

# Dundee Engine worker describes deadly conditions at Stellantis plant, where Ronald Adams Sr. lost his life

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Workers from the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex continue to come forward with testimony about conditions at the Michigan plant, where 63-year-old Ronald Adams Sr. was killed on April 7. Adams, a highly skilled and experienced machine repairman, was crushed when an overhead gantry that lifts engine blocks suddenly engaged, pinning him to a conveyor.

Monday will mark 11 weeks since Adams died almost instantly from crushing injuries and traumatic asphyxia. Yet Stellantis, the United Auto Workers and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) have not provided Adams' family or co-workers with any substantive explanation about his death.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which initiated an independent investigation into the fatal accident, will be holding a public hearing on July 19 at the University of Detroit-Mercy to present the facts that have been uncovered and take additional testimony from rank-and-file workers, safety experts and other relevant witnesses.

Last week, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a Dundee Engine worker, who emailed the WSWWS in response to the IWA-RFC's appeal for more information about the causes of the fatal accident. The worker's name has been changed to protect him from retaliation by company and UAW officials.

"Anybody who is honest will tell you it's not safe in there, especially since the retool," Nick, a worker with 15 years at the plant, said. "I mean, it wasn't safe before, but at least you kind of knew where the problems were. They weren't getting addressed, but you knew where they were.

"For the company it's just, 'Make the numbers, get it done.' That's all they care about. 'Don't cause any problems. Just put your head down and do what I said,' that's their motto. The ones who say something about safety get blacklisted. They'll keep you from becoming a team leader, getting overtime or transferring from night shift, even though you have seniority," the worker said.

"A week or so after Ronnie died, another maintenance guy almost got electrocuted when he was sweeping and hit a 480-volt line that was live because the circuit breakers were not labeled right. They tried to cover that up. Circuit breakers are powered on that haven't received safety approval and don't have the proper placards with safety and management signatures on them. They were turned on so the engine block line can make production.

"Even the placard on the breaker says, 'Don't turn this on unless it's signed off by safety' and all that. But the switches were on anyway," Nick said. After the worker was almost electrocuted, "they ran around to try to get the breakers labeled right real quick," Nick reported.

"This plant constantly breaks its safety policies in the name of pushing parts. Management is always pressuring everyone to hurry and get things

done through short cuts. 'We'll do the paperwork after,' they always say. I've seen text messages from unit leaders telling team members to start their machines before they signed off that the lockout was removed properly and it was ok to run."

Nick said it was also commonplace for management to hand out "cheater keys" to bypass lockouts and allow workers to work on machines even though they are still activated. "A cheater key makes the machine think the safety gate is closed so it still has power or hydraulic pressure, and it can basically run under unsafe conditions," he said.

## Stellantis, UAW officials scramble to exonerate company

After Adams was killed, management put out a newsletter telling people to turn the keys back in, Nick reported. "It wasn't quietly done. They threatened to fire people who got caught with them. They put a couple of three-gallon popcorn tins around the plant for people to throw the keys in. I know one of those tins was at least half full. I mean every maintenance guy, every team leader, and even team members had them. They kept the keys in their toolboxes or on their key chains."

The lockout procedures were changed temporarily after the fatal accident. "Almost everybody in the plant has lockout training to work in certain areas. So, after Ronnie died, they came out and told us, 'From now on, when you lock out, we have to have somebody in management verify you locked out properly and sign off on it. Then when you're done, they need to verify that you backed out properly and took your lock off.' They had to sign off that they witnessed that the task was complete and that the machine could be re-energized, he said. But this only lasted a short while, he added, saying, "They're not even following that now."

Nick said rank-and-file workers had repeated fights with management over lockout policy. "When we do a tool change in one of the machines, you have to kind of lean inside the machine to get the tool out. I was under the impression that if my body's crossing into the plane into a machine, it had to be locked out and de-energized. But management said, 'No, as long as you have two feet on the floor, you're safe.' That doesn't make any sense. If I'm leaning into a machine, I can get smashed up easily, whether I've got two feet on the floor or not.

"But the two feet on the floor stuff is literally Chrysler's policy, and the UAW goes along with it. We've got into management over that and had the skilled trades steward come out. The union steward said, 'I don't agree with it. I don't want my guys ever doing that.' But the company says you have to do it. So, if you don't, you're going to get written up or terminated," he said.

For a while after Adams' death, maintenance workers were also assigned safety spotters when working inside enclosed factory cells, Nick said. "They have a bunch of electricians working on the line so they're kind of making them work in a group. But it all depends on the day. If everything's going crazy and they're putting fires out everywhere, or if they are short on manpower, then you're working by yourself. We've seen guys working on a gantry by themselves," he said.

