

Legionella outbreak at GM Tech Center in Detroit suburb

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On September 10, 2025, two employees working at the Cole Engineering building at the General Motors technical center in Warren, Michigan, tested positive for Legionnaires' disease, a severe and potentially fatal lung infection caused by Legionella bacteria. The Macomb County Health Department notified GM, and the Cole Engineering building was ordered closed "out of an abundance of caution" until at least September 22, when third-party test results become available. The company has not yet confirmed the engineering center as the source of exposure.

Legionnaires' disease (legionellosis) is a severe type of pneumonia caused by Legionella bacteria. It is contracted through inhaling mist or aerosolized water contaminated with the bacteria. Common sources include cooling towers, HVAC systems, hot water plumbing, decorative fountains and other engineered water systems.

Symptoms typically appear 2–10 days after exposure and include fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle aches, headaches, gastrointestinal symptoms or confusion in more severe cases. For high-risk populations, such as current or ex-smokers or people 50 or older, the disease can be fatal. One in 10 people who get infected with Legionnaires' disease die from lung failure or other complications.

According to the CDC, reported incidents of Legionnaires' disease have increased by an average annual rate of 9.3 percent since 2002. This is due to a variety of factors, including poor maintenance, lack of oversight and worker protections, and increasing temperatures due to climate change, creating ideal conditions for bacterial growth.

Industrial workers are particularly at risk due to extensive, complex water systems at manufacturing plants. Cooling towers and industrial air conditioning

systems are locations where Legionella bacteria are known to thrive and produce aerosolized contaminated water. With the constant drive to increase profit margins, companies are incentivized to reduce spending on maintenance and safety and cover up outbreaks to avoid loss of production.

In response to the Legionella outbreak, a number of critical posts appeared on social media pointing to the general lack of attention to safety by the auto companies. Several noted that these were not the first cases of Legionnaires at the tech center.

One post read: "When they cut back maintenance employees mold happens. Too bad it wasn't management that fell ill."

Others pointed to the attack on public health underway by the Trump administration, including the purging of the Centers for Disease Control. "We can't count on the CDC to investigate this anymore," another worker posted.

Even when corporations are caught engaging in criminal neglect of safety, they are fined at most a pittance compared to their operating profits. In 2023, a 61-year-old worker died from Legionnaires' disease at Huron Inc., a Michigan auto supplier. Investigations showed that multiple workers were infected and hospitalized over several years, with internal tests detecting Legionella bacteria. The company was cited for failing to keep employees safe from a recognized hazard and fined just \$10,300 for killing the worker.

Huron was acquired by Seven Mile Capital Partners in 2015, which then sold it to Adrian, an international private investment company with \$62 billion in assets in 2017. For these giant investment firms, the penalty for killing a worker is a rounding error, the cost of doing business.

In August 2023, just a few miles south of the GM

Technical Center, two workers contracted Legionnaires' at the Stellantis' Warren Truck Assembly Plant. In previous years there were outbreaks at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant outside Detroit and the Kansas City Assembly Plant in Missouri, which resulted in one death.

Legionella as well as copper and lead contamination were discovered at multiple Environmental Protection Agency buildings in Washington D.C., Boston, Houston and Chicago this time last year.

Alongside the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has suffered from significant budget and staff cuts—under Democratic and Republican administrations—further weakening protections against waterborne and environmental hazards. The Trump administration is seeking to gut what is left of OSHA, in the name of freeing companies from “regulatory overreach.”

Every day in the United States, an average of 385 workers die from hazardous working conditions. Legionnaires' disease is only one expression of this ongoing social crime: workers forced into unsafe factories and offices, while companies and their financial backers profit. Without independent organization and struggle by workers themselves, outbreaks like those in Warren, Dearborn, and at Huron Inc. will continue—and more lives will be needlessly lost.

Far from opposing this, the United Auto Workers, which claims to represent more than 2,000 workers at the GM Tech Center, has functioned as a corporatist partner in the gutting of jobs and safety conditions. The sellout of the 2023 contract struggle by UAW President Shawn Fain and the rest of the union bureaucracy resulted in thousands of job cuts, speedup and safety violations, which cost the lives of at least two Stellantis workers Antonio Gaston and Ronald Adams Sr.

Autoworkers must take lessons from the COVID 19 pandemic, when the ruling class declared that “the cure can't be worse than the disease” and presided over tens of millions of preventable deaths. At the beginning of the pandemic, while the auto companies and the UAW were covering up illnesses and deaths to keep production moving, autoworkers took matters into their own hands and walked off the job, forcing a temporary shutdown of the industry.

On July 27, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) held a public hearing where it presented the initial findings of its independent investigation into the death of Ronald Adams Sr., a 63-year-old skilled tradesman who was crushed to death April 7 by machinery at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex. The approximately 100 workers and young people who attended voted unanimously to expand the IWA-RFC and take up the fight for a national and international movement to end the sacrifice of workers' lives and limbs on the altar of profit.

Until production is taken out of the control of the corporations and put into the hands of workers on the shop floor, the slaughter will continue. We urge all workers to take the take up the fight by joining the IWA-RFC (International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees) and building their own democratic organizations, independent of the pro-company union bureaucracies, to take control of work and safety conditions in their workplaces.

To join the fight for rank-and-file committees and workers' control over safety, fill out the form below.



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