

“Workers’ Lives Matter!”: IWA-RFC holds initial hearing on death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr.

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The WSWS will be posting further material and reports from the IWA-RFC hearing on the death of Ronald Adams Sr. throughout the week. To get involved in the investigation, fill out the form at the bottom of this page.

On Sunday, July 27, approximately 100 workers and youth attended the first public hearing held by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) as part of its investigation into the death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. The 63-year-old skilled trades veteran was killed on April 7 at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex when an overhead gantry crane suddenly activated and crushed him.

The meeting was held at the Marygrove Campus in the Bagley neighborhood of Detroit, where Ronald Adams grew up and where his family still lives. Among the attendees were Adams’ widow, Shamenia Stewart-Adams, other family members, and workers from the Dundee plant who braved the threat of retaliation to attend. They were joined by autoworkers from other area plants, as well as postal workers, teachers, students, and neighborhood residents.

The hearing was a powerful response by rank-and-file workers to the months-long silence from Stellantis, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and state safety officials. It concluded with the unanimous adoption of a resolution to continue and expand the investigation, support other victims of workplace hazards, and build rank-and-file committees to enforce safe working conditions as part of an international campaign to end the sacrifice of workers’ lives for profit.

Lawrence Porter, a leader of the Socialist Equality Party and former autoworker, chaired the meeting. He denounced the capitalist system for treating the annual deaths of 140,000 US workers from traumatic injuries and occupational diseases as a mere “cost of doing business.” He compared the death of Ronald Adams to other preventable tragedies, including the killing of Antonio Gaston at the Toledo Assembly Complex and 19-year-old Brayan Canu Joj, killed in a meat grinder at a burrito factory in California.

These deaths, Porter said, were “casualties in a class war,” affecting workers of all races, nationalities and genders. “We are here to sound the call: Workers’ Lives Matter!” he declared, to audience applause.

Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, a 2022 socialist candidate for

UAW president and a leading member of the IWA-RFC, emphasized the broader significance of the hearing. “This hearing is not just about examining the circumstances of one death,” he said. “Our aim is nothing less than to end the deadly conditions imposed on workers in factories and workplaces around the world.”

Adams, Lehman said, was known as the “protector of the plant,” but no individual worker can guarantee safety “under a system where profit is prioritized over human life.” He cited deadly disasters throughout industrial history—from the Courrières mine disaster in France, which killed 1,100 miners, and the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911, to the 1993 toy factory fire in Thailand and the 2013 building collapse in Bangladesh that killed more than 1,100 garment workers. All, he emphasized, were the result of corporate profit being placed above human life.

Lehman urged workers to reject feelings of powerlessness. “We need to recognize that the danger of our inaction is greater than the danger of us acting in our best interests,” he said. He called for the formation of safety committees with real authority in every plant as part of a broader fight for workers’ control over production.

Shamenia Stewart-Adams received a standing ovation as she addressed the crowd, with family members standing behind her. “I stand before you today not just as a grieving wife, but as a voice for every mother, every wife, every family who has watched their loved one walk out the door for work, trusting that they will return home safely,” she said.

She continued, “I have received no answers from MIOSHA [the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration] or the UAW. Not a letter, not a call, not a single word explaining why or how this happened... Our family deserves to know the truth, and we are demanding the truth—not just for myself and our children, but for every family who has suffered in silence.”

She implored Adams’ coworkers to come forward. “I know some of you have been threatened... But I am asking you with everything in me to find the courage to come forward,” she said. “Because what happened to my husband can happen again, to any one of you.”

An audio message followed from “John,” a Dundee worker who was injured on the job. He described the “chaos” that erupts during launch periods, when “safety is out the window.” Before his injury, he said, repeated complaints were ignored by both the

union and management. “We’re just like slaves,” he added.

