nothing, meaning you’re going to get in trouble. His record was impeccable. Then I looked at his discipline record. I don’t know what he’s got going on, but he was a dependable young man and that was impeccable,” Kottalis said.

These remarks captured the pro-company character of

the UAW bureaucracy. Rather than opposing the brutal conditions in the plants, the UAW officials function as Ford’s slave drivers and prison guards. In the eyes of these pro-company stooges, the fact workers like Long are literally being worked into an early grave is a good thing.

Just days after the funeral, Rouge workers told the WSWS a worker at Ford Dearborn Diversified Manufacturing Plant (DDMP) suffered a burst appendix on the assembly line. They say the medical department sent him back to the line after a nurse examined him. After he collapsed, police or security guards reportedly took him to a nearby bus stop to go home. Apparently, a passerby seeing the worker in distress rushed him to the hospital, likely saving his life.

Thus far, the UAW and the company have not released any official information about the cause of Long’s death, the conditions on the assembly line, possible negligence by management personnel or why it took so long for the medical professionals to respond.

Workers, however, have every right to know the circumstances behind Long’s sudden death and take measures to prevent such tragedies in the future. They can have no confidence that the UAW, Ford and state health and safety agencies will produce anything but another cover up of corporate murder.

The Rouge Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting for an independent investigation to uncover the truth, hold all those responsible to account and guarantee that Long’s widow and children are guaranteed lifetime support.

In opposition to the UAW apparatus, rank-and-file committees must enforce line speed and health and safety conditions in the plant. This must be part of the building of a powerful industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class against the capitalist system that subordinates human life to corporate profit.

For more information on the Rouge Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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