

Michigan issues statewide lockdown, exempting auto industry as “critical infrastructure”

Tom Hall
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Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced a statewide stay-at-home order yesterday morning, as the COVID-19 virus continues to spread rapidly throughout the state. The three-week lockdown lasts until April 13 and took effect at midnight last night. The order, according to a press release, requires Michiganders to remain in their homes unless they are part of a “critical infrastructure workforce, engaged in an outdoor activity, or performing tasks necessary to the health and safety of themselves or their family, like going to the hospital or grocery store.”

The announcement means that thirteen out of 50 US states have announced lockdowns in response to the pandemic. While Texas has yet to issue a statewide lockdown, the cities of Dallas, Austin and San Antonio have issued their own orders.

The shutdown in Michigan comes after a rapid rise in confirmed cases throughout the state, from zero only two weeks ago to 1,328 cases and 15 deaths as of this writing. However, given the lack of testing and the atrocious level of social infrastructure in the state—especially in Detroit, the poorest large city in America—it is certain that the real total is many times higher.

Whitmer’s order was long overdue. She has previously placed a ban only on large gatherings of more than 250 people, which exempted auto factories and other industrial sites employing thousands of workers. Michigan schools did not even close until March 16.

The main factor in the delay was the overwhelming opposition of the major corporations doing business in the state to such an order, fearful of the impact it could have on their bottom line. As late as last Saturday, the heads of both the state and Detroit chambers of commerce issued statements “advising” the governor not to declare a lockdown. “We cannot risk a disruption in the supply

chain or a break in the distribution cycle. In addition, many businesses have non-interruptible operations and those operations need to be protected as we move forward,” Michigan chamber CEO Rich Studley argued.

Indifferent to the deaths and human suffering it would cause, there are growing calls from the corporate press, including the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, to restart production in industries as soon as possible in order to avoid denting the profits and share values of corporate America. President Trump, whose central preoccupation has been with the impact of the pandemic on the stock market, is reportedly mulling a lifting of restrictions to restore “normal” economic activity, a move which would expose untold numbers to infection and death.

These sentiments were echoed in the latest piece by the right-wing *Detroit News* commentator Nolan Finley, who declared that the “coronavirus cure is worse than the disease” and argued that “Before too much longer, we have to end the lockdown, even if the COVID-19 risk is not eradicated.”

The auto industry, which in spite of decades of plant closures is still centered in southeast Michigan, remained operating normally for weeks, even as the virus began to spread through the plants. Two weeks ago, the first case in an auto plant was confirmed at Fiat Chrysler’s Kokomo Transmission Plant in Indiana. However, Fiat Chrysler refused to close this facility, which is a critical choke point in its North American supply chain, and the auto companies worked with the United Auto Workers to combine lies and threats to force workers to remain on the job. This was upended last week only by a wildcat strike wave which broke out in Detroit-area Fiat Chrysler plants and began rapidly to spread outward, forcing the companies to suddenly reverse course and announce a

temporary closure of plants across North America, although Mexican workers remain on the job.

The strikes were blacked out in the corporate media. The press is now engaged in full cover-up mode, re-writing history to present the UAW as having spearheaded the shutdowns. Such a lying account was published in the industry publication *Automotive News*, and retweeted by the UAW's official Twitter page, attributing the shutdowns to days of backroom talks between union bureaucrats and auto executives.

While the lockdown is necessary from a public health standpoint, as with similar orders around the world there can be no doubt that it will be accompanied by repressive measures including the use of Trump's declaration of a national emergency and the Defense Production Act to force workers back into the infected factories.

The automakers, which are currently scheduled to restart production no sooner than March 30, a full two weeks before Whitmer's order expires, have not yet indicated whether they plan to remain closed in Michigan through April 13.

The governor's order contains a key exception to allow workers in "critical infrastructure" sectors, as defined by the Department of Homeland Security, to remain on the job during the pandemic. This is a broad designation, which is managed by the Department's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), focused ostensibly on securing American industry against attack by foreign adversaries. It has little or nothing to do with fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to healthcare, power generation and sectors necessary for sustaining human life, "critical infrastructure" also includes the broad category of "critical manufacturing," which includes steel, aluminum and other metallurgical industries, electrical equipment and appliance manufacturing, shipbuilding—and the auto and auto parts industries.

In an official guidance released on March 16, the Trump administration declared that workers in "critical infrastructure" industries "have a special responsibility to maintain your normal work schedule." The use of this designation is already being deployed in an attempt to keep tens of millions of manufacturing workers on the job. Electric vehicle maker Tesla attempted unsuccessfully, to keep its massive Fremont, California plant operating normally during a lockdown in Northern California. John Deere has also announced its intent to remain open under the DHS guidelines. Management at Ford's Kansas City Assembly and Fiat Chrysler's

Belvidere Assembly plants have also sent letters to their workforce declaring their facilities are exempt from local shutdown orders.

For those workers who will remain on the job, Whitmer's order leaves largely to the discretion of private business what concrete actions they will take to mitigate the spread of disease. One of the major factors behind last week's wildcats in the auto industry was the lack of even basic protections for autoworkers, who were not provided with masks, gloves, sanitizer or even hot water in some cases.

One autoworker in Toledo described the conditions in the plant to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "In parts of the plant there is no soap, no hot water. We've brought up these issues for eight years and more. There was the Bird Flu, MERS, SARS.

"Workers cough and spit on the line and in a 10-hour day, there are 39,100 interactions that can contaminate a vehicle on the line. This is especially on the final stages of production. At the front of the line, the vehicle is baked in furnaces, which would presumably kill off any virus. But by the end, there are hundreds of workers on each shift having thousands of interactions with the vehicles.

"Workers are fed up with this. It started in Kokomo where there were at least two workers who tested positive. It's happening at Whirlpool, at AK Steel and other companies.

"[Vice President] Pence can get the results of his COVID-19 tests back in 45 minutes. My friend took six days to get his results, and that's if you can even get a test. Everything is being done for the elites, for the stock market, for the airlines. It's going to the billionaire families, not the \$1,000 families. Half the workforce at our plant are temporary part-time employees who are not even getting \$40,000 a year. We need to get bailed out, not Bill Gates who could shell out a few billion without even noticing it. We want the billions for our families, for medical equipment and other things to fight this."



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