

9 months since death of Michigan autoworker Ronald Adams

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Nine months after the preventable death of 63?year?old machine repairman Ronald Adams Sr. at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan, the silence from the company, the United Auto Workers and state remains deafening. Production resumed at Dundee as if nothing happened, while the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) has still not released the results of its probe into the April 7 fatality.

On Tuesday, a spokesman from the state safety agency told the *World Socialist Web Site* that “the case remains open” nine months afterwards. Management and the UAW bureaucracy have offered no accountability to Adams’ family or his co?workers.

This cover?up is inseparable from broader political and economic developments: job cuts, the rapid imposition of automation and AI, and an outright assault on safety regulation by the Trump administration. Together they produce the conditions for industrial slaughter.

Adams was crushed to death while performing maintenance on an industrial washer inside an enclosed factory cell, when an overhead gantry suddenly activated. Testimony gathered by an independent inquiry by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees revealed the lack of any serious lockout/tagout procedures in the factory. After Adams’ death, contractors who programmed the industrial washer and gantry were never interviewed by official investigators, and workers ordered to be silent (read about the investigation). MIOSHA’s continued delay in publishing its findings enables this cover?up. The agency’s claim that “investigations can take significant time” rings hollow when essential evidence can be altered and families and co-workers are denied any explanation.

The only way to break the cover?up is by mobilizing workers themselves to collect testimony, preserve records and publicly demand answers. This is precisely the purpose of the IWA-RFC’s independent inquiry, which

held a public hearing in Detroit last summer.

Equally criminal is the role of the UAW bureaucracy. Far from holding management accountable, UAW President Shawn Fain and his Stellantis department aided the company in returning the plant to full production. The UAW sanctioned the bypassing of lockout procedures and cutting corners on basic safety in order to return the plant to production as soon as possible. This is the outcome of the decades-long transformation of the UAW into an instrument of corporate management.

The deaths of Ronald Adams and other workers are the predictable consequence of the corporatist labor-management regime. Antonio Gaston, 53, was crushed to death at the Toledo Assembly Complex in August 2024 amid staffing shortages and allegations that safety guards had been removed to avoid production delays. Late last year, Toledo was placed on “emergency status,” with workers forced to endure 9–12 hour shifts, six to seven days a week, producing a surge in injuries concentrated at that plant (See our reporting on Toledo’s spike in injuries and emergency status).

Both Gaston’s and Adams’ deaths followed the UAW’s betrayal of the 2023 contract struggle. The union’s phony “stand up” strike and the eventual sellout of that fight cleared the way for mass firings of temporary workers and layoffs of full?time employees. Cutting staff only intensified speedup. The bureaucracy rammed through concessions that empowered management to run leaner, faster production lines staffed by exhausted, under?resourced workers. The result: more accidents, more injuries and more deaths.

The push to accelerate automation and AI in factories is being presented as “modernization.” In reality, it is being deployed to increase productivity on reduced headcounts—and to discipline the workforce. New automated systems often have complex, opaque software and depend on a reduced complement of maintenance

staff. When safety interlocks are bypassed to keep lines running, these technologies can become lethal instruments.

This shift is amplified by the political assault on regulatory protections. The Trump administration's drive to gut the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and other enforcement mechanisms allows corporate managers to ignore or manipulate investigations, if they take place at all. Workplace injuries and deaths, not to mention later deaths from long term exposures to toxic chemicals, are regularly undercounted or buried.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics annual report on Employer-Reported Workplace Injuries and Illnesses, set to be released on January 22, is always a year behind and will only report 2024 figures, not deaths and injuries from 2025. In 2023, there were 5,283 workplace fatalities from traumatic injuries and 135,304 from occupational diseases, averaging 385 deaths daily. There were another 2.6 million injury and illness cases that year.

The pattern repeats beyond the auto plants. At the US Postal Service, maintenance mechanic Nick Acker, 36, was crushed inside a mail-sorting machine at the Detroit Network Distribution Center on November 8. Witnesses reported disabled safety features as well as ignored safety grievances on the part of the American Postal Workers Union.

One week later, mail handler assistant Russell Scruggs Jr., 44, died after falling and striking his head at the Palmetto P&DC in Georgia, amid reports of inadequate emergency protocols and delayed medical response. These deaths mirror the same cover-up and indifference evident at Stellantis and demonstrate that speedup, understaffing and disabled safeguards now cross industries.

As the year ended, the death toll across industries continued to climb. On December 30, 57-year-old Darrin Rose Sr. fell into an industrial "crusher" at the Hoopes-Edwards plant in Alliance, Ohio. Fellow workers were not able to get him out in time. The machine involved breaks down chemicals for use as snow and ice melt products and fertilizers, according to the company website.

The same day, Elzie Houston, a 33-year-old truck driver and father of three girls, was killed when a concrete cattle feed trough weighing approximately 2,500 pounds fell from a trailer and landed on him. "I just want answers," Houston's mother Ulonda Leonard said. "I just want to know what happened. How did it happen? Because the stories I'm getting don't make sense to me."

The only way forward: rank-and-file organization and workers' control

Defending workers' lives requires the democratic, independent organization of workers themselves, through rank-and-file committees on every shop floor and in every facility. These committees must be empowered to:

- Conduct independent inquiries—inspect lockout/tagout records, document bypassed safeguards, collect witness testimony and preserve photographic and video evidence.
- Abolish labor-management safety committees and organize rank-and-file committees with the power to halt operations until safe conditions are restored.
- Coordinate regionally and internationally to prevent employers from isolating local struggles and to mobilize solidarity across plants and industries.

Such committees are the embryonic organs of a movement that can enforce safety standards and defend jobs. They must link immediate demands—no permanent layoffs, full pay and benefits for displaced workers, shortened workweeks without loss of pay—to the broader struggle for workers' political independence and socialism.

Workers at Stellantis, the USPS and across industry: do not accept silence or bureaucratic whitewash. Convene meetings, preserve records, form rank-and-file committees and connect with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Ronald Adams and Antonio Gaston, Nick Acker and Russell Scruggs Jr. did not die because of "accidents." They were killed by a social system that values profit above life. Their deaths must be the spark for a movement that insists: no more cover-ups, no more silence, workers' lives over bosses' profits.



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