

Mounting anger as workers demand protection from unsafe conditions

Tom Hall, Joseph Kishore
18 March 2020

There is growing outrage among workers in the United States and internationally over the fact that they continue to be kept on the job in the face of the spreading coronavirus pandemic and that no measures are being taken to secure their lives and livelihoods.

On Tuesday afternoon, autoworkers at a Fiat Chrysler plant in Tipton, Indiana gathered outside their plant before their shift began to protest being made to work even as large gatherings outside of work have been prohibited throughout the state. Management told them that if they did not work, they would be fired, a threat that was supported by the United Auto Workers during a plantwide meeting held to bully workers to get back to the line.

The same day, scores of workers at the Lear Seating plant in Hammond, Indiana refused to work, forcing the shutdown of the parts factory and the nearby Chicago Assembly Plant. Bus drivers in Detroit have also refused to work in unsafe conditions.

This follows a job action by paint shop workers at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit on Monday and a similar work stoppage by Canadian Fiat Chrysler workers last Thursday in Windsor, Ontario. Workers in the auto and other industries have engaged in widespread strikes in Italy and Spain over being forced to continue working amidst a nationwide lockdown.

Several autoworkers have already tested positive, including at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant outside of Detroit. There can be no doubt that, as a result of the criminal decision to keep production going, a far larger number of workers are already infected.

Manufacturing plants throughout the US are being kept in operation. Boeing, which is requesting tens of billions of dollars in government bailout money, is

forcing workers to maintain operations, even as senior management have been instructed to work from home. Several Boeing workers have already contracted coronavirus, and it has certainly spread much further.

Workers in the service industry, who come into contact with hundreds of people every day, continue to work.

Amazon is hiring hundreds of thousands of workers to meet the surge in demand for online shopping. While management is working at home, the horrific conditions in Amazon warehouses remain the same. One worker told BuzzFeed News, "They're offering no preventative solutions, only payment for workers after we've been infected, which doesn't help to slow the spread of the pandemic or alleviate the suffering [and] risk of death from contracting it."

In other words, Amazon considers the lives of its workers to be expendable, and any paid leave it offers to those who contract the virus is considered part of the cost of business, more than made up for by the surge in profits.

There is no reason that workers in industries that are not essential to the functioning of society should continue to work. Workers in essential industries, such as health care, must be provided with safe working conditions. Medical workers throughout the country are outraged over the fact that they are being forced to carry out their critical jobs under highly dangerous conditions without the most basic safety equipment.

Other workers have been laid off or have had a sharp cut in their hours and income. Unemployment is already beginning to rise, and estimates are that it could increase to as high as 20 percent. Uber and Lyft drivers and other workers in the "gig economy" continue to be exposed to dangerous conditions if they are able to get work.

The striving of workers to take collective action to protect their health and safety and those of their communities has been blocked at every step by the trade unions. For these corporate lackeys, the profit interests of the companies take precedence over the lives of the workers they claim to represent.

Late Tuesday, the United Auto Workers, a criminal syndicate whose entire top leadership is under indictment or threat of indictment on federal corruption charges, announced that it would take no action. Instead, it said it would only work with the companies that put in place “new measures that will increase adherence to CDC recommendations on social distancing in the workplace.”

The UAW has touted this deal as a “partial shutdown.” In fact, production will continue, with at most a reduction in shifts. The aim is to keep the lines running to extract every last penny of profits from workers whose lives are in danger.

On Tuesday night, workers responded with outrage on social media. Comments on the UAW Facebook post announcing the deal included: “So again, nothing will get done, and the workers aren’t protected;” “How about a mass walkout?;” “Shut down the plants already;” “You [the UAW] spent hours talking and concluded to do exactly what we were already doing... sounds like the contract negotiations!”

To prevent the further spread of the virus and to save millions of lives, all nonessential workplaces must be shut down immediately! No worker should be expected to place his or her life in danger. All production must be redirected to producing urgent necessities, including health care equipment. Workers will gladly continue to work when they know that what they are doing will save lives, but this work must be carried out under safe conditions, overseen by scientists and health care professionals.

All workers who are laid off must receive full pay, financed by the corporations and state resources. All workers must have access to paid sick leave. Rent, mortgage and utility payments must be suspended during the coronavirus crisis to ensure that any worker seeing a reduction in his or her income is able to afford basic necessities.

The claim that there is “no money” to meet these demands is the most absurd claim of all. All these corporations have piled up billions in profits through

the exploitation of their workers. Trillions have been turned over to Wall Street. These resources must instead be directed to meeting urgent social needs.

To fight for these demands, workers should form rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the corrupt unions, to defend their health and safety.

Workers should use all the means at their disposal, including social media, to organize opposition, hold meetings and discussions, reach out to workers in other industries, and coordinate with workers internationally. The rights of workers cannot be secured through individual action, but only through collective struggle.

This must be combined with a program of action to defend the whole working class, including demands to provide full testing, free and equal health care for all, and a massive reallocation of resources to fight the deadly virus. Trillions of dollars must be taken from the hands of the financial oligarchy and placed at the disposal of a globally-coordinated response to the pandemic.

As the Socialist Equality Party National Committee stated yesterday: “The essential principle that must guide the response to the crisis is that the needs of working people must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth. It is not a matter of what the ruling class claims it can afford, but what masses of people need.”

Now is the time to organize and fight for this program. Millions of lives are at stake.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact