

Media blackout of wildcat strikes in US auto industry

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Within hours after wildcat strikes in Fiat Chrysler plants in Michigan and Ohio forced a temporary shutdown of much of the North American auto industry during the coronavirus pandemic, the corporate media entered into full cover-up mode.

The strike wave began Tuesday night at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, when workers downed their tools and were eventually sent home early by management. The morning shift followed suit, sitting down and allowing products to roll past without touching them on the assembly line. Within hours, production at Jefferson Assembly, Toledo Assembly and Dundee engine were paralyzed by a wave of wildcat actions.

Prior to these events, the US-based auto companies, with the full support of the United Auto Workers, combined lies with threats to keep workers on the job, endangering the health and even the lives of 150,000 workers and their families. But on Wednesday, autoworkers took matters into their own hands, against the furious opposition of the UAW, and refused to let the companies “kill them on the line” for the sake of corporate profit. In order to head off a strike wave spreading to the entire country or even all of North America, the auto companies were forced to hastily reverse themselves and announce shutdowns throughout North America.

But one would not know any of this from the corporate-controlled mainstream press. Nearly all of the articles reporting the shutdowns, which themselves have tended to be buried on their websites, exclude any mention of walkouts having occurred. Virtually all of them perpetuate the myth that the UAW demanded the closures, concealing that the fact that the workers forced the shutdowns--in *opposition* to the UAW.

Such antiseptic headlines include:

“Detroit Car Makers to Temporarily Close U.S. Plants Over Virus Concerns” (*Wall Street Journal*)

“GM, Ford among automakers to halt US production” (CNN)

“Automakers to Close Factories in North America” (*New York Times*)

“Automakers to temporarily shut down factories to slow the spread of coronavirus” (*Washington Post*)

“Automakers closing North American factories to protect workers from coronavirus” (*Chicago Tribune*)

“Detroit automakers agree to close all US plants” (*Detroit Free Press*)

All of them forwarded, without any comment, professions of auto executives’ immense concern for the wellbeing of autoworkers. The *Free Press* passed along this comment from GM CEO Marry Barra: “GM and the UAW have always put the health and safety of the people entering GM plants first. We have been taking extraordinary precautions around the world to keep our plant environments safe and recent developments in North America make it clear this is the right thing to do now.” But not twenty-four hours prior, the *Free Press*’ sister publication *Detroit News* reported that the same Barra had categorically refused to shut down operations.

If one were to believe these headlines, the companies and the UAW experienced an Ebenezer Scrooge-style conversion, realized that continuing production would condemn thousands to death, and, out of newfound deep concern for the safety of the workforce and their families, sent them home with a smile and pat on the head.

Of course, this is belied by the fact that General Motors in particular is seeking to drag out the shutdown process as long as possible. Some facilities may remain open through next week. The company’s auto parts

warehouses will remain open entirely.

The *Detroit News*, which expresses, in a more unvarnished form than the *Free Press*, the thinking and concerns of the Detroit automakers, was one of the few to acknowledge what actually took place. Columnist Daniel Howes wrote yesterday of “simmering mutinies stoked by fear” growing with “each passing hour.” He added: “This is historic and unprecedented, and not in a good way. It's the functional equivalent of a strike against all three companies in the three countries of North America.”

Howes' comment is the exception which proves the rule. It demonstrates what accounts for the worried silence within the corporate press. They do not want other workers, millions of whom are still laboring in unsafe conditions in nonessential manufacturing and warehouse facilities, to profit by the example set by the Fiat Chrysler workers.

This is an object lesson for workers in the role of the bourgeois media. Far from being “authoritative news sources,” as is claimed, they function instead as propaganda mouthpieces of the major corporations and the government, which alternately censor or manufacture news stories in the interests of the ruling class. While they have responded to a collective yawn to the fact that millions of workers are being exposed to infection by being forced to remain at work, they are working swiftly to implement their own version of “social distancing” to limit the contagion of working-class opposition.

They are particularly worried that the revolt by autoworkers exposes the loss of control by the unions, which have spent the last four decades suppressing the opposition of workers to the destruction of millions of jobs and one union-backed concession after another.

The developments in the US are part of a wave of strikes making its way across the entire world. They follow wildcat actions by autoworkers in Italy and Spain to force shutdowns of plants, which the auto companies attempted to continue to operate during national lockdowns. But the media has remained silent on this too.

This is also repetition of the media blackout of the massive strikes last spring in Matamoros, Mexico by 70,000 auto parts workers, who marched to the border to appeal to American workers for support. For weeks, not a single English-language publication in the entire

world, with the sole exception of the *World Socialist Web Site*, reported on the struggle.

Over the past week, the *World Socialist Web Site* was the only publication which not only reported the true conditions in the plants but gave autoworkers a voice. We also published statements by the Socialist Equality Party calling on workers to take matters into their own hands, and to fight for their own solution to the pandemic in opposition the policies pursued by the capitalist governments and major corporations. These statements were read and circulated by thousands of autoworkers.

As workers face new challenges, including the fight for full compensation for lost wages and opposition to an return to the infected plants, the *World Socialist Web Site* will continue to pierce the veil of silence by the corporate media to bring workers the truth and fight to mobilize and educate workers around a program of action to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. We urge autoworkers and all workers to donate to the WSWS and to join the fight to build the Socialist Equality Party as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

Shut down all nonessential 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.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact