

Workers halt production at Fiat Chrysler Windsor Assembly over coronavirus danger

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The WSWS urges autoworkers to contact us with information on the conditions in your plant and what workers are saying.

Workers at the Fiat Chrysler Windsor Assembly Plant downed tools Thursday over concerns about the spread of coronavirus at their plant and after learning that a worker at the FCA Kokomo Transmission Plant in the United States was diagnosed with the potentially deadly disease. Windsor Assembly is the largest FCA plant in Canada and employs 6,000 workers building the Dodge Caravan and Chrysler Pacifica vans.

Plant management confirmed that one worker at Windsor Assembly was on self-quarantine after their possible exposure to the virus. According to the latest reports, management got production restarted Friday afternoon following the intervention of the federal Ministry of Labour and the Unifor union. The same day workers stopped work in Windsor it was reported that the wife of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tested positive for coronavirus.

A statement issued by FCA management declared, "The Ministry of Labour visited the plant on March 12 to investigate and determined our protocols and work environment to be safe. We worked with the local union and Unifor leadership as well as government officials to address this issue."

The statement did not explain why auto assembly plants with thousands of workers were safe when political jurisdictions all over North America were declaring states of emergencies, closing schools and public corporate offices and banning large public gatherings in an attempt to halt the potentially catastrophic spread of COVID-19 infection.

The action by the Windsor FCA workers reflects growing anger and frustration inside auto plants across North America, where workers are raising strident demands for a suspension of operations to protect the health and safety of workers, their families and the broader community as the scale of the coronavirus pandemic becomes more widely known.

A worker from GM St. Catharines, Ontario wrote to the

WSWS Autoworker Newsletter, "Virtually nothing is being done. Both management and the union leadership are asleep at the wheel based upon what I have been told."

Meanwhile, the state of Michigan by executive order closed schools and universities and banned gatherings of more than 250 people over COVID-19 concerns. However, the order exempts factories and offices.

While factory production across North America is continuing full tilt, Ford and GM are telling non-factory employees, including white collar and upper management, to work as much as possible from home to prevent the spread of the virus.

At the massive FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit unconfirmed reports circulated Friday about multiple potential cases of COVID-19 among employees at the facility. While there have been no statements from the company or the United Auto Workers union confirming or denying these reports, workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* expressed anger and contempt at the disregard by management and the UAW for their health and safety.

One SHAP worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "They are telling us not to panic. How can you say that when you are not safeguarding our health? You have made unlimited profits for nine years. How much is enough? People are pissed about that."

"We can't believe the union. We are so mad at them. If they aren't going to fight for us, then we don't need them. What's the point?"

"(Thursday) at 9:30 or 10:00 at night they had a form that supervisors wanted us to put our name on from upper management saying we should wash our hands; take precautions about the virus. If you didn't sign it, they said you would get written up. They didn't give us a copy of the form. It was on a clipboard.

"We think it was a paper that was designed to relieve them of responsibility in case people get the virus. That's what everyone thinks. Many didn't sign it. Later they came around and wrote up people who didn't sign it."

“We found out that a worker called his cousin who is a union steward at JNAP [FCA Jefferson North Assembly Plant] and he told them there was a confirmed case there. Management knew about it.”

He said of reports that workers at SHAP may have contracted the virus, “People are ready to walk out. My whole department said they weren’t coming today or tomorrow, but they were told they would be written up.

“They don’t give a crap about management; they are for putting their family and kids first. If they contract it and take it home, their babies might get it.”

Another SHAP worker wrote, “They’ve done nothing. I feel as though they shouldn’t be running production. There are 2 cases in my plant, and they’ve done nothing about it. They claim that they’ll be setting up hand sanitizing station, but they are yet to be seen.

“They clearly don’t care about the line workers if they aren’t considering shutting down plants but are talking about shutting down corporate offices.”

A worker at the Kokomo Transmission Plant wrote to the *Autoworker Newsletter* about the confirmation of a case of COVID-19 at FCA in Kokomo. “We have had numerous confirmed cases with workers at the Tipton transmission plant and they are covering it up and making us work. If this doesn’t open the peoples’ eyes, nothing will.

“This company and union don’t give a damn about any of us. We are treated like farm animals. We are a bunch of slaves for the rich and their families and we always will be until the people take back what’s rightfully theirs.”

A worker at the GM Kansas City Assembly Plant wrote, “We have heard a B shift supervisor has the virus and today a girl thought she had it on C shift, and they couldn’t care less. They weren’t even going to make her go to medical. I was the one who disinfected her gun and parts rack and trained the double up who did her job the rest of the day. We called our committeeman and told supervisors and called health and safety. They did nothing but tell us there is no way she has it.”

Workers at other Ford, Chrysler and GM plants report similar experiences. In a social media post, workers at the GM Flint Assembly Plant asked the UAW shop chairman what would happen if workers at the plant contract COVID-19; would management close the plant?

The UAW is dismissing workers’ concerns and making sure production is not disrupted. In response to the workers’ question, Local 598 shop chairman Eric Welter said, “decisions are coming out of the 39th floor of the RenCen,” referring to CEO Mary Barra’s office in GM’s headquarters at the Renaissance Center in Detroit. “I expect the policies will continue to change as the spread of the virus continues. It’s not a negotiation; it’s being driven by medical experts at

the (Centers for Disease Control).”

The decision to keep the plants open is not being driven by medical experts, but the profit interests of the corporations and Wall Street shareholders. Far from representing the interests of workers in this dangerous situation, the UAW functions as management’s enforcers.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* advances the demand for a halt to production until the COVID-19 infection is contained. At the same time, workers must receive their full pay and benefits for the duration of the closures. To enforce this, we call for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every factory, neighborhood and workplace to fight for the independent interests of workers. No confidence can be placed in the assurances of management or the UAW about the safety in the workplace. The guiding principle must be that human lives take precedence over corporate profits.

A SHAP worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “This is an example of capitalism. It’s all about profit. They don’t give a crap about health. They care about their stockholders and CEOs. Workers are a dime a dozen—[costing] \$15 an hour. Once they get rid of the older ones, it’s good for them.”

A worker at the FCA Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio wrote, “I’m very scared about the situation... Work has only handed out paperwork for us to sign about the virus...They haven’t supplied us with any sanitizer. I have my own... Nor have [they] come to us to speak about [it] personally. I understand they don’t want to lose money, but why take the chance of us getting infected by it? God forbid that any of us get it, then nobody will be able to even build the Jeeps.”

The *Autoworker Newsletter* is interested in your experiences. We urge workers to email us at: autoworkers@wsws.org with information about conditions in your plant and to subscribe to our newsletter for regular updates and more information about forming rank-and-file committees to take collective, independent action in the face of the COVID-19 threat.



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