

“They just want production done at whatever the cost”: Dundee plant reopening as UAW-Stellantis stonewalls information on death of Ronald Adams Sr.

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2 June 2025

The WSWS urges Dundee workers and other autoworkers to come forward with information and to support the investigation into Ronald Adams Sr.’s death. Fill out the form at the end of this article to send us your comments. Your identity will be kept confidential.

Monday marked eight weeks since the death of Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr. at the Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan. Adams was crushed to death when an overhead gantry pinned the 63-year-old machine repairman to a conveyor.

According to public records, Adams died of crushing injuries/traumatic asphyxia, the latter referring to a sudden forceful compression of the chest that leads to a backward flow of blood to the head and neck.

Nearly two months since the death of her husband, Shamenia Stewart-Adams has not received any information from Stellantis management, the United Auto Workers or the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) about the causes of the fatal accident and the circumstances surrounding it.

MIOSHA has not issued the results of its investigation nor fulfilled its obligation to update the family on its progress. The UAW has not released any information from its supposed joint investigation with management, which is reportedly being assisted by the national UAW Health and Safety Department, headed by UAW President Shawn Fain.

Despite this, the UAW has approved the restart of production at the Dundee Engine Complex, with hundreds of production workers scheduled to return as retooling operations are completed in the next few weeks. This irresponsible and reckless decision only underscores the fact that the UAW bureaucracy functions as a direct tool of corporate management.

“It is totally unacceptable we don’t have any information about Ronnie’s death and we’re coming back to work,” a Dundee worker told WSWS reporters outside of the engine plant Monday afternoon. Another worker said he was very upset that shop floor workers have not been given any information about the causes of the fatal accident, adding that the restart of the plant was “shady.”

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has initiated an independent investigation to oppose a cover-up and prevent Ronald Adams’ death from being swept under the rug like so many workers before him.

In a statement posted Sunday, Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker

from Pennsylvania and a leader of the IWA-RFC, urged workers to come forward to provide information to the rank-and-file investigation. In a video of the statement which quickly garnered tens of thousands of views on TikTok Monday, Lehman said:

If you are a worker and you know something about what led to the death of Ronald Adams or any other worker, if you have seen how safety corners were cut, if you know about the gantry system’s existing problems, if you heard anything in the plant beyond company rumors, now is the time to come forward for your coworkers and for his family. Your identity will be protected, and you will not fight alone for the truth.

He added:

We demand the abolition of the company-union safety committees that serve to cover up safety violations, real rank-and-file oversight over safety conditions and full access to all documentation and records on Adams’ death. No reopening of the plant until the full release of all information regarding his death, and not without the approval of a committee of rank-and-file workers tasked with independently investigating it with the assistance of trusted experts. Workers waiting to resume work need to be compensated fully by the company.

“A lot of us think they’re covering up what really happened”

Several Dundee workers who spoke to the WSWS said UAW officials give management a green light to disregard basic safety procedures.

“A lot of us think they’re covering up what really happened, including the distribution of the service keys,” a veteran worker told the WSWS. “And the UAW is basically in bed with management.”

Denouncing the rush to reopen the plant, the worker said, “They just

want production done at whatever the cost. Every manager in there knows it is unsafe, but they don't care. They just want it up and running.

"They put pressure on the workers to get things done no matter what, and workers do it because they fear for their jobs. They say, 'If you can't get it done, I'm going to find someone else to do it.'"

A few weeks after Ronald's death, another worker said, Stellantis fired the plant manager, Ronald's supervisor and the UAW safety representative. "They fired them basically right before Ronnie's funeral. It was almost like they set it up purposely to make people at the funeral think, 'Ok, that's good, they got rid of them and somebody's paying for this.'"

"You can't trust the union. Say you have a situation, and you confide in the UAW. The next thing you know, they pull you into the HR office. They're in bed with them real heavy."

There are many questions that must be answered regarding the death of Ronald Adams Sr.:

- Why was the gantry, which workers believe had been properly locked out and therefore disconnected from its energy source, suddenly activated, crashing down on Adams in as few as 1.5 seconds?

- Was management rushing the retooling process and cutting corners to get production restarted as soon as possible? The factory has been undergoing a years-long retooling project, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, and has been reportedly behind schedule in the launch of a new multi-energy engine, a federally funded EV battery tray line, and front and rear end beams, which are critical for a new frame architecture being used in highly profitable Jeep and Ram models.

- Did layoffs and cost-cutting undermine basic safety standards? Even as it hands out billions to its top investors, Stellantis is engaged in a massive cost-cutting campaign dubbed "doghouse," which Stellantis Chief Financial Officer Natalie Knight says is aimed at enforcing stricter controls over purchasing from external vendors. "The Doghouse is back! If we apply more discipline, we can ensure big savings for the company," Knight said earlier this year.

- Did management or one of its contractors bypass the standard lockout/tagout procedures? Workers say that management routinely distributed "service keys," also known as "interlock keys" or "cheat keys," which can bypass lockouts and allow machinery to be accessed unsafely. Workers report that the day after Adams' death, management quietly asked anyone with such a key to return it "without penalty."

Workers have also reported that the third-party robotics and automation contractor PARI, brought in by Stellantis to install new equipment on the engine line, altered the software logic of the system. Previously, the gantries were programmed to remain off during "dry runs," they reported. But when PARI installed gantries and conveyors for a new engine washer, workers said, they introduced a change to the logic without properly informing workers.

Many placards, which are diagrams showing where the power source for machinery can be shut off and locked out, have not been updated, workers say. The gantry that killed Adams, they report, had been moved from the south plant to the north plant. If the placard had not been updated, Adams may have thought the gantry was properly locked out although it wasn't. The plant was reportedly closed for several days after the accident to update the placards.

Finally, workers report there have been software glitches in the system that cause machinery to suddenly revert to the programming

used to manufacture the former 3.6-liter Pentastar engines, whose production ended in August 2023, instead of the new 1.6-liter, I-4 turbocharged engine. This glitch, they say, may have also affected the operations of the gantry. "When the person goes in to try to run the machine with the new logic they put in, it'll run for a minute, and then it converts back to the Pentastar," one worker told the WSWs.

"Ronnie's family and everybody has to know the truth about what happened"

Workers also spoke about a previous incident at the plant a few years ago when a hi-lo blew up and they had to take cover outside. "People were shook up and asked to be sent home," one worker said. "First, the union told us they'd send us home. But then they came back after talking to HR and they said, 'HR doesn't want anybody to go home.' We let the UAW have it. 'You don't let HR tell you. You tell them, I'm sending my people home.'"

"I know there are a lot of people who want to talk about what happened to Ronnie, but they're scared for their jobs," another worker said. "If the UAW finds out who is speaking out, they'll go to HR. Then HR will call them into their office and threaten them or come up with something to get rid of them. They're that dirty."

"The operational manager is quite aware of the conditions. They know about the service keys being used. There should have been somebody working with Ronnie. There is no way he should have been left alone."

Expressing support for the rank-and-file investigation initiated by the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees, the worker said, "That's what we need. It's scary, but we have to stand up. Ronnie's family and everybody has to know the truth about what happened."

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