John spoke of Adams’ deep commitment to safety and his expertise as a trained aircraft mechanic. “Not once did he say, ‘We can bypass [a lockout].’ I could never see Ronnie going into a cage knowing that it’s energized,” he said. He urged support for the IWA-RFC investigation, stating, “The union is in bed with management... This has got to stop... If we were in control—the workers—we’d stop the line.”

WSWS reporter Jerry White delivered an extensive presentation on the IWA-RFC’s findings, drawn from dozens of interviews with Dundee workers, family members and safety experts. He cited Adams’ autopsy report—obtained only through a Freedom of Information Act request—which revealed catastrophic injuries that White said were comparable to “an airplane crash or combat explosion.”

White reported that a programmer from Fives Cinetic, who had worked directly with Adams on the washer-gantry system, said Adams knew the machine “from the beginning.” The programmer speculated that during maintenance, the gantry may have received a false signal indicating the washer was ready, triggering the fatal motion. Despite this critical insight, White noted, the programmer “was never interviewed by Stellantis, the UAW, or MIOSHA.”

Multiple workers reported that lockout/tagout protections were routinely bypassed using “cheater keys” distributed by management. “This plant constantly breaks its own safety policies to push parts,” White quoted one worker as saying. After Adams’ death, management ordered the cheater keys returned, under threat of termination.

White showed internal emails sent to the IWA-RFC by workers, demanding the cheater keys be returned. He quoted a former OSHA officer who told the IWA-RFC, “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.”

Autoworker and IWA-RFC member Max spoke passionately about the psychological toll of unsafe working conditions. “Ronnie did not die because of an accident,” he said. “He died because the system we live under values profit over people... We need to enforce our own safety conditions on the shop floors in every plant.”

Ruth, a postal worker who travelled to the hearing from Pennsylvania, connected Adams’ death to the fatal conditions faced by workers in the USPS. “We have lost four brothers due to heat-related injuries—three this year alone,” she said. “The temps in the trucks reach 128 degrees.” She added, “We must be the voice for Ron Adams and every other worker... We need a bigger voice for justice and truth.”

A powerful component of the event was the reading of greetings from workers around the world, including an audio recording from autoworkers in Mexico expressing their support for the inquiry and describing the similarly dangerous conditions they face. An estimated 2.9 million workers die each year from workplace injuries and illnesses—nearly 8,000 every day.

David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, spoke toward the end of the meeting and summed up the central issues raised.

North described how workplace injuries and deaths are the necessary consequence of capitalism. “The term ‘accident’ is often used, but is that word adequate? If you walk across your room and you trip, that might be an accident. But when we are experiencing events that occur with staggering regularity ... these are no longer mere accidents in the conventional sense of the word. We’re seeing the operation of necessity.

“This is the product of the system within which we live, not just in this country but in every part of the world. Our social life, our economic life, is organized in a way which produces, continuously, these disasters, and they will continue unless a way is found by putting an end to the system which produces these catastrophes.”

The only way this will happen, North said, is when the working class replaces the capitalist system with socialism and runs economic life based on human need, not private profit.

Addressing the younger members of the Adams family, he concluded, “Let’s make sure that the world in which you grow up is a world in which such horrors never take place. When you grow older and speak about what happened to your grandfather, or your father, you will say ‘that’s what it was like in the old days, before the working class came forward, understood what was going on, changed the world and made it a world worth living in.’ That’s what we’re seeking to do.”

The meeting concluded with Will Lehman introducing a resolution calling for the continuation of the investigation, the formation of rank-and-file committees and the launch of a global campaign to defend workers’ lives. A Dundee worker spoke in support, saying, “I’m willing to take a risk because this man is gone. I appreciate you doing this for my brother and his family.”

The resolution passed unanimously.

Afterward, Ronald Adams’ son Chris said, “We know how corrupt companies and governments can be, to cover things up. We need justice. Now we see that it’s not just our family, it’s many other families that this type of thing has happened to. This hearing and the movement can shed light on this, not just here but worldwide, and make this world a better place.”

Another family member added, “You think that you’re alone. To see all of the people that we saw today, now you can see others have a voice.”



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