Nick reported that after Adams' death, the chief concern of management and the UAW bureaucracy was to prevent workers from exposing the unsafe conditions in the plant. "Ronnie died at night, so when we showed up for work, they herded us into the auditorium and locked the doors behind us, which is a fire hazard itself. So, everybody's in the locked room and the plant manager was like 'Don't say anything to anybody. Nobody knows exactly what happened. We're investigating it.' It was basically don't say anything. If you want to go home you can but come back tomorrow and we have trauma counselors and all that stuff. "It was blah, blah, blah and they didn't really make any remarks about be safe or anything like that. 'We lost a person, and we need to get back to normal.'"

Nick reported that every contractor in the plant was told to go home and not come back. "They weren't allowed back in until four or five weeks later," he said. This is important because workers have informed the WSWs that several contractors, including those from Fives Cinetic who programmed the gantry involved in the fatal accident, were never questioned by Stellantis, the UAW or MIOSHA.

Nick continued: "They got rid of the plant manager pending the investigation. But the guy under him who is now the acting manager is no better. He's been on the floor multiple times, seen unsafe things going on and just turned his head. He never said anything or did anything to correct things. They also fired Ronnie's supervisor's boss but not his supervisor. Management picks and chooses who to get rid of in the hierarchy. People are saying Stellantis wanted to get rid of the plant chairman anyway because the retooling was failing and nothing was getting produced. But Chrysler is not going to tell you that they were just looking for an excuse to get rid of the plant supervisor.

"He's gone and suddenly we're getting production ready. The last we were told, as of April 14, we were in launch mode, and we were supposed to be ramping up into full production. Everybody on layoff in the machining department is being called back this week. They're trying to run production, but the machines, the equipment, doesn't work."

Nick said that the UAW safety representative, Tom Zimmerman, still has his job too. "Everybody is asking why does he still have his spot? But they're not going to do anything to him. The company and the union created this position for him, and they guided him into that spot after the members kicked him out of his plant chairman position because he didn't file grievances or do anything to help the membership out. As soon as he was finally voted out, they put him in charge of the safety of union members. I'm not saying this was a made-up job, but it was specialized just for him. He gets to go to Black Lake, Florida or anywhere else on our dime."

## A record of deadly accidents and severe injuries

Nick reviewed past accidents at the plant. "Safety has always been a problem here and we have brought this up multiple times. A few years after I got hired, we had a guy who almost got killed on the same line as Ronnie. He had a gantry come down and grab him behind the head and pin him down. They thought he was dead. It pushed the forks that pick up the engines through the back of his head, broke his back and busted his

teeth out. But somehow, luckily, he survived.

"We had another guy, probable three or four years ago, who slipped and fell, and broke his back. The company said he broke his back at home and made him come to work for half of his shift. They basically put him out on medical instead of giving him workers' comp.

"The unit leaders were sent out there to mop up water around him because he slipped in a spot that we've warned them that they needed to have grip tape or some kind of abrasive sprayed on the floor so you wouldn't fall."

Nick said from its opening in 2005 as a joint venture between Mitsubishi Motors Corporation, Hyundai Motor Company and DaimlerChrysler Corporation called the Global Engine Manufacturing Alliance (GEMA), Dundee has always been a "very company-oriented plant." A lot of the initial workers, he said, never worked in a union factory. "No matter what the conditions were, it was whatever HR and management says. You do it or they're going to try and fire you."

But then, Nick continued, there were a lot of people from the Detroit plants hired, and like Ronald Adams "they spoke up and said this is not how it's supposed to be done." Some of them had 30 years seniority and remembered what a real union was like. So, when they're seeing a unit leader out there mopping her floor around somebody that's screaming in pain on the ground waiting for EMS to show up, they wouldn't stand for it."

He continued, "It's not like Ronnie was a new guy that just got done with an apprenticeship or just showed up. He's got 30 years of experience doing this type of work at Chrysler and as an aircraft mechanic."

Nick said it was not enough for management to get a wrist slap fine from OSHA. "We're in a \$100 million retool at this plant and a \$20,000 fine isn't going to make a difference. We need to make sure things are enforced and safety standards are upheld."

He continued: "These companies are just trying to make record profits on top of record profits. They want all the money while we have to fight tooth and nail for pennies. You got UAW President Shawn Fain saying we got everything we could in this contract and the very next week, Chrysler's doing massive stock buybacks. It's ridiculous when you can't afford what you build. Today it's like you're buying a starter house when you're buying a car."

Nick explained why he had come forward with information for the rank-and-file investigation. "Some of the guys at the plant got the flyer that was passed out with the statement from Will Lehman (Mack Trucks autoworker and leading member of the IWA-RFC) on Ronald Adams. They came to me and said you should talk to them because you have records on everything that's been going on here. So, I said, yeah, maybe I should talk to them because I've seen it all in my time here."

Expressing support for the expansion of rank-and-file committees to oversee safety in the plants, he said, "I totally agree we got to take control of our own stuff, because at the end of the day, the only ones responsible for our safety is ourselves. If management is going to come at you for it, then I'd rather get paperwork and be alive than, you know, dead or injured."

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