

“They’ll sit in the office while you die”

Autoworkers condemn lack of response by union and management to coronavirus emergency

Shannon Jones
12 March 2020

As the coronavirus COVID-19 spreads across the US and around the world, reports are mounting which expose the woeful unpreparedness of government and employers to deal with this emergency. The highly infectious disease can be transmitted easily in closed spaces such as factories and offices, putting workers at high risk of infection.

The official declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization underscores the danger facing workers and their families. While major school districts and universities in the US have closed or transitioned to online classes, there has been no similar action in the auto industry.

The shutdown of wide sections of the industry, which is or will quickly become a public health necessity, will pose additional challenges to workers and their families, who would face severe hardship from missing even a single paycheck.

The criminal indifference and stupidity of the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic, focused primarily on propping up the stock market and using the cover of a public health emergency to launch trade wars, is the clearest sign of the complete incapacity of the capitalist ruling class to respond to the crisis in a measured and rational way.

The Socialist Equality Party, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, urges workers to form rank-and-file workplace committees to mobilize their collective strength to demand that sweeping action be taken in response to the pandemic. These committees should monitor the health conditions in the plants and demand rapid improvements in

sanitation and other measures to prevent the spread of disease. If a facility has a confirmed case of coronavirus, these committees should demand that the plant be immediately closed, with all workers fully compensated for lost hours.

Finally, they should demand that the full resources of society be used to prevent and treat outbreaks. This includes free and universal access to testing and treatment and emergency measures to protect refugees, prisoners, the homeless and others of the most vulnerable sections of society.

By contrast, autoworkers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* reported that neither the United Auto Workers or corporate management were informing workers of the gravity of the situation or proposing serious countermeasures, including demands for waiving of penalties for absences.

“They have just told us to wash our hands, the usual stuff,” a veteran worker at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson Assembly Plant in Detroit told the *Autoworker Newsletter*.

She said the main concern of management with COVID-19 was the potential disruption to production due to parts shortages from China. The response of management to the coronavirus pandemic was on par with its general indifference to workers health and safety, she said.

“Right now we have a bad virus going around the plant. But we can’t afford to take off work. Unless you take off four consecutive days you get a point for each day off. If you miss four days you need a note from

your doctor to return to work. That makes doctors angry, forcing them unnecessarily to take up their time.

“Several years ago we had cases of tuberculosis at the plant from drinking the water. One person almost died, he was throwing up blood, but FCA doesn’t encourage you to get help.”

A GM retiree with connections to the Delta Township Plant outside of Lansing, Michigan, said, “GM has not announced any plan yet. They did, however, put up signs telling workers to wash their hands. I went on Facebook and posed the question to my former committeeman and I am awaiting his response. Not holding my breath. He was a company stooge.

“I can only guess that they will pay lip service to anything that is favorable to continued production. They will downplay the science, as is the vogue, until forced to take any proactive measures. Predictable behavior and crisis management is the curtain they hide behind.”

The coronavirus crisis is a major topic of discussion of workers on Facebook. On the UAW Facebook page for the Kentucky Truck Plant, workers reacted angrily to a letter posted from UAW Local 682 on the coronavirus crisis. The letter detailed only a few inadequate measures and then offered prayers.

One worker wrote, “I read the letter about the coronavirus and top level preparations and this is the breakdown... We’re going to sit in the office talking about it while you all die.”

Another responded bitterly, “Cleaning house of some of their elderly legacy employees and their pensions so they can hire more sts’s [Supplemental Temporary] at \$15 an hour.”

A third said, “Ever since they outsourced cleanup back in 2008 ... that place has not been clean since. Outsourcing and temp workers has divided the union. I am not saying the workers themselves, but the division of pay...”

Workers showed reporters for the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* a memo from UAW Local 682 at the Louisville Assembly Plant. The memo failed to mention any preparations to deal with the coronavirus threat while complacently boasting of the “insourcing” of additional work. Towards the end the memo blandly noted, “Plant is still filthy inside and out restroom[s] are in horrible shape...”

A Louisville Assembly worker commented, “We get

parts from everywhere. Our 6.7 diesel goes in [the] F-250 [that] comes from Mexico ... Engines for the Escape come from U.K. ... Global parts from all countries ... there are 13,000 workers at [Louisville Assembly and KTP]. [What happens] if one of the people at our plant has the virus or their close family member does? A lot of us are older and we touch vehicles on the lines. We’re like a huge cruise ship, touching doors, railings in the plant. Ford has Quarantine [measures] in China and now in Germany at some of their plants.”

Another Louisville Ford worker told the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*, “The bathrooms at KTP have been a problem for quite some time. A couple of weeks ago, the shop chairman Todd Dunn got them to do a thorough cleaning of the bathrooms. But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

“Where I’m at the company has a problem stocking paper towels, and the trash cans are constantly running over.

“They do not clean the line where we work. If there is any trash, it just stays there. The worst is that people spit on the floor and it just stays there. It’s disgusting. It’s like the broken windows theory. If you clean up a neighborhood and fix the windows, people are more likely to take pride in it and keep things nice. On the other hand, if you let it get run down, they quit caring. Ford has been running us into the ground for years.”

A worker at the Fort Wayne Assembly Plant observed, “I think it has the possibility to be devastating to workers, employers and the economy. Once it hits manufacturing it could shut down facility after facility. If that happens workers and employers could eventually see a major impact from lost wages and lost production and if it progresses long enough the local and larger economy will be impacted. I am sure employers will fight any preemptive shut downs, not wanting to lose production, creating the possibility of a larger outbreak.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact