

US automakers, UAW deploy threats and lies to keep workers on the job during pandemic

Tom Hall
16 March 2020

(For live updates, including reports from autoworkers on the conditions in their plants, follow the WSWWS Autoworker Newsletter Facebook page at fb.com/autoworker.newsletter.)

The decision by US auto companies to keep their factories running at normal capacity during the coronavirus pandemic is a criminally reckless decision, which threatens the health of hundreds of thousands of autoworkers, their family members and the wider communities in which they work and live.

On Sunday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that no gatherings of 50 people or more be held in the US for the next eight weeks to slow the spread of the coronavirus. State governments throughout the country, including the major auto-producing states of Indiana and Ohio, had already announced bans on gatherings of more than 250 people. But the federal and state measures exempt the auto plants, which employ as many as 8,000 people, and other workplaces.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* call for the formation of rank-and-file committees to fight for the immediate shutdown of all nonessential production with full compensation for all lost income. These measures must be combined with demands for immediate testing, the elimination of all out-of-pocket medical costs and equal access to high quality health care for all. At the same time workers should fight for the allocation of society's resources to fund a worldwide and coordinated public health campaign to fight the pandemic, rather than squandering trillions to prop up the stock markets and protect the super-rich.

China was able to slow the growth of the disease only by a nationwide shutdown of all workplaces. Auto plants in Wuhan, China's Motor City, idled for weeks.

Without such drastic intervention, by the US government's own estimates, up to 214 million Americans could be exposed and 1.7 million could die.

In the United States, not a single major facility has been placed on extended shutdown. Even Fiat Chrysler's Kokomo Transmission plant, the first facility with a confirmed case of coronavirus, continues to operate at full capacity. At GM's Wentzville Assembly near Kansas City, management shut the plant for only a single shift for "deep cleaning" after a worker was potentially exposed. German automaker Volkswagen announced a mere 24-hour shutdown at its Chattanooga, Tennessee plant today for cleaning and to give workers time to make arrangements for their children whose schools have closed. But even with proper sanitation, which is impossible in such a short span of time, this will do nothing about transmissions that have already occurred or halt new ones once workers return to work.

Auto plants in other countries only closed after a considerable delay and in the face of the demands of workers. Fiat Chrysler's plants in Italy began to close last week after a growing wildcat strike wave demanding the closure of plants. Ford is only now shutting its plant in Valencia, Spain, a country which has been placed on lockdown, after three workers tested positive for the virus—but only for a single week. In Windsor, Ontario across the river from Detroit, Fiat Chrysler autoworkers were able to temporarily halt production on Friday over coronavirus concerns, only to be sent back to work with the support of Unifor, the Canadian auto union, and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—who is under self-quarantine after his wife became infected.

The United Auto Workers union is playing a critical role in keeping workers on the job. Bound to the

companies by a thousand threads, they insist that only management has the right to make decisions over the operation of the plant, regardless of the health threats to workers. Faced with overwhelming opposition among the rank-and-file, the union's plant chairman at Ford's Louisville Assembly issued a pathetic request for management to close the plant for two weeks. But the real attitude of the UAW was expressed at the end of a letter by president Rory Gamble to members, which declared the union's intent to "keep the economy flowing," ie., the profits to the corporations and Wall Street investors.

Sunday night, the UAW and the auto companies announced the formation of a joint "COVID-19/Coronavirus Task Force," including the CEOs of all three companies, Gamble and the three UAW vice presidents. As with all other "joint" programs such as the training centers which have been at the center of the massive UAW corruption scandal (and which has already implicated two members of the task force, Gamble and UAW VP Cindy Estrada), this will be used not to protect workers but to enforce management's dictates and create lucrative opportunities for the union bureaucracy.

The signal for this was given in a statement by Gamble who hailed the companies for "taking steps to keep the COVID-19/coronavirus out of their facilities and during this national emergency." After this lie, he added, "we will do even more working together."

The announcement was promoted by the corporate Detroit *Free Press*, which announced the move in a misleading headline "UAW and Detroit automakers take action to protect hourly workforce." It added, "while sporting events and the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Detroit have been canceled or postponed to practice 'social distancing' by calling off large public gatherings, the production at the Detroit Three's plants must go on, the companies said."

The real policy of the automakers and the union is exposed in widespread reports by autoworkers to the *World Socialist Web Site* that management is threatening disciplinary action against workers who do not show up for work. (To report what is going on at your plant, email the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* here.)

Workers at Fiat Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) in suburban Detroit have

separately reported that management is deliberately concealing what is known about the potential exposures in the plant in order to keep people on the job.

"Yesterday they had a supervisor come around to make us sign a statement that we would wash our hands and so forth," said one worker. "If you didn't sign it, you would get written up. We figured that this was a way to try to relieve them of legal responsibility in case anybody gets sick in the plant. Many people didn't sign it or wrote 'Refuse to Sign' on it. They were written up later in the shift."

The supervisor also distributed an official letter from management, reproduced below, which contains the bald-faced lie that "the World Health Organization (WHO) has said that there is likely no way to stop the virus from spreading." In fact, the WHO has been pleading with governments to take drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus, to no avail.

"People are ready to walk out ... [but we] were told they would be written up. Why? We don't give a crap about management because they are putting themselves above our family and kids. If they contract it and take it home their babies might get it.

"They said they are going to bring in additional people to clean but they haven't done that. The bathrooms are filthy. They haven't done anything except make people sign that form to relieve them of class action liability. The only thing the union has said was that they can't write us up. But we don't believe them anymore. This is something that FCA and the union has set up. They are in on this together. Rory Gamble, he's in the middle just like everyone else. He's not innocent of anything."

"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—it costs them \$15 an hour. They want to get rid of the older ones."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact