

The Ronald Adams investigation and the fraud of UAW-management joint safety oversight

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The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees has initiated an independent, rank-and-file investigation into the April 7 death of Dundee Engine skilled trades worker Ronald Adams Sr. to uncover the truth about the conditions that led to this tragedy.

This investigation is completely independent from corporate management and the United Auto Workers apparatus, which is joined at the hip to Stellantis through a myriad of labor-management committees, including the National Joint Committee on Health and Safety.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously noted, UAW officials said, in a perfunctory statement on Adams' death posted for Workers Memorial Day on April 28, "the incident is currently under investigation by the UAW-Stellantis Health and Safety Department with assistance from the International Union, UAW Health and Safety Department, and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA)."

As this statement shows, there is not a millimeter of daylight between the UAW apparatus, Stellantis and the toothless and grossly underfunded state safety agency, MIOSHA. Long ago, the UAW traded in even a nominal role as an independent safety watchdog for a cushy seat at the table with corporate management.

The UAW-Stellantis Health and Safety Department is integrated into corporate management through a series of national and local joint health and safety bodies spelled out in the Master agreement. The contract outlines that when there is a serious injury or fatality, a joint board of union and management investigates the incident together.

It probably does not come as news to many workers that the role of the UAW management safety committees is not to expose and ameliorate unsafe conditions, but to cover up for management and make sure no one is held accountable for workplace deaths and injuries.

The National Joint Committee on Health and Safety is only one of a mind-numbing array of UAW-management committees that tie the interests of the union apparatus to the management of the Detroit automakers at every level, from the shop floor to the executive suites. For example, in the 2023 UAW-Stellantis agreement the word "joint" appears at least 150 times.

Machine lockout procedures are a major issue in the accident that killed Ronald Adams Sr. Lockout/tagout is the procedure by which skilled trades workers ensure that power is disconnected to a machine before attempting performing maintenance or repairs.

According to language in the 2023 UAW-Stellantis national agreement, the UAW shares responsibility with management for overseeing Lockout/tagout at factories. The contract states that the Local World Class Partnership Council, comprised of top union and management representatives, "will take immediate actions to remedy any deviations or shortcomings in training, proficiency or adjustments in their Local Lockout Program."

It continues:

A joint lockout/energy control program review team shall be established utilizing existing resources, comprised of one member from Corporate OSH and one member from the UAW Stellantis Health and Safety Department. The joint team shall review the program's minor servicing task list, where applicable, for standardization and compliance with the Company's lockout policy.

So incestuous is the UAW-management relationship in jointly overseeing safety that to shield itself from lawsuits, the UAW has included disclaimers in each of the Big Three contracts disavowing any "financial liability for either the health and safety of Company employees or for work connected injuries, disabilities, diseases or related losses incurred by employees of the company or its subsidiaries or third parties while on the Company property." [FCA US LLC – UAW 2023 contract, page 366]

There is a direct financial incentive for the UAW apparatus to shield the company from liability resulting from its role in killing and maiming workers. Through the various joint program committees and joint training centers the Detroit-based auto companies funnel tens of millions of dollars annually into the coffers of Solidarity House. According to the union's latest financial filing with the US Labor Department, the UAW received \$2.8 million from the FCA National Training Center last year, with another \$2.4 million past due. UAW-GM joint labor management committees netted \$6,997,000 and UAW-Ford joint committees \$6,957,000. This does not include the payment of salaries to full-time UAW functionaries administering these programs.

During the federal investigation into UAW corruption, it was revealed that the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center (NTC) in Detroit was the conduit for the payment of direct bribes into the pockets of top ranked UAW officials, including former UAW Chrysler director Norwood Jewell. Among other things the NTC directly oversees the joint safety committees.

Safety "training" often consists of expense paid visits to the UAW's posh Black Lake resort in northern Michigan. Representatives of corporate management are sometimes present at these programs.

According to UAW.org, the Black Lake resort includes:

241 completely remodeled guest rooms, featuring lakeside rooms at Maxon Lodge, hotel-style rooms and fully equipped

condos.... A beautiful gymnasium houses two full-sized basketball courts and can seat up to 1,200 people when set up as an auditorium. There is an Olympic-size indoor swimming pool, a sauna next to the men's and women's dressing rooms, an exercise and weight room and pool and table tennis tables.

