

Autoworkers at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant speak out against relaxation of CDC guidelines, end to COVID restrictions

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31 May 2021

The abrupt change in COVID-19 safety guidelines by the US Centers for Disease Control last month has angered autoworkers, who have dealt with massive outbreaks inside major plants in recent months, and many of whom have already lost loved ones and coworkers to the terrible virus. The rules, which allow unvaccinated individuals to not wear masks or practice social distancing in most situations, have led to states rapidly ending all COVID-related safety protocols.

This has particularly dire implications in auto plants, which have been kept in full operation since a brief shutdown at the start of the pandemic, despite large factories being major vectors for transmission of the disease. Since the relaxation of CDC safety guidelines, the United Autoworkers and Detroit carmakers have been in closed-door talks that are clearly aimed at paving the way for the removal of any remaining safety precautions in the plants.

A *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* campaign team spoke to workers at Sterling Height Assembly Plant (SHAP) last week on the continuing danger of COVID infection and the relaxing of masking guidelines by the CDC. SHAP has seen recent severe outbreaks of COVID-19 infection that have forced hundreds of workers into quarantine.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* encountered strong opposition to the elimination of masking and overall disgust and anger with the failure of the UAW to either enforce safety guidelines or inform workers of COVID-19 infections in the plant. Workers also expressed solidarity with recent strikes by Indian autoworkers, which temporarily forced the shutdown of the country's auto industry against the opposition of management and the unions to protect workers from

COVID.

The WSWs team distributed a copy of the *Autoworker Newsletter* that reported the strike by Indian autoworkers. A SHAP worker responding to the strikes launched by Indian Hyundai and Renault-Nissan workers over COVID safety by pointing out that workers at SHAP and other US and Canadian plants did the same in March 2020. "They are just like us! Good for them."

Asked about the moves to drop masking requirements, he noted, "The protocols they have in place are a joke. The UAW is not for us."

Another worker with 10 years said, "I think they need to keep the masks. So many have had COVID at the plant it is scary. They are passing it from team to team. Workers have passed it from wives to husbands and husbands to wives."

Asked why the UAW was not taking action to protect worker, she said, "They are paid to keep quiet, to try to keep us content."

She said she had heard nothing about the recent COVID death of Mark Bruce, a worker at the nearby Sterling Stamping Plant. She had only heard about the death of crane operator Terry Garr, who died in an industrial accident at Sterling Stamping last month, through a truck driver.

"How did a situation like that happen?" she asked, pointing out that safety protocols are supposed to be followed. "It should be fully investigated. We have the right to be informed. We spend more time at work than we do with our own families."

According to press reports, the UAW and management from the three Detroit-based car companies plan to keep masking requirements in place

for the time being.

However, they will meet again, perhaps as early as this week, to review that decision. The UAW said it is waiting for the updated masking rules being developed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in response to the new CDC guidelines. Those rules dropped the requirement for vaccinated individuals to wear face masks in most indoor and outdoor settings.

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, announced that the state will reopen outdoor concert venues and stadiums to full capacity starting June 1. At the same time, indoor banquet halls, restaurants and bars will be allowed to operate at 50 percent capacity. All COVID restrictions are being dropped effective July 1.

This takes place while 60 percent of the US population is not yet fully vaccinated, including all children 12 and younger, for whom a vaccine has not yet been approved. There are close to 30,000 daily new cases in the US and more than 1,800 in Michigan, numbers that the corporate media no longer bothers to report.

A veteran SHAP worker said, “They treat us here like s—t.” He said safety protocols were regularly violated. “Half the time there are no towels, no disinfectant, no cleaning. If someone gets COVID, they don’t even let us know.”

He said that if workers complain about anything, the standard response by the UAW is “it’s in the contact. They can do that.” He said both management and the UAW attempt to pit the younger workers against the older workers, in particular the temporary part-time workers, who fear speaking up since they can be fired for the slightest infraction.

Asked about the reports that UAW and management are discussing the ending of masking requirements in the auto plants, one younger worker said, “I am fully vaccinated, but I am going to continue wearing my mask. There are hundreds here that are out over COVID.”

Another worker expressed her concern over the situation and the attempts to claim life is returning to “normal.”

“I don’t like what is going on. Me and my husband both had the virus. I have talked to people who were 90-100 years old, and they say they don’t ever remember anything like this.”

A worker at Jefferson Assembly said, “Production, production, production. Regardless of human safety care or concern anywhere, it’s sickening.

“Everything is reopening, and people are vacationing and traveling at an all-time high. In three-six months, the death toll will have doubled, if not more with more strains being exposed daily.”

About the relaxed CDC guidelines, “those careless words and actions will change mankind as we know it.”



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