

53-year-old Stellantis worker Antonio Gaston crushed and killed at Toledo Jeep plant

Our reporters
22 August 2024

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is holding a meeting this Sunday, August 25, at 3:00 p.m. US Eastern Time, “For global action to defend jobs at Warren Truck and around the world!” To register, click here.

A 53-year-old worker at the Toledo Jeep Assembly Complex was crushed to death on the assembly line at the Ohio factory Wednesday afternoon. Antonio Gaston was a father of four children who was forced to move to the Toledo plant after Stellantis closed his plant in Belvidere, Illinois in 2022.

A gofundme page has been set up to raise money for Gaston’s wife and children.

Just hours after the deadly incident, a quality inspector on the Jeep Gladiator line told local news station WTOL 11 that Gaston was killed “where the chassis and the body comes down together, where all the parts from all the plants come together.” He “was doing his job on break, and he just apparently happened to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time. The conveyor turned on; it’s just terrible,” he said.

“As far as we know, the worker who was killed drove a tugger and was a stock worker,” another Jeep worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The line started moving while he was near the robot. There was no safety mechanism that would prevent the robot from moving if someone is near it, from what I’m aware of at least. If there is, obviously it wasn’t working.”

Pointing to the impact of job cuts at the plant, the worker added, “Stellantis has been eliminating hundreds of jobs within the plant. It started by eliminating team leaders and combining teams. They also eliminated a lot of quality jobs, and jobs they considered too ‘easy.’ But the same amount of work is required to build the vehicles. The additional work was added on to other jobs, which, of course, isn’t good for safety.

“There is also immense pressure to eliminate down time

and line stoppages, so people have to work faster to keep up. I’ve worked on that side before, and the jobs are extremely over cycled.

“The worker who was killed was in stock, and they have eliminated jobs in stock also. It’s a sad situation, he had a wife and children. Now they are without a husband and father. The company doesn’t care about safety, only cranking out numbers.”

“It was a very terrible, tragic, sad, accident,” a veteran worker told the WSWs. “He may have seen something not right about the chassis, and tried to fix the situation, and got trapped.” Asked if job cuts and pressure to meet production quotas have undermined safety in the plant, the worker stated “yes” emphatically.

A WSWs reporter called United Auto Workers Local 12 President Bruce Baumhower’s office for more information about the worker’s death and the impact of job cuts on safety conditions. Although the local union president’s secretary took down the questions, Baumhower has not returned the call.

The UAW bureaucracy is complicit in the deadly conditions facing workers. Stellantis and the other automakers have used the pro-company labor agreements signed by the UAW last fall to launch a savage job- and cost-cutting campaign. This has been spearheaded by Stellantis, which is seeking to shift the cost of its transition to electric vehicles by slashing thousands of jobs in Toledo, Detroit, Kokomo and other cities. Most recently, the company announced the layoff of 2,500 workers at its suburban Detroit Warren Truck plant.

It is well known among autoworkers and other workers in dangerous manufacturing facilities that “no one dies on the company’s property.” This is because employers could face wrongful death lawsuits from surviving family members if such fatalities are connected to dangerous conditions of work and corporate negligence.

A Warren Truck worker told the WSWs, “Whatever

happened in Toledo, they're going to solely blame it on the victim. If someone dies in the plant, the company is supposed to pay the family triple the benefits. My coworker died here last year. They told us they were working on him. He still had a pulse. He was cold before the ambulance arrived or even knew where he was.

"They didn't pronounce him dead until he left this property. That's just plain wicked and disgusting behavior on the part of the company."

In a statement posted on his X/Twitter account, Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US vice president, stated:

"Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore and I express our deepest condolences to the wife and children of Antonio Gaston, who was killed at the Toledo Jeep Complex Wednesday. We demand a full investigation of his death, carried out by a committee of trusted rank-and-file workers themselves.

"There is no doubt, however, that Antonio is the latest victim of America's industrial slaughterhouse, which subordinates workers' lives to capitalist profit. This is the brutal system that Harris and Trump, both corporate controlled parties and the UAW bureaucracy defend.

"Since the signing of the 2023 UAW labor agreements, hailed by UAW President Shawn Fain and US President Joe Biden, as 'historic' and 'life-changing,' autoworkers have been subjected to a savage attack on their jobs and working conditions. Thousands of part-time and full-time workers have lost their jobs and those remaining face increasingly deadly conditions in the factories.

"At Ford, 46-year-old Tywaun Long Jr. died of a heart attack on April 17 because of exhausting hours and speedup. Now, Antonio Gaston's name has been added to the long list of autoworkers, including Steven Dierkes, Danny Walters, Catherine Pace and Daulton Simmers, who have been sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit. This is not limited to the auto industry. Just a few miles from the Jeep plant, the two young brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey, were killed in an entirely preventable explosion at the nearby BP Husky oil refinery in September 2022.

"Now, Fain and his PR department think they can fool workers with their phony grievance writing campaign to 'enforce the contract' and force Stellantis to 'keep their promise' to reopen the Belvidere plant. But it was precisely the sellout agreement backed by Fain & Co. that has given the auto corporations the green light to destroy tens of thousands of jobs.

"Workers cannot rely on the UAW bureaucracy, let

alone Harris and Trump, to protect them. Instead, workers must expand the network of rank-and-file committees in the factories so they can assert the power of workers on the shop floor over job safety and conditions. In March 2022, workers at Jeep, Warren Truck, Sterling Heights and other Stellantis plants shut down the industry with wildcat strikes because the UAW and management kept production running as Covid was spreading throughout the factories.

"As Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker who ran as a socialist candidate for UAW president against Fain, said, the right to a safe job, and the right to a secure and good-paying job, can only be won through the collective action of the rank-and-file in opposition to the UAW apparatus. This struggle must be guided by the principle that workers' social rights take precedence over corporate profit and private capitalist ownership of the giant corporations, which have been built up through labor of generations of workers.

"The SEP calls for the unity of autoworkers around the world in a common fight against job-cutting and deadly conditions, and for Stellantis, Ford, GM, VW and other giant corporations to be transformed into public industries, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class."

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