

COVID-19 spreading widely in auto plants as Detroit automakers push for more production

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23 July 2020

For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your factory, send an email to the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more.

Reports continue of spreading COVID-19 infections at US auto plants as Detroit automakers are making clear that they will not permit even temporary shutdowns for cleaning and quarantining. Even as cases surge, Ford, Fiat Chrysler and General Motors are keeping a tight lid on vital information needed for workers' health and safety, such as the number and location of infections.

There were nine new cases reported this week at the Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville, according to a memo sent to plant employees. This brings to 20 the number of confirmed cases at the plant, according to claims by Ford and the United Auto Workers (UAW), which workers believe is likely an underestimation.

At the nearby Ford Louisville Assembly Plant (LAP), which employs a total of 4,500, workers reported to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that as of Tuesday there were 19 confirmed cases of COVID-19. These are figures that workers compiled independently based on social media exchanges because there is no consistent reporting on the part of the UAW and the company. "Management is not saying a word," said an assembler on day shift. "Wearing a mask in this heat is unbearable, and the cases just keep piling up."

The UAW admitted that no interruption in production or additional cleaning had occurred after the new cases were confirmed at KTP. Ford made it clear that its disregard for basic safety had the sanctioning of the union. In a self-serving statement, management declared, "Working closely with the UAW and external experts in infectious disease and epidemiology, we developed safety protocols to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, which we follow at all Ford facilities globally."

So determined are the auto companies to keep pumping out production and profits, that Ford tried to keep workers on the assembly line Wednesday even after the power and lights went out at the Chicago Assembly Plant. Workers sent

photos to the WSWs showing coworkers working by the light of their cellphones.

While Ford is demanding that workers risk their lives by working in the midst of a pandemic, the government of Britain awarded a \$634 million loan guarantee to the company to support Ford's exports of engines and transmissions from its plant in Dagenham, England.

In the face of the dire threat to health and safety posed by the return to work, under conditions where the COVID-19 pandemic is surging across the US, workers at the Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly Plant, Sterling Heights Assembly and the Toledo Jeep manufacturing complex have organized rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, to protect workers. Among their demands, the committees have insisted that workers have access to all information about infections and that an immediate 24-hour shutdown of the entire facility for deep cleaning take place after a case is found.

There has been a particular surge of COVID-19 cases at the Toledo complex, with management and the UAW flouting basic health and safety measures. At last report, there were more than 60 cases in the plant, but that is likely a vast underestimation under conditions of an information blackout by the UAW and FCA. Responding to widespread unrest, FCA said Friday that it was setting up an "in-plant COVID-19 Task Force," to relay workers' questions and concerns to senior management and the UAW.

"Someone just went home sick," a Toledo Jeep worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "The supervisors come up here and spray the area she was in since 5:30 this morning and run the line. Keep in mind that we've all touched the cars she's touched since 5:30 a.m."

"She's been in the break room, the bathroom and on the line, and they are going to continue running production, taking the least amount of precautions possible. This company should be facing a lawsuit."

Another worker said that he had been assigned to a new team and found that "Someone tested positive on the team and everyone was just finding out today. This whole team

could basically have been exposed; nobody's been tested, nobody's been quarantined. I was being trained by someone who had direct contact with the person infected. There is no social distancing over there, we were literally standing on top of each other."

At General Motors, it is being reported that the company may rescind plans to temporarily eliminate the third shift at its Wentzville, Missouri Assembly plant. The announcement of the temporary layoffs came as COVID-19 cases surged at the facility and the company faced mass absenteeism by workers who feared infection.

A worker at the GM Wentzville Assembly Plant posted on Facebook that management was "talking about how it now has 52 total positive cases and dozens waiting on results. But our (UAW) chairman is reporting 38 only. They think it's a joke with our lives!"

Workers at the plant had demanded the temporary closure of the facility in the face of a surge of cases. GM presented the temporary layoff as a partial response to these demands.

In an interview July 19 in the *Detroit Free Press*, GM CEO Mary Barra defended the company's supposed safety protocols, indicating there would be no further production shutdowns due to the recent resurgence of COVID. "We believe we do a very good job of keeping people safe by reducing the possibility that someone with COVID can enter our plants."

She added, "We feel that we've got a safe environment at work. At Wentzville, one of the things we do is screen. We are taking the precaution to say that you need to quarantine until we know that you don't have the virus. I've been at 10 plants since we started back up, and I'm continuing to go to plants. When I talk to people, they understand the protocol. To a person, they tell me, 'I feel safer here than I do at the grocery store.'"

In fact, at the Wentzville plant, as in every other auto facility, the safety protocols are little more than window dressing. GM and other auto companies have rejected out of hand any regular testing for workers, saying it is not practical and cost-effective.

Barra did not explain how contact tracing and quarantining could take place under conditions where asymptomatic workers could be spreading the infection without knowing they have the disease.

As for safety protocols, social distancing is impossible on assembly lines that require multiple operators on one process. Workers report lack of hand sanitizer, lack of adequate breaks, and the refusal of management to carry out basic cleaning measures.

The latest reports of COVID-19 cases at auto plants add to the surge, which includes dozens of cases at the GM Arlington, Texas plant and more than 130 at electric

carmaker Tesla in Fremont, California.

In a further demonstration of the collusion of the UAW with the auto companies, a group of 27 Toledo Fiat Chrysler workers filed a federal racketeering lawsuit this week alleging that both the UAW and company management colluded to deny them pay raises, advancement and seniority. The lawsuit states that FCA and the UAW "engaged in a classic pattern of racketeering, including committing multiple violations of bribery."

The suit was filed less than two weeks after a federal judge in Detroit dismissed General Motors' lawsuit against FCA claiming that the latter's bribing of top UAW officials to obtain favorable contract terms gave FCA an unfair competitive advantage. In throwing out the lawsuit, the judge declared, "FCA's UAW workers were the direct victims of the bribes because they were paid less, and GM suffered only an indirect competitive harm."

The workers had originally sued FCA and the UAW over a pattern of collusion and skullduggery dating back to 2007, when they hired in as temporary workers. At the time, the workers were systematically denied contractually stipulated advancement and pay increases and their grievance was suppressed.

In seeking the reopening of the lawsuit, the Toledo FCA workers pointed to the pattern of racketeering revealed by the arrest and conviction of top UAW officials, including former UAW Vice President for Fiat Chrysler Norwood Jewell, accusing the union of "illegally manipulating the collective bargaining and grievance processes and diverting funds from the National Training Center and other FCA funds for the benefit of UAW officials."

The blatant collusion of the UAW with auto company management in enforcing unhealthy and unsafe working conditions is a further graphic demonstration of the utter worthlessness of this organization. The WSWS urges workers to build and expand the network of rank-file safety committees to continue to assert workers' basic right to a safe work environment.



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