

Former California OSHA inspector: “Totally out of control” lockout/tagout standards factored in death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr.

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18 July 2025

A former compliance officer at the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA) spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues surrounding the April 7 death of Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr.

Adams, a 63-year-old machine repairman, was performing maintenance at the Dundee Engine Complex in southern Michigan when an overhead crane, or gantry, suddenly activated, pinning him to a conveyor. He died instantly from crushing injuries and traumatic asphyxia.

More than three months later, Stellantis, the United Auto Workers (UAW), and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) have provided no explanation for his death. A spokesperson from the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) recently told WSWS that there was “no additional update” and the “investigation remains ongoing.”

Despite this, Stellantis—with full UAW backing—has resumed full production without informing Adams’ family or co-workers about what caused the fatality or holding anyone accountable.

Workers at Dundee say retooling for a new engine line was over a year behind schedule, and safety procedures were being bypassed to resume production.

One example is the widespread use of “cheater keys” to override lockout/tagout procedures meant to ensure machinery is fully shut down and cannot be restarted during maintenance. Following Adams’ death, management instructed workers via email to return these keys in bins located near the UAW Local 723 office and elsewhere in the plant.

This violates OSHA Standard 1910.147, which governs

the control of hazardous energy to prevent accidental machine activation during servicing.

The former Cal/OSHA officer, referred to as Steve to protect his identity, commented on the findings of the independent investigation launched by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

“I reviewed the OSHA documents,” Steve said. “‘Gang’ lockouts aren’t in the UAW contract, but buddy tasks—shared jobs involving foremen, skilled trades, and supervisors—are common. Each person should place their own lock on the equipment. The supervisor’s lock goes on first and comes off last after confirming the work is complete.”

He continued, “A cheater key is a skeleton key. It defeats the whole system. If anyone can unlock someone else’s lock, there’s no real protection. Key control is central. Each worker must have a unique key and keep it on them. You can’t just leave it on a lunch hook. That’s how people get killed. What I’m hearing is their key management was totally out of control.”

Steve added, “In California, a supervisor is liable for allowing this. They can’t claim someone ‘went rogue’—that’s the so-called Mercury defense. But it doesn’t hold. It sounds like Dundee had virtually no functioning lockout/tagout system. That’s a willful violation, and if enough cheater keys were in circulation, it edges toward criminal negligence. In California, the Bureau of Investigation would alert the district attorney if there were grounds for prosecution. I imagine Michigan has something similar.”

The 2023 UAW-Stellantis contract makes clear that the union shares responsibility with management for

overseeing lockout/tagout compliance. The World Class Partnership Council, composed of top union and company officials, is tasked with addressing any lapses in training or procedures.

However, the same contract includes a disclaimer stating the UAW holds no financial liability for health and safety issues or injuries on company property—effectively distancing the union from consequences of collaboration with management.

Commenting on this, Steve said, “In my opinion, the union made a huge mistake agreeing to co-manage lockout/tagout. That’s the company’s job. If something goes wrong, liability should be on them. The union just accepted massive civil responsibility while trying to shield itself legally with a ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ clause. I doubt that would stand up in court.”

This co-management arrangement gives the UAW a vested interest in covering up management’s role in industrial deaths. Since the 1980s, the UAW bureaucracy has been integrated into corporate management through financial incentives. Billions in corporate funds have flowed into union coffers under the guise of “joint training,” thanks to the 1978 Labor Management Partnership Act.

These training centers became vehicles for corporate bribery. UAW officials, bought off with training funds, signed concessionary contracts that slashed jobs, wages, and safety.

“You’re basically dealing with a company union again,” Steve said. “This takes us back to the era of employer-controlled unions.” When told that Dundee workers referred to the joint investigation into Adams’ death as “the fox guarding the henhouse,” Steve replied, “Exactly. It’s like having HR also be your safety officer.”

Workers say the UAW safety rep at Dundee was Tom Zimmerman, a former shop chairman ousted by members for his pro-management stance. “That’s when you strike,” Steve said. “You have a legal right to a safe workplace, free from known hazards. Don’t give that up.”

“They can’t force you to perform dangerous tasks,” he added. “You have the right to walk away from unsafe work. If machine guards aren’t in place or if lockout/tagout isn’t followed, you don’t have to proceed. You can’t be disciplined or fired for protecting yourself.”

As for the union’s collaboration, Steve said, “Workers have to say: I’m not going to pull the trigger on myself just because the boss says so. They need to throw out the current union officials. When contract negotiations come up, reject this framework entirely.”

Steve then was asked to comment on the broader neutering of workplace safety regulations under both political parties, Steve replied, “Neutering? It’s more like outright castration. In California, political appointees have turned the agency into a joke. There are whole sectors they avoid—like ports. The docks have sky-high accident rates, but CalOSHA and federal OSHA argue over jurisdiction even though state law clearly gives CalOSHA authority over all employment in California.”

On top of decades of pro-corporate policy, Steve warned, the Trump administration is now dismantling OSHA altogether. Trump appointed David Keeley—a former executive at UPS and Amazon—to lead the agency. OSHA’s mission is being redefined to eliminate “burdensome” regulations. Inspections are being slashed from 35,000 to just 26,000 this fiscal year.

“OSHA was founded because society realized the economic cost of losing young workers to accidents. People were seen as resources. The highest injury rates were among the youngest and oldest workers. So OSHA was about preserving human capital—basic dollars and cents logic.”

“States had some programs already, but OSHA standardized it nationally. The idea was that keeping people healthy and working was better for society than having them disabled or dead. But since Reagan, the agency has been systematically gutted. The worker-to-inspector ratio today is a joke.”

“Companies have entire legal teams that specialize in fighting OSHA citations. If a company challenges a citation, they can depose OSHA staff and accuse them of perjury. These hearings go before administrative law judges. I’ve been deposed—you have to defend every word you write.”

“Some OSHA inspectors are afraid of hearings. They’ll walk away from serious violations to avoid them. One director even told us: ‘Keep fines under \$100,000, and don’t issue willful or repeat citations—unless there are bodies or body parts on the ground.’”



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