

# The death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. and the law of capitalist profit

David North  
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*These remarks were delivered by David North, the Chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board and National Chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US), toward the conclusion of the July 27 public hearing of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees' investigation into the death of Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr.*

*Ronald Adams, a 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).*

*The hearing was attended by 100 workers, youth, and community members. It was addressed by Shamenia Stewart-Adams, Ronald Adams' widow, and featured powerful reports from Mack Trucks worker and IWA-RFC member Will Lehman, WSWS labor reporter Jerry White, and other autoworkers and rank-and-file workers.*

*The meeting unanimously adopted a resolution to continue and expand the investigation, establish rank-and-file safety committees, and build an international campaign to defend the lives and rights of workers.*

*To become involved in the inquiry or to report information on workplace deaths and injuries, submit the form at the bottom of this page.*

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On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party, I would like to extend both our condolences and our sincere welcome to the family of Ronald Adams. We greatly appreciate the comments and the courage of Shamenia in speaking here today.

This cannot be an easy experience for you and your family. You have suffered an irreparable loss. There's no way that that reality can be diminished. But I hope it has become clear in the course of this discussion that your experience is not an isolated one. All over the world, working people can identify with the experience through which you have passed.

The reality is that we can be certain, on the basis of statistics, that even as we have been meeting here during the past two hours, hundreds if not thousands of workers all over the world have suffered injuries, and many have been killed.

We know that this will not be ended by expressions of condolences. We know that those who claim to have responsibility for the fate of workers, particularly union organizations, will do nothing to stop this.

Some 52 years ago, I went to Ohio to cover the struggles of the working class in major industries. That was a period of enormous rank-and-file militancy. While I was in Lorain, Ohio, which was a center of steel manufacturing, I came across a very small notice in the local newspaper about the death of a young worker by the name of Rick Hertzig at the National Tube plant in Lorain.

Hertzig was killed in an event very similar to that which killed Ronald Adams, except that Rick was a very inexperienced worker, while Ronald was very experienced. A massive piece of equipment hit this young worker, Hertzig, and killed him instantly. He was just 20 years old. He left behind a one-year-old child, a young widow, and a devastated family.

Now here we are 52 years later, and the same things are happening every single day.

We live in the midst of the greatest scientific revolution in history, a staggering development of technology, and yet the most elementary precautions are not taken to protect the lives of workers. The most dangerous thing that a worker can do every single day is go to work. No family can be sure that at the end of the day, they won't suddenly receive devastating news of something terrible that has happened in the factory or in the workplace.

So far, we have only been speaking of industrial accidents. We have not been talking about the daily poisoning that takes place inside factories, in workplaces, in neighborhoods. We have not addressed the issue of global warming and the destruction of the environment.

The term accident is often used, but is that word adequate? If we are going to change things, we must begin to

understand the cause of what are called “accidents,” and to recognize that within these accidents, we are seeing the operation of a law.

If you walk across the room and you trip, that might be an accident. When we are experiencing injuries and deaths that occur with staggering regularity, day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute, second after second—these are no longer mere accidents in the conventional sense of the word. We are seeing the operation of necessity.

These tragedies are the product of the way that the system within which we live is organized, not just in this country but in every part of the world. Our social life, our economic life, is organized in a way that continuously produces these disasters, and they will continue until a way is found of putting an end to the system which produces them.

What is the system? What is this social organization? It is the capitalist system. Where does all this wealth come from? Where do the trillions of dollars in the pockets of a handful of people come from? The wealth comes from the transformation of the labor of human beings, what is called labor power, what capitalists buy from workers in the form of wages.

The whole operation of the system depends on transforming human labor into profit, into what Marx called surplus value. When they employ workers, capitalists are interested in only one thing: How much wealth can that worker contribute to their own fortune? Machines don’t make any money. They have to be set into motion. It is the labor of workers that sets those machines into motion or adds in one form or another value to the productive process that makes this entire system operate.

From the standpoint of the capitalist class, everything depends upon the transformation of labor into surplus value and profit. In order to achieve that, every measure will be taken to guarantee the highest level of exploitation.

We must understand that it is the system itself which produces these tragedies, a system that operates in the interests of another class, which owns the corporations, which derives value and profit from the labor of workers. In response, we must build a movement among the working class. It is first of all necessary for workers to be conscious of this system, and on this basis to take action, to transfer power to the workers on the shop floor in the workplaces, to begin a movement on an international scale that will take control of the organization of society in the interests of the broad masses of the working people.

Let us be blunt: We are living in a world where every day we read of unspeakable horrors—industrial deaths, the poisoning of the environment, the genocide of entire populations, as we now see in Palestine, the spending of trillions in preparation for war. That is the system we are

working under.

If this system is to be changed, it requires the intervention of the working class, the fight to build a mass social and political movement.

This meeting has been organized by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It could be organized and this fight will continue because it is informed by a perspective. We are not looking to the ruling class to solve this problem. It cannot solve it. Even if it wanted to, the operation of its economic system determines its actions.

The message that we put forward today is that it is critical that we take this fight into the factories, into the workplaces, that we build the IWA-RFC as a powerful instrument of working class struggle in the United States and internationally, and that we connect this fight to a struggle to change the very nature of the political and social system under which we live.

You cannot combine capitalism with the interests of the working class. If any of these social problems are to be addressed, it will require the building of a socialist movement. There’s no escaping that truth.

Fundamentally, socialism means the transfer of power to the working class and the reorganization of society on the basis of the interests of broad masses of people.

I look at Shamenia and your children and grandchildren. Let us make sure that the world in which you grow up is a world in which such horrors never take place. And when you grow older, when you speak about what happened to your grandfather and 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 worth living in. That’s what we’re seeking to do. Join and help build this movement.



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