

Shut down the auto industry to halt the spread of coronavirus!

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party demands an immediate shutdown of all auto and non-essential production throughout the country in response to the coronavirus pandemic, with full pay for all workers affected.

Such action must be developed as part of a comprehensive plan to halt the spread of the virus and ensure the safety of workers. So far, all actions taken by governments have been based on maintaining the profits of the corporations and the share values on Wall Street.

Already, autoworkers in US plants have contracted the virus, but the plants are being kept open. The UAW and auto companies want workers to risk their lives to keep the profits of the auto companies flowing, even as managers and UAW leaders retreat to the safety of their own homes. Workers must act now to save their lives and the lives of their families by forming rank-and-file committees.

Anger is growing at auto plants across the US and Canada over the decision by the auto companies to keep normal production even as the global pandemic spreads. This is a criminal policy, mandated by a capitalist system that subordinates human life to the drive for profit.

FCA and the UAW forced workers in Kokomo, Indiana, to stay on the job even after a worker tested positive for the virus at their plant.

At plants across the continent and throughout the world, support for a mass walkout is growing. In Italy, workers began spontaneous walkouts to protest the fact that they are being forced to continue working even with the entire country in lockdown.

The Trump administration and the Federal Reserve have made \$1.5 trillion available to major banks in order to prop up the faltering stock market, but only pennies to actually fight the coronavirus. Tests are still

not available for the broad masses of people. State and local governments have banned large gatherings one after the other, but the auto plants and other workplaces have been exempted from these orders so workers can continue to pump out profits.

As of this writing, the official tally of cases is more than 125,000 worldwide and more than 1,000 in the United States. However, because of the near-total breakdown in testing for the disease in the US, the real figure is far higher. In Ohio, where tens of thousands of autoworkers live and work, the government estimates that one percent of the state is already infected, or more than 110,000 people.

An outbreak of this magnitude threatens to overwhelm health care systems and lead to mass death. According to the *New York Times*, the federal government's internal modeling estimates that as many as 1.7 million Americans could die—nearly three times the death toll from the 1918 Spanish Flu, the worst epidemic in American history.

The disease can be contained, but only by taking drastic measures. China was only able to reduce the number of new cases by shutting down workplaces across the entire country. The Chinese auto industry, centered in Wuhan, the source of the outbreak, idled for weeks.

But in North America, there are no serious measures being taken to fight the disease because the central preoccupation of the government and the ruling class has been to protect corporate profit. The outlook of corporate America was summed up in a statement by Ford communications executive Mark Truby, who told the press: “Obviously we need to keep our factories moving. That’s the goal.”

The response of the UAW to the pandemic has been to lie to workers about the real scale of the crisis and to

keep them on the job. Yesterday, UAW president Rory Gamble released a statement saying the UAW would protect its bureaucrats by restricting their travel. Too bad: a temporary halt to steak dinners in Palm Springs paid for with workers' dues! As for the health of workers, Gamble wrote the union will "keep our economy flowing" by forcing workers to work even as their lives are at risk. The UAW simply reminded workers to "wash hands."

The same is true for the unions in every country. Unifor, the Canadian auto union, responded to a walkout yesterday at Fiat Chrysler's Windsor Assembly Plant by ordering workers to go back to work. Mexican GM workers at Silao have likewise received no information from the CTM union.

But it is not just auto companies. Similar conditions prevail throughout the country and internationally. No considerations or serious actions are being taken to protect the health of distribution workers, service workers, manufacturing workers and other sections of the working class.

Workers must organize independently to protect themselves. This must be done through the formation of rank-and-file committees to shut production. Workers should hold discussion and meetings online to elect a rank and file leadership and agree on a common program of action. They must coordinate their activities with workers from other plants, workers in other industries, and workers throughout the world—the coronavirus, after all, does not respect national borders or sectional differences.

The SEP proposes that such committees should adopt the following demands:

- **The immediate shutdown of non-essential workplaces!** Before reopening, they must be subjected to intensive cleaning after the disease has subsided. The deplorable state of cleanliness in the factories must be ended once and for all.

- **Full compensation for lost hours, and no deduction from sick leave!** Workers must not be forced to choose between financial destitution or termination and risking exposure by continuing to work. They must receive sick pay at 100 percent of current rates.

- **For a massive and globally coordinated response to the pandemic!** Not billions, but trillions must be allocated to meet this crisis, including free and

universal testing and the rapid expansion of hospital infrastructure.

- **For workers' control over safety and health in the factories!** As long as such decisions are left in the hands of management, workers will be continually exposed not only to the outbreak of disease, but risk of serious workplace injury. Workers should insist that their committees have the authority to control all questions related to safety, up to and including the closure of plants and workplaces.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed graphically the class divisions at the heart of American society. It poses directly the question: who runs society? By recklessly endangering the lives of millions of people, the capitalist class and the two parties of big business have forfeited their right to rule.

To prevent the outbreak of such catastrophes in the future, the capitalist system, an economic system based on inequality and exploitation, must be ended. Its replacement is socialism—the running of society directly by the working class in the interests of human need.

Workers who agree with the need to form rank-and-file committees: Contact your coworkers and arrange discussions to address the situation immediately before the health crisis gets out of control.



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