

US autoworkers take matters into their own hands

# Auto plants shut down throughout North America in response to wave of wildcats over coronavirus

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Fiat Chrysler was forced to close plants and cancel shifts after thousands of workers in Michigan and Ohio downed their tools yesterday in opposition to the decision of the company and the United Auto Workers union to continue production during the coronavirus pandemic. All three Detroit-based automakers later announced plans to shut plants throughout North America.

For weeks, the UAW has sought to keep workers in the factories by issuing joint statements with corporate executives, which falsely claimed the plants were safe, and by joining management in threatening workers with termination if they refused to work under unsafe conditions. Faced with the criminal indifference of the UAW to their own lives, autoworkers are taking matters into their own hands.

The work stoppages in the United States are the latest in a worldwide wildcat strike wave in defiance of the unions. Autoworkers in Italy, Spain and Canada earlier walked off the job in protest of management's decision to continue production during nationwide lockdowns. After weeks in which the capitalist class in the US and Europe has pursued a deliberate policy of "malign neglect"—combining the pumping of trillions into the stock markets with total inaction on protecting the lives of millions of people—a critical section of the international working class is beginning to move and put forward its own response to the pandemic.

The work stoppages began at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit Tuesday night, shortly after the joint UAW-management task force announced that all of the plants of the Detroit automakers would continue to operate on slightly modified schedules despite several workers testing positive, including two at the Sterling Heights plant. After failing to browbeat workers into restarting the line, management sent workers home early, at 10:30 pm.

The scene played out again on Wednesday morning, when the next shift sat down and refused to work, allowing uncompleted vehicles to pass down the line. "It should never have taken this long," a young worker at the plant told the WSW. "There are more than 7,000 workers in our plant, constantly interacting with each other, leaning and crawling inside the same trucks. How are

we supposed to keep separate in there?"

"This is not our fault. We don't want to be carriers. The union says we can file for unemployment, but it would take two weeks to get anything. We need to be compensated now. We've made billions for these companies and they act like we're just their damn pawns."

The action quickly spread to other plants. At Jefferson North Assembly, workers entered the plant in the morning and sat idle for hours, before management finally sent them home at 1PM. According to workers, UAW officers raced from the union offices to threaten them with termination, but to no avail. "The union sold us out," one worker said. "We don't need rotating shifts—we have to shut down the plants. They don't even care about us and our families—the UAW showed that last night."

Another Jefferson worker added, "They think workers are worth less than the cars being produced. We are expendable and once one of us dies, there are more people waiting to replace us so the company can continue making money."

Angry scenes played out in Northwest Ohio at Toledo North Assembly, where dozens of workers confronted Local 12 Vice President Brian Sims for keeping them on the job. After lying and claiming that no walkouts had taken place at other plants and demanding that workers "relax," Sims abruptly left out the back door of the committee room.

A job action was also taken at Dundee Engine, south of Ann Arbor. Warren Truck workers, who had staged a partial work stoppage earlier in the week, were also let out early.

Faced with the prospect of a nationwide or even continent-wide walkout, Fiat Chrysler, Ford and General Motors announced later in the afternoon that they would be closing their North American plants—including in Mexico and Canada—through March 30. However, this is yet another maneuver, designed to buy the companies and the union time to dampen opposition and restore full production.

General Motors CEO Mary Barra announced that it would implement a "systematic, orderly suspension of work." In reality, this means the company will attempt to keep at least some of the workers on the job for another week or more, leaving almost no

downtime before plants are set to reopen on March 30. After first announcing that it would continue production at GM's Lansing Delta Township plant until March 27, management reversed itself suddenly on Wednesday evening, saying the plant would be closed this Friday, March 20.

Other automakers are continuing North American production or shutting their plants for an even shorter period of time. Honda announced yesterday that it would cease production in North America for only six days. Volkswagen idled its Chattanooga, Tennessee plant for a mere 24 hours on Monday before resuming production. Hundreds of thousands of workers at parts suppliers are still being forced to work, including at plants with the UAW, under conditions which are even worse than in the assembly plants.

Tesla attempted to operate its plant in Fremont, California on a normal schedule, in spite of a government-mandated lockdown, until the intervention of the local sheriff's department. It is now continuing "minimum basic operations." The electric vehicle company had attempted to label itself as an "essential enterprise" under the terms of the Alameda County closure order, on the absurd but sinister grounds that the plant is considered part of "National Critical Infrastructure" by the Department of Homeland Security.

There is an element of desperation in the attempts by the auto companies to keep production going as long as possible. Having faced a downturn in profits and sales even before the pandemic, the auto companies are under intense pressure from Wall Street, where stock prices across the board are now in free-fall, to shore up shareholder value by continuing to produce, even as consumer demand plummets as tens of millions remain indoors.

Damage control in the corporate press and the political establishment is now in full swing. Media headlines reporting the shutdowns have systematically excluded any mention of walkouts, implying instead that the companies and the unions had suddenly reconsidered their decision to continue production out of concern for workers' well-being. Reassuring headlines over the last week that plants were being subjected to routine "deep cleaning" have now been exposed as complete lies. In reality, almost nothing had been done. Workers report that they do not even have access to gloves, masks, hand sanitizer or even hot water with which to wash their hands.

Debbie Dingell, the widow of the late "congressman from GM" John Dingell, released a statement yesterday afternoon suggesting that the UAW led the fight to close the plants. "UAW leadership was focused on protecting the health and safety of their workers as a first priority," she claimed, adding, "Going forward the unions and the companies need to work together closely to protect workers and *the stability of the industry* [emphasis added]"—in plain language, to force workers back into the plants to produce more profit.

Yesterday's events were a milestone in the deep-rooted rebellion of workers against the pro-corporate trade unions. By taking the initiative into their own hands and in opposition to the UAW, workers were able, in the space of a few hours, to stagger the auto companies and at least temporarily halt production. Autoworkers are beginning to confirm through their own practice that they are

far more powerful without the UAW. "This was awe-inspiring," said one Sterling Heights worker, referring to the collective strength of the workers.

The autoworkers must now become the tip of the spear for a broader movement of the entire working class. The next step is to form a network of rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees, starting from the auto plants but embracing all sections of workers and linking up with workers around the world.

These committees can force a shutdown of all non-essential production, with full compensation and no lost sick days. These committees should demand that governments throughout the world allocate trillions to address the pandemic. The wealth hoarded by the rich and the major corporations must be requisitioned and placed at the disposal of society, and industries re-tooled to produce needed medical equipment and vital necessities.

"It took the workers to unite, go out and stop the plants," one Warren Truck worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We are doing what we need to do. We must protect our health, our children and our elderly parents. This has to be fair across the board. We need to be treated equally, to be equal.

"We make the country. We do everything. We have to stand up and take back what we already built. 'They' are the capitalists. And 'they' want to divide us. It's not about black and white, gay and straight, it's about capitalists and the poor. We have to end the racial negativity designed to keep people separate.

"There is enough money in the world. There should not be one homeless person, no vets in the streets. They've put billions into the stock market, but what about us? In Detroit, they should be taking all those empty school buildings and making pop-up hospitals as well as helping the homeless. They are showing us they don't care.

"This is not just about the virus. It's bigger than the virus, it's about rich and poor all around the world. They'd like to get rid of older folks, maybe a few babies and control the population. The working class has the power to change this. What we need is strong leadership. Capitalism is killing everything and I'm tired of it."

*Shut down all non-essential production to halt the spread of the coronavirus! Distribute our statement, "How to fight the COVID-19 pandemic: A program of action for the working class" and form rank-and-file committees at your workplace. For assistance and to distribute information about actions workers are taking at your plant, contact us immediately at autoworkers@wsws.org or on Facebook.*



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