

Two Fiat Chrysler workers die from COVID-19 in US

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According to a United Auto Workers spokesman, two US Fiat Chrysler workers have died as a result of the coronavirus infection. One of the workers worked at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit and the other worked at the Kokomo Transmission Plant (KTP) in Indiana. It was not reported when the workers died.

According to posts by the family on Facebook, the worker who died in Kokomo was Jeff Bagby, a mechanical quality engineer. He died after being hospitalized with pneumonia on March 9. Bagby was a well-liked and respected figure in Kokomo. Following his death, hundreds of friends and co-workers posted tributes to Bagby on Facebook.

The name of the worker at Sterling Heights Assembly was not available at the time of this posting. Three workers at FCA have now died as a result of COVID-19. A technical worker at FCA headquarters in Auburn Hills, Michigan previously passed away due to the infection.

The deaths are the predictable outcome of the combined efforts of the auto companies and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union to keep the plants running and pumping out profit until last week, under conditions of the ever-widening global health emergency.

On March 12, Fiat Chrysler acknowledged that a salaried worker and UAW member at Kokomo had tested positive for coronavirus. Despite demands from workers to close the facility, which employs 4,000 workers, the UAW and FCA were determined to keep the plant open because it supplies transmissions for all of the company's vehicles, including the highly profitable Ram 1500 pickup and Jeep Grand Cherokee SUV models, and its closure would quickly halt North American production.

As word of what happened in Kokomo spread to other plants, FCA workers at the minivan plant in Windsor, Canada, the Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit and a transmission plant in Tipton, Indiana, downed tools and refused to work until supervisors and union officials forced them back to work with threats of firings. Workers at the Lear seating factory in Hammond, Indiana, also refused to work under unsafe conditions.

This came to a head last Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, March 17-18, when reports of a worker being diagnosed with COVID-19 at SHAP led to a sit-in by workers at the plant. The job action sparked protests and walkouts by workers at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit and the FCA Toledo North Assembly Complex in Ohio.

Fiat Chrysler responded by announcing the temporary closure of all its plants. The action by FCA was followed by all other major automakers operating in North America, resulting in the temporary suspension of car production in the US and Canada by the end of the week.

Ron, a young second-tier worker at SHAP, expressed his condolences to the family of his co-worker, telling the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "This is sad. The very person who tested positive, leading us workers to walk out of the plant, has perished, and it all happened in less than a week. We've had co-workers in the plant who have passed before, but it was nothing like this, because this is happening to all of us. I have two family members who are in the hospital right now because they are sick.

"If those shifts hadn't stop working and walked out, we still be in the plants, working in close proximity to each other and instead of one worker dying it could have been three, four or five. Who knows how many

people the deceased worker came into contact with and who could have contracted the virus?”

“We all need to stay home until it is over,” said a worker at the GM Fort Wayne Assembly Plant on hearing the news.

In the letter announcing the death of the two workers, UAW President Rory Gamble—himself implicated in the UAW corruption and bribery scandal—went out of his way to praise Ford management. The company announced yesterday that it was pushing back its planned March 30 date for the restart of auto production. Gamble also reported that a worker had tested positive for the coronavirus at the American Axle plant in Fraser, Michigan, leading to the closure of that facility.

In response to the news of the deaths a worker commented angrily on Facebook, “We have real people dying out here and we are supposed to get back to work by Easter? What a joke.”

Significant sections of corporate America and the political and media establishment are insisting that there must be an end to the disruptions to profit-making, regardless of the cost in greater death and suffering from the coronavirus pandemic. Such sentiments are being voiced by both the Trump administration—who said today that he wants the economy “raring to go by Easter”—and Democratic Party mouthpieces like *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who asked rhetorically in a recent column, “What the hell are we doing to ourselves? To our economy?”

These attempts to go back to “business as usual” in a matter of weeks fly in the face of the increasingly desperate warnings of international public health experts and scientists, who have stated that COVID-19 has the potential to kill millions in the US alone and overwhelm the already over-stretched health system, unless drastic measures are taken.

For the capitalist class, the lives of millions of workers must be sacrificed in the interests of corporate profit.

Workers must take the deaths at SHAP and FCA Kokomo as warning: Urgent action is needed to block the rush back into the factories, halt the spread of the coronavirus and prevent a health catastrophe unprecedented in modern history.

The WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party urge

workers to take up a program of action in order to fight the pandemic: rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW, must be formed and demand the shutdown of all non-essential industry, the rapid expansion of testing for the coronavirus, and the reallocation of trillions of dollars—not to Wall Street and the corporations, who want to force workers back into harm’s way, but towards the resources needed to combat COVID-19 and to providing free healthcare and support for the unemployed.

“We had to take action ourselves because the UAW wanted to keep us in the plants,” Ron, the worker at SHAP, said. “Now we have to get more workers on the same page because this affects all of us. All of the non-essential industries should be shut down too. And we all should be fully compensated for our lost time so we can pay our bills and take care of our families.

“They’ll say they can’t afford this, but Trump is putting all this money into things that are not for the betterment of millions of people. Workers at General Motors struck last year in the first big auto strike in decades. We have to fight to show the businesses that we mean business.”

*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 more information, contact the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org.*



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