

“GM’s one of the biggest liars out there”

GM Fairfax worker speaks out over management-UAW cover-up of COVID-19 spread

James Tatsch

1 December 2020

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke with a worker at the General Motors Fairfax Assembly Plant in Kansas City, Kansas, about the ongoing spread of COVID-19 inside the plant and the cover-up by GM management and their accomplices in the United Auto Workers.

The coronavirus has been surging across Kansas and Missouri, with both states recording their highest totals over the preceding days with no sign of abating. As of Monday, nearly half of Kansas City’s metro-area hospitals anticipated critical staffing shortages for the coming week as they deal with the ongoing influx of COVID-19 patients, according to data collected by the Kansas Hospital Association.

The GM Fairfax plant, which employs roughly 2,260 across two shifts, is one of two major auto assembly plants in the Kansas City area, the other being Ford’s massive Kansas City Assembly Plant.

At Fairfax, UAW Local 31 officials recently were forced to acknowledge that there were a number of cases inside the plant, in the face of widespread anger which has been building up among workers over the lack of information on infections. The local’s “Shop Update” newsletter on November 10 stated that there were 10 new cases in the plant across five departments, affecting both the first and second shifts. Without explaining the timeframe for the emergence of the cases, the report stated that “several” workers had been sent out for testing.

Seeking to justify withholding further details which would help workers determine whether they had been exposed, the UAW made perfunctory and fraudulent references to “privacy laws,” HIPAA restrictions and COVID-19 guidelines.

The Fairfax worker said that the limited information released by GM and the UAW concealed the true scope of the virus’s spread throughout the plant. “We know that the shop chairman’s reports are inaccurate, they say such and such person in one area or another,” said Sam. (Sam’s real name is not being used to protect him from retaliation.) “We know of other cases throughout the plant. Word spreads mouth to mouth, and people post it on Facebook as soon as they go out.

“GM at the local level, they’re hiding the actual numbers of COVID. They don’t report tests done outside the plant, only those through the plant’s medical department. GM’s one of the biggest liars out there. I’m sure there’s a lot of cases out there they don’t want us to know about. As it gets colder and colder, it’s going to get worse.”

The UAW local chairman claimed that in all cases the proper protocols were followed and that all team members in the area were notified. Sam rejected this. He noted that in some cases they had only found out that a person was out on quarantine after they had come back to work. “Last month there was that second shift team leader that tested positive, and that was not reported. He worked over into the day shift before he went out. That could have exposed the whole shift.

“Word had spread that a team leader on the Seal-Line and one from the Cleanroom tested positive, but they’re not telling us anything about that.” He stressed, “The team leader touches all of your tools. They hand out the supplies we work with on a daily basis. They go everywhere.”

Sam said that the UAW was working to protect the interests of the company, not the workers. “When you’ve got the UAW we have at Fairfax, the company can pretty much do what they want. They’re not talking about COVID. They’re just trying to keep to business as usual. I’m tired of paying union dues only to have my ‘representative’ represent the company.”

He said that the use of temporary workers had increased as older workers took medical leave, although the total number of temporary and part-time workers in the plant is unknown. The union has only acknowledged that temporary worker orientations are a priority. “The temporary workers used to only work on Monday and Friday; now they’re there day in day out. They’ve been asked to work 30 hours a week or more. They say they have enough temps to run the plant, but that’s kind of funny because team leaders are on the line because we’re so short.”

The auto industry was only shut down from late-March to May because of the wildcat strike wave that was initiated by workers who were outraged that production was continuing in the midst of the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic. By taking the initiative in defiance of the UAW, autoworkers were able to save tens of thousands of lives. Now even the limited safety measures that were enacted throughout the industry following the two-month shutdown are no longer being enforced, and in many factories the measures are being eliminated entirely. The willful disregard for the health and safety of workers is being carried out with the full support and collaboration of the UAW.

