

Some US auto companies announce plant closures, others remain open in wake of worker job actions over coronavirus

Shannon Jones
20 March 2020

On Wednesday a series of job actions by Fiat Chrysler workers in Ohio and Michigan against continued production during the coronavirus pandemic led to announcements later in the day by most major North American automakers that they would carry out the temporary shutdown of factories.

The timing or length of the shutdowns varied. While some companies piously declared their concern over workers health, others stated that shutdowns were at least partially related to the collapse of vehicle sales due to the ongoing health crisis. The announcements, made in the wake of worker job actions, represented a sharp turnaround from statements earlier in the week indicating management's determination to continue production despite the enormous health risk.

Fiat Chrysler closed its North American factories Wednesday afternoon after spontaneous job actions broke out, beginning with workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant and spreading to Jefferson North Assembly in Detroit, Dundee Engine Plant south of Ann Arbor and the Toledo North complex in Ohio. The stoppages were carried out independently and in defiance of the pro-company United Auto Workers. In many cases workers defied threats by the UAW and management, who tried to vainly restart production.

In a statement dripping with hypocrisy Fiat Chrysler CEO Mike Manley said, "Working with the UAW, and having visited many of our plants yesterday, we need to ensure employees feel safe at work and that we are taking every step possible to protect them. We will continue to do what is right for our people through this period of uncertainty."

The UAW, which prior to this weeks job actions had been conspiring with the Detroit auto companies to keep the plants operating during the pandemic, cynically praised the suspension of production. President Rory Gamble declared. "UAW members, their families and our communities will benefit from today's announcement with the certainty that we are doing all that we can to protect our health and safety

during this pandemic. This will give us time to review best practices and to prevent the spread of this disease."

Following the lead of Fiat Chrysler Ford said it will close all North American factories after second shift Thursday March 19 through March 30. On Wednesday it announced the closure of its Wayne Assembly Plant outside of Detroit after an employee tested positive for COVID-19.

A Ford worker at the Wayne Assembly plant west of Detroit said as of Thursday afternoon the plant was still operating. "Line workers want time off because they are scared for their lives," he reported.

General Motors is attempting to stall for as much time as possible before it closes its plants. In a brief announcement March 18, GM confirmed it will begin a "systematic orderly suspension of manufacturing operations in North America due to market conditions, to deep clean facilities and continue to protect people."

By "orderly," GM means a piecemeal drawing down of production lasting several days and extending, in some cases at least, well into next week. This means that some plants will be closed under GM's plan only for a couple of days before potentially re-opening as soon as March 30. As of Thursday evening, most GM plants were still operating

However, opposition and anger has appeared to force GM to reconsider its plans at at least some facilities. Only hours after announcing at Lansing Delta Township on Wednesday that the plant would operate through March 27, management backtracked and said the plant would close on March 20 instead.

At 5:00 PM last night, workers at the GM Flint Truck Plant received a message that operations would cease at the facility immediately "due to growing concerns over the coronavirus." The message said the possible resumption of operations would be reviewed on a weekly basis. At Fort Wayne Assembly workers have received notification that operations would be suspended at the end of the second shift on Friday March 20.

A GM worker in Michigan told the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter, “Everyone is very uneasy at work and can’t understand why we are still working. It’s hard to believe we are put in a position of ‘come to work and contribute to the spread of this deadly virus or face discipline or lose our jobs.’”

Many, if not most, of the hundreds of thousands of workers in the US auto parts plants remain on the job. A worker at America Denso Manufacturing in Battle Creek Michigan wrote, “They are closing down for a week starting this Monday. They just told us last night at work [there are] three options. 1) We can still work and we would be only cleaning. 2) We could take a week off using our vacation pay. 3) We could take a company op and not get paid at all. It sucks that we are forced to use our vacation pay in order to survive. Because we live paycheck to paycheck.”

A worker at Allison Transmission in Indianapolis told the Autoworker Newsletter that there had been confirmed cases of coronavirus at his location. The company employs 3,000 at three Indianapolis facilities making parts for major automakers.

“It’s wrong. We should all be shut down. Everyone is angry. The union gave ‘support’ to the Windsor workers (Canadian Fiat Chrysler who walked out last week.) But when we wanted to walk out they said ‘no.’

“Management went around the floor saying ‘we are taking precautions’ and that we can’t sue them. All they have done is put trash bags over chairs (in the seating areas) but there isn’t even hand sanitizer.”

He said there had been four to five workers taken to medical “but the UAW isn’t acknowledging anything. If you are ill you must use vacation time.”

Of conditions in the plant he said, “It’s a cesspool. We are going to catch it. 1,600 transmissions a day are pumped out of these plants, but there are 5-6 stacked high and 100,000 engines deep sitting in storage. The company’s profits are huge.”

Many Asian and European-based automakers have also announced the temporary suspension of North American production.

In a statement on March 19 Nissan said it would close its two US plants starting Friday and continuing through April 6. Areas deemed “business essential” will operate with “enhanced safety measures,” said a company press release. It claimed workers would be paid through the closure. The company has large manufacturing facilities in Smyrna, Tennessee and Canton, Mississippi.

Hyundai has closed its only US factory, located in Alabama, after an employee tested positive for coronavirus. It said it would clean and disinfect the plant, but did not indicate a date for re-opening the facility.

Honda, meanwhile, said it would close its four North American plants for one week starting Monday.

Electric carmaker Tesla, meanwhile, maintained its operations this week, despite a declaration by Alameda County, California that it was a nonessential operation under the county’s shelter-in-place order. The San Francisco Bay Area has one of the highest COVID-19 infection rates in the US. Tesla claimed it did not have a final word from local and state authorities if it would be allowed to operate.

German-based Volkswagen said it would close its Chattanooga, Tennessee facility for just one week starting Saturday March 21 out of COVID-19 concerns while it assesses “future production plans and market developments.” It said employees would be paid during the closure.

German-based BMW said it would maintain operations at its Spartanburg, South Carolina facility. The state of South Carolina earlier issued an advisory calling for non-essential employees to work from home. BMW has closed its European operations.

Toyota, the largest Japanese-based automaker in North America, indicated it had no plans for extended closures. Its Georgetown, Kentucky facility is the largest Toyota manufacturing plant in the world, employing more than 8,000 workers who build the Camry, Avalon and other vehicles. On Wednesday the company said it would shut down its North American plants on March 23 and March 24 for a “thorough cleaning”, supposedly to protect workers from the coronavirus and as a response to the drop-off in sales.

A Toyota worker wrote to the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter, “I am disgusted with my company Toyota, we have confirmed cases and we are still working! I have a newborn at home and compromised family but I still have to come into work? Unbelievable. Shut down like the rest of them...”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact