

Stellantis Sterling Stamping worker buried as questions remain over work-related death

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Thomas Eugene Cornman Jr., a 58-year old veteran autoworker at Stellantis Sterling Stamping in suburban Detroit, was laid to rest July 25 in Shelby Township. He passed away July 21 after struggling for his life in a hospital for two weeks.

Cornman reportedly suffered an injury at work which would ultimately claim his life, reportedly involving a forklift. Testimonials at his funeral described him as a well-liked man among his co-workers, and an abundant source of love, kindness, humor and support for his family.

Little has been made public about the accident or how exactly Tom was injured, due to the stony silence maintained by the company and the United Auto Workers union. UAW Local 1264 officials posted a death notice and funeral information on their Facebook page last week without the slightest suggestion that it was work related.

But as any veteran autoworker can confirm, statements from company and union officials should be treated with more than a healthy dose of skepticism. One worker with 20 years of experience, who knew Tom, told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, “When something like this happens, the company tries to brush everything off like it’s not their fault. It’s a shame what the union allows them to get away with... They don’t have our backs at all.”

Cornman’s death follows by nearly four months the tragic death of Dundee Engine skilled trades worker Ronald Adams Sr., and is at least the third work related tragedy to fell a Stellantis worker in the last year. In the wake of the refusal of both management and the United Auto Workers to conduct any serious investigation or release any details of the accident to Adams’ family members and coworkers, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees launched its own independent investigation. The preliminary findings reveal gross disregard for worker safety on the part of management and their UAW accomplices.

The Detroit automakers are notorious for doing everything they can to deny responsibility for any fatal incidents that occur inside the plant. Many autoworkers at Stellantis have

shared stories with the *Autoworker Newsletter* of how they’ve witnessed cases where workers are unconscious at the time emergency paramedics examine them after an accident in the plant and are later pronounced dead from supposedly non-work related injuries. UAW Local 1264 officials have not responded to requests from the WSWS for comment on the incident inside the plant which sent Cornman to the hospital.

According to family members, Tom was born in Pontiac, Michigan and grew up in nearby Rochester. His dad and his uncle both retired from a General Motors plant in Pontiac, which assembled Fiero cars before being closed for good in 2010. His grandparents, whom he would visit often until the end of their lives, lived in Pennsylvania, just north of Pittsburgh.

After high school, Tom joined the military. When he returned from his deployment, he picked up the nickname “Airborne” in reference to his time as a paratrooper in the US Army. He then pursued a career as an assemblyman in the automotive industry, which allowed him to build a life and a home in Michigan. Cornman was well-liked and respected by his co-workers. He was known for having an infectious smile and a kind word to offer for everyone.

Pastor Myra Moreland, who gave the eulogy at Tom’s funeral, suggested that his nickname was an appropriate way to characterize his contagious joyful nature, which was also “airborne.”

Family members recalled that Tom loved spending time with his family. He was a role model to his three nieces who lived in Virginia. He visited them at least twice a year. He gave them compassion and support during critical transitional phases of their life, such as attending college, for which he will always be remembered. He also had a deep and loving bond with his brother, Don.

In a fond recollection, his niece Taryn, who lived with Tom at his home in Michigan for some time, shared a story of Tom’s playful claim that he was not the one who had fueled her car in the middle of the night (when he certainly had done just that). “I don’t know what you’re talking

about. It must've been the gas fairy."

Another niece, Chloe, spoke of "Uncle Tommy" as "someone who never let time or distance stop him from showing up." He was a "guide" in her and her sisters' life's journey.

Tom had a fiancée, Melissa, who tragically lost her life in 2012. Melissa was described as "the love of his life." Tom had a stepdaughter from this engagement, Heather, to whom he remained close for the rest of his life. Just a year prior to the heartbreaking loss of his fiancée, Tom's mother passed away. Tom's father also preceded him in death, sometime before that. Tom's family described Tom as generous, reliable, hard-working, wise, and deeply caring.

Tom loved to go swimming, and some of the fondest memories that his family have of him are on the beach. His favorite destination to vacation was the Outer Banks island chain off the coast of North Carolina. He had an "indiscriminate passion" for music, being familiar with many styles, and he would occasionally sing his favorite songs while spending time with his family. Tom also loved animals.

Tom was enthusiastically preparing for retirement and eagerly awaiting that day. He was planning on moving to Hawaii when that happened, although his nieces were hoping that he would come to Virginia. Those dreams of bliss and free time to enjoy with loved ones were swept away by the brutal realities of for-profit production. "He gave his life to those plants. He deserved to have a long and healthy retirement afterwards," his cousin exclaimed.

Doug MacIntosh, president of UAW Local 1264, of which Cornman was a member, also spoke at his funeral. While expressing condolences on behalf of all the workers at Tom's plant and the UAW, he did not acknowledge that the fatal chain of events culminating in Tom's death began with an accident in the plant.

This failure to note the work-related character of the circumstances surrounding Cornman's death was consistent with the Facebook notice sent out by the union informing autoworkers of the upcoming funeral. Needless to say, neither MacIntosh nor the Local's recording secretary, Marty Barrymore, who spoke next, denounced or even hinted at the incredibly dangerous conditions that exist inside auto plants that workers have to navigate every day in order to stay alive. The dangers are magnified at facilities like Sterling Stamping that contain massive dies used for pressing parts for car bodies.

Another veteran worker from Tom's plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "Safety is all for show... The only safety in there is if you look out for yourself."

Two workers died within the space of one week in 2021 at Sterling Stamping, which the company says is the largest

stamping facility in the world. Crane operator Terry Garr was crushed to death in a stamping press during dye staging, and millwright Mark Bruce died of COVID-19.

One of Tom's co-workers informed us, "We work with a lot of grease and oil. I've been on jobs where I'm slipping while I have parts in my hand, and they just put cardboard over it." Another worker at Sterling Stamping said, "A lot of stuff gets ignored, especially the working conditions on the platforms. The press-side flooring bubbles up. We're tripping while holding parts. It's dangerous."

One elderly family member, commenting on the accident which sent Tom to the hospital said, "We'll probably never know exactly what happened to him." Several members of his family were skeptical of claims that Tom's death was due to his health, and not the accident which he suffered at work.

"He was in excellent health," one of Tom's relatives said. "His death should've been prevented." One member of his family from his generation who was close to Tom said, "We're going have to wait for an investigation" before they can be sure of the cause of his death. Another family member predicted, with disgust, "They're not going do anything."

When introducing the three union executives who were present at Cornman's funeral, Pastor Moreland awkwardly referred to them as "his coworkers." This was perhaps an honest mistake, since the relationship between union officials and rank-and-file autoworkers is unclear to many outside the auto industry. But experienced autoworkers are increasingly seeing their union "reps" for what they are: management's enforcers of job-cutting, the slashing of benefits, exhausting hours, line speed-ups and unsafe conditions.

When addressing the memorial, Barrymore said, "For six years of me being Tom's steward, [my phone] never rang for a problem or an issue" with Tom. This may have been because, as one of Tom's actual co-workers told us, "If you complain to a committeeman, nothing really changes."



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