As at other auto plants, workers at Fairfax say that basic safety measures, such as the mask policy, are not being strictly enforced. The

screening protocols that are conducted at the entrance of the plant are only cosmetic. Workers are not able to keep proper social distancing at shift end, getting packed together at the exits. It is not uncommon to find the check-in station unstaffed for periods throughout the day. And during peak periods workers are rushed through with no regard for their temperatures taken and their responses to questions about symptoms.

Even given the case numbers included in the Shop Report alone, the state of Kansas is required to identify GM Fairfax as an “Outbreak Location” based on the COVID-19 Exposure Location Identification Policy. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) guidelines state, “The KDHE will release the names of locations that have five or more cases with symptom-onset dates in the last 14 days.” However, the agency states that it no longer lists specific workplaces once it “no longer has five or more cases with symptom onset dates within the last 14 days,” making it unclear whether Fairfax was previously on its list.

Nonetheless, KDHE’s limited public admission indicates that private businesses and meatpacking plants make up the second largest number of cases by outbreak cluster, behind only long-term care facilities.

City shuts fire station in Fairfax Industrial District

Even as safety measures are breaking down and COVID-19 is spreading inside the plant, the ability of emergency personnel to respond to a crisis at the factory is being undermined by the city government. (The plant is located in Kansas City, Kansas, across the state border from the larger Kansas City, Missouri.) The city’s Unified Government Commission voted over the summer to close the Fairfax Industrial District’s fire station, relocating the entire fire company to the Piper area, 13 miles away, shifting resources to the western portion of the city that is currently the major focus for commercial development.

Firefighters have protested the move, picketing City Hall recently. In an industrial area that is termed by department officials as “highly volatile” and a plant rated by the fire department as a “High-Hazard Building Structure,” the nearest responders will now come from a smaller neighborhood station located three miles away.

Sam pointed to the potentially catastrophic impact of the longer response times because of the move, saying, “Every other day I’m hearing sirens going off from that fire station, so it’s definitely being utilized. Three to four months ago a semi lost control, and it hit some tanks. They had to evacuate the area because of chemicals leaking. My understanding is that there are 15,000-20,000 [working in the Fairfax Industrial District]. That’s an awful lot of people with potential medical problems. There’s a lot of chemical plants around here, and it’s going to reduce the response time. There’s going to be more people suffering over that issue.”

Sam denounced the corporate handouts repeatedly offered to giants like GM by the state, saying they were then used to justify cuts to essential social services. “All these big corporations get all these tax incentives to stay in the state of the Kansas. And then they have these shortfalls, and they take away from the people, the fire departments and so on.

“They think it’s better to save more money to give the corporations

abatements and tax incentives, while they take away the health and safety of workers.”

Concerns grow over plant’s future

In addition to the threat that the pandemic presents, workers are increasingly worried about the future of the Fairfax plant given the long-term business plan recently announced by GM. New investments in electric vehicle production and the threat of looming job cuts were reported last month in the WSWS. The future of the GM Fairfax plant has been viewed by workers and auto industry analysts as increasingly uncertain, with production of the signature model Chevy Malibu slated for discontinuation in 2022, and the current variation of the Cadillac XT4 scheduled to remain in production through the 2023 model year.

Earlier this month General Motors reported its third quarter 2020 profit earnings, which were more than double previous estimates, seeing a five percent increase in share trade value. The profit increase is the direct consequence of the abandonment by management, the UAW and the state at every level of any serious measures to contain the spread of the virus in favor of a rapid reopening of the economy.

The fight to defend both workers’ lives and livelihoods requires a break with the corrupt, pro-company UAW and the organization of rank-and-file safety committees, as workers have begun at the Ford Kansas City Assembly and other auto plants.

We call all on GM Fairfax workers to join and expand the network of rank-and-file safety committees to fight for an immediate halt to all non-essential production, with full compensation to workers and small businesses, in order to save lives until the virus is contained. The enormous fortunes being accumulated by GM and its Wall Street investors must be redirected to meet these pressing human needs. Life must take precedence over private profit.

To join a rank-and-file safety committee, learn more about organizing one, or report on conditions at your plant, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact