

Kentucky auto parts worker denounces continued plant operation as coronavirus spreads

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A young worker at the Metalsa auto parts plant in Elizabethtown, Kentucky spoke to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* on Wednesday after news broke of Big Three automakers shutting down production.

A tier one supplier to Ford, Fiat Chrysler, Toyota, General Motors and others, Metalsa is continuing to produce vehicle frames, endangering thousands of line workers in the plant in the process. The Elizabethtown facility is one of three Metalsa plants operating in Kentucky. Metalsa's parent company Proeza declared the Kentucky facility "low-risk," although the state has tested very few residents for the coronavirus.

In the Elizabethtown plant, around 2,000 hourly employees work the lines. These workers are drawn from surrounding counties, where the possible spread of the virus is virtually untracked.

The worker estimated Metalsa produced 90 percent of Ford's vehicle frames, and the company had no intention of slowing production through the outbreak.

"Right now," he said, "they scheduled us to work Saturday and Sunday as well—you know, just keep on trucking and not even worry about it. We have a lot of 12-hour shifts, a lot of people in there all day, in the small break rooms together."

"We have a pretty large plant, but it's still pretty close quarters on where you work at in most places. On the assembly line it's all pretty close quarters," the worker explained, "working with your other people, repair stations, welding and stuff like that."

"So, to put this in perspective," he added. "On a humid day, when somebody sneezes, there's a projectile of up to ten feet that this virus could spread [on] and be in the air for up to 20 minutes. When you have 400 people changing shifts at 2 p.m., a possible five people have it and we all go out the same door: one of them sneezes, 20 minutes; we do a shift change in five. A hundred people go out the door in three minutes, two minutes. They're not even looking at the small

things."

The worker was angry that the company didn't prepare for the coronavirus outbreak weeks ago. "The first day that we found out there was a case in the US, we should have started taking precautionary measures to keep people safe," he said. "They were more worried about the economy."

"I think it's kind of alarming that this is one of the biggest outbreaks that's ever occurred so fast. They're not even sanitizing. And we didn't shut down first shift for them to come in and clean. I mean, it's terrible."

Company management has compared it to the flu and told workers not to worry about it. "We could all ignore facts, but it's not another flu," he stated. "We don't have a vaccination for the coronavirus yet. We don't have medicine to treat it. We do have that for the flu. I think they're handling it all the wrong way and we have quite a few workers who are very distraught over the situation."

Most of the workers are afraid they will contract the virus, but they have no recourse except burning through vacation and sick days. "There's a majority, I think that 80 percent of the people are just terrified," the worker said. "Their plan is to go to the doctor and get a note to be put off work for other issues."

"There was someone calling in because they said their wife was a suspected case of COVID-19 and she was in the ICU or something like that," the worker stated. "That's causing a pretty big stir. People are calling in for that reason. I think everybody is just scared but we're not getting any answers at all."

"You know, we have a lot of higher risk people ... the only directive we've been given by the company [is] that if you are scared and want to take off, you have to use your [sick or vacation] days. But we don't get enough days. Unless you've been there for 20 years, you don't get the 20 days of vacation. You don't get enough days to take off for two weeks and not have to be scared anymore. There's no amount of time that we're given."

“So my father’s 60 and he’s got diabetes and I would like to see him. However, if I’m going back and forth to work seeing all these people every day, I’m not going to be able to go visit him at all.”

The worker described the grueling production schedule in unsanitary conditions. “We’ve been working seven days a week for the past month, give or take a Sunday here or there that we’re off,” he said. “Getting drafted for [three] twelves Monday through Friday and then working Saturday and Sunday 12 hours a day, already not seeing our families—this has been an issue.

“And this is a known fact that this was rolling into a pandemic and these companies are saying that they are essential. But there’s no automotive manufacturer that is an essential company in this time of panic.

“We’re not even getting cleaned. I went in the bathroom in the back of the plant on one of the lines that should be taken care of, it’s right below an office, but there was no toilet paper in there. It was out of soap. The toilets were disgusting!

“Every door we had you had to grab to pull it open. That’s terrible hygienic practice, grabbing a door to open it in a bathroom of all places after you’ve washed your hands.”

The worker said he had appealed to both management and union representatives for a shutdown, to no avail. “The [UAW] is pretty much the modern-day version of the mob,” he declared. “They say our security is their number one goal, but it’s not. Our money is their number one goal, the money they receive. The union president probably makes more than anybody in the factory I work in.”

“You know we should be next on the list for shutdown,” he said. “We’re behind [in production], but those numbers should not matter when it comes to health and safety. How are you going to run a plant that turns into something worse and you’ve got people dropping like flies? How are you going to run a plant when half the people are gone? I mean, it just doesn’t make any sense to treat humans like cattle.”

The Metalsa employees felt they had no choice but to stay, given the poor economic conditions across Kentucky and the US as a whole. “We all have a choice that we could say, you know, we’re done with it, and quit and walk out, but then what do we face when we don’t have insurance and do get sick? Or we’re needing to go the hospital or pick up our medicine and we are sick, you know? Then we can’t do anything about it because we can’t afford it.”

“If you look at the median income in Kentucky, the average household income is like \$30,000,” the worker said. “And with that comes poor health insurance.

“We could shut down everything in the world for two weeks or maybe a month and not worry about the economy. When we start back working the economy, that should be

our least concern. The economy is going to go up and down. We can’t control that, but we can control our health if we try. And they’re not willing to try at all.

“We’re all facing the same issue and we have been. This is not a new thing. This is not just because of this virus spreading. This has always been an issue. We should be able to stand up as a country as a whole. You know, there’s only so much percent of this country that is wealthy.”

The worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter* he would be speaking to coworkers about the conception of rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW. “You shouldn’t have to work and live in fear the rest of your life that you’re going to get fired because you got sick. We definitely need to demand something to change in our sanitation routines or our overtime hours. I don’t know if you’ve ever worked an 85-hour week in a place filled with weld smoke and loud noises. Your head becomes foggy and you don’t operate correctly and your immune system’s lowered when you’re pulling all those hours and not sleeping.”

The worker expressed gratitude for the workers’ voice provided by the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “I’ve reached out to a few media outlets and it seems more of a joke to them. It’s nothing serious to them—just like the UAW, clearly.

“I messaged you guys on Facebook and within 24 hours I’m talking to somebody. The union, I called and left two voicemails asking for a call back and it’s been 48 hours and I haven’t heard a callback from them. So we see how it is.”

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.



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