

Initial results of the IWA-RFC investigation into the death of Ronald Adams Sr.

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The following report was delivered at the July 27 public hearing on the investigation being conducted by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees into the death of Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr. The 63-year-old skilled tradesman was crushed to death by an overhead gantry at the Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan on April 7 under circumstances which have still not been explained by the company, the United Auto Workers or the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA).

Jerry White, the labor editor of the World Socialist Web Site, presented the initial findings of the IWA-RFC investigation. To become involved in the inquiry or to report information on workplace deaths and injuries, submit the form at the bottom of this page.

This report will present the initial results of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees' investigation into the death of Ronald Adams Sr. It is based on interviews with dozens of workers, including skilled trades, production and contract workers at the Dundee plant, the Adams family, autoworkers from other factories, safety experts, and other witnesses over nearly four months. These are only initial results, however, and the investigation is far from over.

The IWA-RFC launched this investigation after it became clear that Stellantis, the United Auto Workers (UAW), and Michigan's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) were stonewalling the truth. The company issued a perfunctory condolence statement the day of Adams' death, saying it was "working with local authorities," and has since remained silent. The corporate media covered the death only initially—without mentioning any safety violations—and has not followed up.

MIOSHA opened an investigation on April 7 but admitted last week that it is still "ongoing." The UAW, meanwhile, has functioned not as an advocate for workers' safety, but as a co-conspirator in covering up the circumstances of this preventable death.

How Ronald Adams died

We gathered information from the death certificate, the autopsy report and initial public statements to piece together an answer to the question, how did Ronald Adams Sr. die? With the factory now resuming full production, workers have reached out to the *World Socialist Web Site* to provide additional information, including sending us photographs of the workstation where Ronald was killed.

According to public records, at around 1:15 a.m. on April 7, Ronald Adams was performing maintenance on an industrial washer in Department 7300. An overhead gantry, used to transfer engine heads into the washer, suddenly and without warning activated. The hoist plunged down with massive force, crushing Adams.

The autopsy report said Adams was "found unresponsive by a co-worker pinned to a conveyor belt underneath a gantry arm." First responders documented "no signs of life." He was transported to Trinity Hospital Ann Arbor, where he was pronounced dead despite resuscitation efforts.

The autopsy, released after a Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) request, detailed catastrophic injuries: 18 of 24 ribs broken, a crushed sternum, spinal fractures, and 20 percent of his blood capacity found in his lungs.

We provided the autopsy report to a trained surgeon who told the WSWS:

"These injuries are comparable to the trauma from an airplane crash or combat explosion."

No worker simply earning a living should die as if he were in a combat zone. But as Will Lehman explained, Adams and so many others like him are in fact martyrs in a class war—a war against the working class that claims the lives of at least 15 workers every day in the US.

The washer and gantry system

The two orange grippers you can see through the door are attached to the gantry. The gantry moves vertically to pick up an engine head from the conveyor and then carries it over to the washer where it is chemically bathed.

The washer and gantry system are both manufactured and serviced by Fives Cinetic, a Farmington, Michigan-based global engineering firm. A Fives Cinetic programmer who worked with Adams during retooling said Adams was involved from the beginning of the retooling operation. "He was supporting us from the Stellantis side to program that machine. So, he knew that machine from the beginning."

He explained that gantries are programmed for "speed, accuracy, and repeatability." In normal operation, they only activate when safety conditions are met. But he speculated that during maintenance, the gantry may have received a signal that the washer was ready. That is, there were no parts in the washer so therefore the gantry would have to retrieve another part and put it into the washer.

"Maybe the gantry got the signal," the programmer said, that the machine was ready for the part load and the gantry came [down].

These programmers, who have such information, including how the machine was programmed, whether there were faults, whether this particular gantry had malfunctioned before, were never interviewed by Stellantis, by the UAW or by MIOSHA.

As he said, "No one called us. We could have checked the machine mode or fault history, but now that may be lost."

This programmer explained that the control boards do not have a lot of

memory and that once they are shut down and restarted, they erase the data. A modern factory has IT systems that record the motion of every machine, however. They can look at an engine serial number and go back and detect whether there were any faults in the production process. But none of this information has been made public and it needs to be made public.

This programmer, with 15 years in the industry, said, “Stellantis follows safety rules less” than GM or Ford. Before Adams’ death, he said, “you could go in a machine any time, without lockout. After the incident, if you want to go inside a machine, there has to be a maintenance guy who records what time we lock out a machine and who was inside. Another guy will be outside the machine to turn off the panel or press the E-Stop (Emergency Stop) button.”

There was no such spotter, as far as we know, when Ronald was in the factory cell.

Software changes and mislabeled machines

Other Dundee workers raised additional possibilities. Several reported that another contractor, PARI, altered the software logic of the gantry system without informing workers.

“Operators thought the gantry would be off during dry runs—like it always was—but it wasn’t,” the worker said. “Nobody knew they’d added a new layer of programming.”

Workers also reported that “placards”—signs posted next to the machines that indicate where the lockout points are—were never updated after the gantry was relocated from the south side of the plant to the north side.

Steve, a veteran worker, explained:

“If the placards were wrong, a worker could believe a machine was locked out when it wasn’t. That’s one of the major possibilities.”

No lockout/tagout protection

What about the lockout/tagout system? In a properly operating factory, no worker should get anywhere near a machine unless it is powered off and not operable—and this was confirmed by management. What was the situation in Dundee?

Multiple workers testified that management, with the UAW’s blessing, distributed “cheater” keys that bypass lockout/tagout protections.

“A cheater key makes the machine think the safety gate is closed,” said veteran worker Nick. “This plant constantly breaks its own safety policies to push parts. Management tells us to take shortcuts and ‘do the paperwork after.’”

After Adams’ death, management ordered workers to return the cheater keys.

“They threatened to fire people. They put popcorn tins around the plant to collect the keys. One tin was half full. Everyone had them—team leads, maintenance, even team members,” Nick reported.

These are photos of the emails sent out by the HR department at Dundee and the plant manager that ordered the keys to be turned in. The fact that they did this confirms that they knew they were guilty as sin in violating basic lockout protections for workers.

Commenting on this situation, a former OSHA compliance officer told the WSWS:

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.

Pattern of unsafe conditions

Ronald Adams was not the first fatality at Stellantis. Just seven months earlier, on August 21, 2024, 53-year-old Antonio Gaston was crushed to death at the Toledo Jeep plant, 23 miles away. And on July 5, 2025, 58-year-old Sterling Stamping worker Thomas Corman died following a hi-lo accident. That’s three Stellantis deaths that we heard of in under a year.

A former Dundee worker told WSWS:

“When I heard Ron was crushed, I immediately thought—this is what happens at launch time when they’re behind schedule. Ron would not have done anything unsafe. Skilled trades workers always lock out. But during launch, management says, ‘We have to bypass this.’ It’s about money. That’s the only way this could happen.”

Instead of investigating systemic failures, the company, UAW, and media launched a coordinated coverup. After Adams’ death, management brought the next shift of workers into the auditorium.

“They locked the doors—which is a fire hazard—and told us not to say anything,” Nick said. “They wanted everything to ‘go back to normal.’ No real safety message. Just keep quiet.”

Workers who tried to speak out or contact Adams’ family were threatened.

One worker received an anonymous call: “Shut your mouth. Do you still live at [his home address]?”

UAW Local 723 officials issued vague statements on Facebook. Almost two weeks after Ronnie’s death, the UAW International briefly acknowledged Adams’ death at the bottom of a Workers Memorial Day post. But on April 28, the very day Adams was buried, the UAW and Stellantis posted a video praising their “joint efforts” for a safe workplace. In an insult to Ronald and his co-workers, one company executive blamed accidents on “unsafe acts” by supposedly careless workers—not the relentless drive to cut costs and boost profits. They did not even bother to mention Adams’ name.

Later, UAW-Stellantis VP Kevin Gotinsky issued a public letter calling for production to restart—without referencing Adams’ death. With UAW approval, the plant is now operating on three full shifts, producing engines marked with the blood of Ronald Adams.

The UAW’s role in enforcing management dictates

The UAW’s joint safety committee at Dundee has long served management. Its reps, such as former Shop Chairman Tom Zimmerman—voted out by members for being a management stooge—are handpicked and rewarded for downplaying hazards. Zimmerman was the UAW safety rep when Ronald was killed. These committees were also a central part of the UAW’s corruption scandal, funneling company money into “training centers” for UAW bureaucrats.

When the IWA-RFC launched this investigation in May, we warned:

“If this crime is buried, more lives will be sacrificed. Especially as UAW President Shawn Fain supports Trump’s economic nationalism and ‘reshoring’ under sweatshop conditions.”

Build rank-and-file committees

The only path forward is independent action by workers themselves. The IWA-RFC calls on Dundee workers—and autoworkers everywhere—to join the investigation, come forth with more information and demand answers:

Was the gantry's lockout system overridden?

Were changes made to software or controls without informing workers?

Were machines mislabeled after being moved?

Did manpower shortages, cost-cutting and the rush to resume production play a role in the death of Ronald Adams?

Why weren't contractors interviewed by MIOSHA or the UAW?

The IWA-RFC urges workers to take control of safety and production speed—abolish joint safety committees, expose the unsafe practices, and protect their own lives.

Ronald Adams was a husband, father, grandfather—and a respected tradesman who should have returned home that night. To honor his life and protect others, workers must form their own rank-and-file safety committees and end the deadly dictatorship of production for profit.



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