"Black Lake Golf Club is the newest addition to the recreational side of the Family Education Center. Designed by acclaimed architect Rees Jones, the course takes advantage of the spectacular property and is situated on 1,000 acres of heavily forested land on the southeast side of one of Michigan's largest inland lakes."

UAW complicity in coverup of management abuses goes beyond the corruption of individual malefactors in the union leadership. It is bound up with a more fundamental transformation of the role of the UAW into essentially an appendage of management, a change that has taken place over decades.

Indeed, the whole concept of "jointness," what in an earlier period would have been considered a gross violation of basic trade union principles, is expressive of the fact that the UAW has long abandoned its original function as a defensive organization of the working class in favor of unrestrained collaboration with management against the workers it collects dues from. This is enforced by a bloated and highly paid apparatus that is totally impervious to pressure from rank-and-file workers.

In the early 1980s, the UAW officially adopted the program of corporatism. As the WSWs has explained, corporatism is "a doctrine of the identity of interests of labor and management, which leads to the unlimited collaboration between union bureaucrats, corporate management and the capitalist state, to defend the profit system, no matter how severe the consequences for the working class."

This represented the logical culmination of the nationalist and anti-socialist program adopted by the UAW under Walter Reuther, a development that has found a parallel expression in the evolution of trade unions all over the world.

Following World War II, under conditions where US industry dominated the world market, the UAW was able to win concessions from the auto companies. This included the establishment of workplace standards limiting exposure to asbestos, noise and other environmental hazards. The Nixon administration's decision to establish the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 1970 occurred the same year as the 67-day strike by 400,000 GM workers and other major strikes, including the wildcat strike by US Postal Service workers.

Into the 1970s, strikes by autoworkers over health and safety issues were a common occurrence, such as the 22-day walkout by workers at the Lordstown, Ohio General Motors assembly plant in 1972.

However, the rise of powerful overseas competitors and the increasing globalization of production undermined the ability of the nationally based unions to pressure corporations for reforms. In the face of the challenge by powerful European and Asian competitors, the US ruling class abandoned its previous policy of class compromise for more and more open class confrontation aimed at driving down workers living standards.

The Chrysler bankruptcy in 1979 and the UAW-backed concessions marked a watershed moment. UAW President Douglas Fraser joined the Chrysler board of directors and the UAW bureaucracy worked systematically to stamp out any resistance by workers to massive job cuts, speed up and unsafe conditions in the name of shoring up the profitability and market share of the US-based auto corporations.

To offset the loss of dues income, the UAW bureaucracy developed new sources of revenue through direct infusions of corporate cash via the establishment of joint UAW-management committees at all levels.

Thomas Adams, a retired General Motors Buick City worker, who has made an extensive study of UAW finances explained:

A formula based on the number of active workers and excessive overtime generated 'joint funds' to pay for joint program representatives, training, and health and safety programs. The growing list of committees were staffed by an equal number of UAW and management appointed representatives. Appointed jobs were highly sought-after positions because of the lucrative pay and benefits. Loyal partisans traded in their coveralls and the assembly line for Polo-shirts, clipboards, and a desk. The Administration Caucus used joint programs as an opportunity to appoint scores of new joint program representatives, expand the union bureaucracy at the national, regional, and individual plant level. Joint programs created plant-level team leaders who were union-endorsed straw bosses who functioned as shop floor foremen without management credentials. The wages and benefits of appointed representatives assigned to the training centers by the UAW administration were fully reimbursed (JFRs) to the union from the training centers.

He continues:

The GM and Chrysler bankruptcies had no effect on UAW Incorporated revenue. The tens of millions of dollars continued to flow through the training centers into the UAW uninterrupted by the bankruptcy...

The joint training centers were fertile ground for corruption because of the lack of accountability for the hundreds of millions of dollars that flowed from the Big Three through the training centers to the UAW.

[*A Tale of Corruption by the United Auto Workers and the Big Three American Automakers.* Thomas Adams, August 19, 2019]

The predictable result has been a devastating assault on the jobs and working conditions of autoworkers and the evisceration of any genuine safety oversight.

The horrific explosion at the Ford Rouge plant February 1, 1999, brought this reality into sharp focus. There is a significant body of evidence that the disaster, which killed six workers and injured more than a dozen, was the product of criminal negligence by Ford. Reports by Dearborn and Michigan investigators indicate that Ford management was well aware of serious safety issues, but made a calculated decision not to spend the money needed to improve conditions as they were phasing out the century old facility.

Reports also show that UAW officials ignored safety grievances filed by powerhouse workers warning that equipment was antiquated and dangerous, citing the very boiler that exploded.

The first reaction of UAW officials was to rush to Ford's defense. Just hours after the explosion and before any investigation even started, Ron Gettelfinger, UAW vice-president over the Ford department, took the side of management, claiming the power station was among the best run plants in the Ford system. "It was a safe facility, there's no question about that," he told the *Detroit News*. "That's why this is so perplexing to us."

Ultimately, the UAW signed off on a paltry \$7 million settlement by Ford. In exchange for the blood money payment, Ford did not have to admit to fault and avoided criminal charges. Normally, in cases involving fatalities and willful violations, the Michigan's Consumer & Industry Services would have referred companies to the Michigan attorney general

for possible prosecution.

The program of union-management collaboration left workers on their own in confronting the deadly spread of COVID-19 in the auto plants. During the global pandemic the joint UAW management health and safety committees took no action as workers sickened and died. Even after the full dangers of the virus were apparent the UAW insisted workers remain at their workstations, cranking out profits for the company.

Left in the lurch, workers took independent action to protect their lives and the health and safety of their families. In the teeth of threats from management and their UAW hired guns, workers stopped work at a number of factories in the United States and Canada, leaving their machines and standing on the “blue line.” Seeing the UAW losing control and fearing the complete loss of its authority, US automakers called a nationwide halt to operations in March 2020, saving countless lives.

Two months afterwards, with the pandemic far from contained, the UAW collaborated with management to force a premature reopening of the auto plants based on bogus safety protocols that were quickly evaded or abandoned altogether. Workers were denied accurate information about cases in the plant or the ability to quarantine to avoid spreading the disease.

At Stellantis Warren Truck in suburban Detroit at least a dozen workers died from COVID, including autoworker and grandmother Catherine Pace, who succumbed on March 27, 2020 after contracting the disease in the paint department. She was due to retire in June. Family members said no one from the UAW or Chrysler contacted them following Catherine’s death. Monice, Catherine’s daughter, told the WSWS, “If workers don’t take charge, and say we are not going in to work, it will stay the same.”

In spite of this, management claimed in official statistics reported to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), that not a single workplace-related death occurred at Warren Truck that year.

The last several years have seen a series of horrific deaths and maiming involving autoworkers and auto parts workers. In most cases these tragedies have evoked at most perfunctory notice on the part of the UAW apparatus. Even in cases where egregious corporate malfeasance has been a factor, at most token fines have been levied and no criminal charges have been filed.

The deaths include

- Mark McKnight, age 57, January 2021. GM Marion, Indiana Stamping Plant. Crushed to death by a section of steel wall.
- ?Terry Garr, Stellantis Sterling Stamping, April 2021. Crushed while moving a die with a crane.
- ?Steven Dierkes, age 39, June 2022, Caterpillar Mapleton, Illinois foundry. Fell into crucible of molten metal. The company was fined a token \$145,000, which it appealed.
- ?Daulton Simmers, age 28, June 6, 2024, Caterpillar Mapleton, Illinois foundry. Engulfed in flames when molten metal that he was carrying fell on him. The company ultimately faced a pathetic \$32,262 fine.
- ?Antonio Gaston, age 53, August 2024, Stellantis Jeep complex Toledo, Ohio. Crushed while working on assembly line. Stellantis was fined \$16,000, which it appealed.

Workers are determined to put an end to the endless toll of victims sacrificed on the altar of corporate profits. With the death of Ronald Adams Sr. many workers are saying it is time to draw a line in the sand. However, any investigation that is carried out by the UAW, MIOSHA or Stellantis will be a whitewash and cover-up. Workers must take matters into their own hands by supporting the initiative being carried forward by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for an independent rank-and-file investigation to break through the cover-up and establish the truth.

Come forward, share what you know and take part in the struggle. Your identity will be protected.



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wsws.org/contact