

Temporary work stoppage at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck plant as wildcat strikes spread in global auto industry

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Workers in the paint shop at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit downed their tools Monday morning as demands grow among North American autoworkers to close the factories and stop the spread of the deadly coronavirus. The job action by 17 paint shop workers follows a similar work stoppage by Canadian Fiat Chrysler workers last Thursday across the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario, after a coworker came in contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19 and went into self-quarantine.

Company officials announced that paint shop operations at the Warren Truck, which employs 2,613 workers on two shifts, had resumed by Monday afternoon and that "production in the plant was not affected." The United Auto Workers union has not commented on the walkout and remains committed to keeping the plants running despite the threat to workers and their families.

The actions are the first sign that the wave of wildcat strikes that began in Italy against continuing production during the pandemic is beginning to reach the United States. After initially forcing workers to stay on the job in spite of a nationwide lockdown, Fiat Chrysler and other employers in Italy were forced to suspend operations due to the strike wave last week. As in the United States, measures banning large gatherings exempted workplaces where remote work is not feasible.

The wave also reached Spain yesterday, when 5,000 workers at the Vitoria Mercedes-Benz plant in the Basque Country, the company's second-largest van plant in the world, downed their tools and walked out. Production at the plant had continued for nearly a week after the Basque Country was placed on government lockdown on March 10. According to Twitter posts, one worker at the plant had already tested positive for the virus and twenty more were in quarantine. Videos of the walkout were viewed

tens of thousands of times on Twitter.

After initially announcing that production would only be suspended for a few days, on Monday Fiat Chrysler announced that its six Italian plants, plus one in Serbia and one in Poland, would remain closed until March 27. In making the announcement, the company cited not the imminent health crisis, but "market conditions." French automaker Groupe PSA, Fiat Chrysler's pending merger partner, said its plants in Madrid, Spain, and Mulhouse in the east of France would close on Monday and the rest of its European operation by Thursday at the latest.

Ford said Monday that it would extend a previously planned three-day shutdown this week at its Valencia, Spain, plant to the entire week and then reassess the situation before resuming production, the *Wall Street Journal* reported. The company said that three cases of coronavirus infection have been confirmed within a 24-hour period.

"All the corporate people are working from home," one Warren Truck worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "What about our families?"

"A lot of other people think the industry should be shut down now. The workers are blaming the union, saying we don't have representation. Our understanding is they shut down in Europe. Why don't they do that here?"

"We're living in extreme fear," another Warren Truck worker said. "I went to the union and asked them if all the businesses are closing and more than 50 people are not supposed to be coming together, why aren't we closed when we have 2,000 people? They have no answer.

"Somebody in there is going to infect everybody. If they close the plant, people wouldn't have to come in sick. Instead they want us to tell on people if they seem sick. They're telling us to use hand sanitizers and wash our hands, but there are bathrooms in there with just cold

water or without any running water at all.

“All they care about is the trucks, and they aren’t even being shipped. This is capitalism at its best. We should walk out or sit down. I asked the supervisors aren’t they afraid for themselves? They said, ‘As long as you come to work, we have to come to work.’ They are waiting for us to take action.”

The UAW is complicit in what can only be described as the criminal endangerment of autoworkers and their families. Governors in industrial states like Michigan and Ohio have already directed gyms, theaters, dine-in restaurants and schools to close to limit the spread of the deadly virus.

Despite the first worker being tested positive for COVID-19 at a Fiat Chrysler plant in Kokomo, Indiana last week and reports of many other potential cases in Detroit and other cities, production continues in the auto factories, including in southeast Michigan, which, with 115,000 employees, is still the largest concentration of auto production in the US.

The contempt of the auto executives towards the lives of workers was summed up by Ford CEO Jim Hackett, who in a letter to employees last Friday said that the company would shut down a facility for 24 hours if a worker there was diagnosed. But once a worker tests positive it is already too late! The disease can incubate for up to two weeks before someone shows symptoms and meanwhile can be spread over workplaces, tools, components of vehicles coming down the assembly line, turnstiles, lunchrooms and common areas.

Workers are already voting with their feet by refusing to come to work over the last several days, including over 500 workers at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit on Saturday. The companies, with the full backing of the UAW, have been filling in with temporary part-time employees who can be fired if they fail to schedule time off weeks in advance.

Facing widespread opposition on the shop floor, the UAW and the auto companies have set up a joint “task force,” made up of the corporate CEOs of GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, the UAW president and three vice presidents. Union officials are deliberately concealing the dangers facing workers, falsely claiming that the corporations are following the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization. Only one “guideline” is driving the corporations and the UAW: maintain production in order to boost profits and shareholder returns.

If action is to be taken to protect workers and their

families, then workers must take the initiative themselves. Workers should elect rank-and-file factory committees, organized independently of the corrupt UAW, to demand and fight for the immediate shutdown of the auto plants and all nonessential production. At the same time, these committees must demand full compensation for any lost wages and the abolition of all copays, premiums and deductibles to guarantee the highest-quality health care to all workers.

This should be combined with the demands for immediate and free testing, a massive allocation of resources to public health needs, instead of propping up the stock market, and equal access to health care and all social services. All workers who are laid off due to the pandemic must be made whole.

With stock markets around the world crashing, signs of another global economic meltdown and parts supplies from China drying up due to the pandemic, the US-based auto companies are scrambling to pump out every ounce of profit they can before being forced to close the US plants. Whatever vehicles can be sent to the car dealer showrooms—even if they are empty—can be booked as sales in automakers’ quarterly reports in hopes of holding off a further selloff of their stocks.

During the stock selloff on Monday, Fiat Chrysler shares fell almost 22 percent by closing, while General Motors Co. was down 15 percent and Ford dropped 11 percent. According to the Center for Automotive Research, if people did not buy any vehicles for just one week, the companies could lose \$7.3 billion in revenue.

An autoworker at a GM plant in the Detroit area told the WSWS: “The Big 3 and the UAW need to stop playing and do the right thing and shut these plants and warehouses down! The governor of Michigan has said no congregations of 50 people or more; the president of the United States has put that limit at 10. The attorney general said today violations will be considered criminal. How do the Big 3 and the UAW Task Force know better than the government and get away with this? You can’t tell me our jobs are essential functions! It’s greed in its purest form. No regard for health and safety!”



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