

“They don’t care about our health”

Strikes, protests spread as US workers demand protection from COVID-19

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Strikes and protests by workers demanding protection from the deadly coronavirus have occurred with increasing frequency over the last several days. Job actions in the United States and other countries are taking place even as the Trump administration and other capitalist governments around the world rush to restart production and the flow of corporate profit, knowing full well that this will accelerate the spread of COVID-19 and increase the death toll.

“That’s crazy,” Tonya, a worker at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, said of Trump’s comments about ending the lockdowns and getting the economy “roaring back” by Easter. “There shouldn’t be any rush back to work. There isn’t a cure, and this is fast spreading and deadly. If we go back to work, we’ll be with co-workers who are sick but don’t have any symptoms. They would be sending us to be hurt, if not killed.”

On Wednesday, sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania carried out a wildcat strike over concerns that fellow workers had contracted the virus and that they had no protective gear. In a video posted on Facebook, sanitation worker Fitzroy Moss said the city had falsely claimed that sanitation workers were “evaluated for coronavirus” when, in fact, “they don’t care about our health.” The mayor says the “trash is going to get picked up no matter what,” he continued, but “we’ve only been given a pack of four wet-wipes” and “no masks, no gloves, nothing!”

Workers shouted down and chased off a Teamsters union bureaucrat who tried to force them back to work. The union official said, “Keep your social distance and do your six-foot thing,” and told the workers that the city did not have facilities to test workers.

“We are risking our lives,” a worker told a local

reporter, “if one of us gets infected, all of us get infected.”

On Tuesday, more than two-thirds of shipbuilders at Bath Iron Works (BIW) in Maine refused to show up to work, the day after the first worker at the shipyard tested positive. In a memo last Tuesday, General Dynamics said the US Navy had confirmed that the Bath shipyard was deemed “critical infrastructure” under a White House guidance that directed defense contractors to continue to operate normally in the interests of national security.

The wife of one BIW worker posted, “Don’t forget what keeps companies running... employees! Too bad they aren’t being valued as people right now... just numbers, employee numbers who are deemed replaceable because BIW doesn’t care about their health or well-being during a NATIONAL PANDEMIC!”

On Monday, public transit workers in Birmingham, Alabama refused to take their busses out due to COVID-19 concerns. The Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority responded by restricting busses to 15 to 19 passengers, blocking off seats to allow social distancing for passengers and drivers, and asking passengers to use the rear door when entering and exiting busses.

The Detroit Department of Transportation was forced to halt bus operations last week after sickouts by drivers.

Also, on Monday, over 40 poultry workers at a Perdue chicken and pork processing plant in Kathleen, Georgia walked off the job to demand sanitary working conditions, hazard pay and time off after multiple workers reported being exposed to COVID-19 at the factory.

These actions follow the strike by Amazon workers in Queens, New York, the refusal of Brooklyn postal workers to work in an infected facility and the wave of wildcat strikes at Fiat Chrysler plants in Michigan and

Ohio last week, and an earlier job action at the company's minivan plant in Windsor, Canada. The actions initiated in opposition to the United Auto Workers and Unifor unions, which insisted that workers stay on the job, forced the shutdown of the auto industry in the US and Canada, but not Mexico.

At least three Fiat Chrysler workers have died from COVID-19, including Jeff Bagby, a mechanical quality engineer at the Kokomo Transmission Plant in Indiana, and a still unnamed worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit. On Wednesday, Fiat Chrysler confirmed that Lorenzo Seldon, a 50-year-old worker and UAW steward at the Warren Truck plant, had also died of the disease.

The walkouts in the US are part of an international trend, which includes a walkout by Manitoba silver miners, Amazon workers in Italy, more than 1,000 meatpacking workers in Northern Ireland, public hospital doctors and nurses in Zimbabwe, and a series of wildcat strikes by autoworkers in Italy, which has the highest number of COVID-19 fatalities in the world. Italian metal workers and bank workers are scheduled to strike next Wednesday in Lombardy, the country's hardest hit region.

"Workers in every industry and all over the world have to stand together," Tonya, the Detroit Fiat Chrysler worker, said. "In Italy, there is a lockdown, but they are still forcing workers to work. It's horrible.

"All that the companies care about are production and profits. [UAW President Rory] Gamble said he was demanding a two-week shutdown, but they came back and said we'll rearrange a few things to make it safer. All they did was give us degreasers, not even disinfectants, for workers to clean their own areas. The UAW doesn't give a damn about us. If we didn't walk out, we'd still be in the plants."

She also expressed outrage over the shortage of masks, ventilators and other lifesaving medical equipment. "We should use all of the plants to produce what is needed," Tonya said. "In one shift we knock out 600 Jeeps and that takes way more parts and manpower than medical equipment. We would have the capacity to produce tens of thousands of masks and other equipment every day. We have the capacity but we're not using it.

"FCA and other carmakers say they are going to produce ventilators and masks. But the president and the companies are only concerned with profit. If workers were in control, we would be making sure humanity is not suffering and people are not dying from a lack of

equipment that can be produced."

Laura, a teacher from Florida, said, "I'm furious that people expect us to give up our lives for work that does not pay us enough to even live the lives we're given. This is a horrible abuse of power and in some ways just sentencing people to die.

"Clearly, the working class is replaceable—that has never been clearer. If this were a computer virus that could wipe out their fortunes, they'd care. But this virus, which spreads among those who have not been granted the 'privilege' of leaving work and still being paid, does not worry them.

"The ruling class has access to tests and safety measures and money to survive that the rest of the world doesn't. What does this say about the society we live in? That this truly is dying capitalism and it is clawing and kicking to stay relevant. The only fatality I am happy to see from this virus is that of a capitalist structure."

"Capitalism is showing its true face," Barry, a retired General Motors worker from the Lansing Delta Township plant in Michigan, said. "This is socially sanctioned euthanasia, just like the WSWS said.

"We know from the lessons of Korea and China we can flatten the curve if you isolate and test people. We need to be tested every week, every day, not just when you get symptoms, and we need a quick test to get results right away.

"This is culling the herd. They must be laughing all the way to the bank. I told my wife, 'They would love us to die, we are collecting Social Security.' They have been trying to slash that for years. It's just another way to do that. It's ruthless and inhumane."

A worker from Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville, where a worker tested positive, said, "I used to think capitalism was OK. But when you get these extremes of wealth and poverty—these huge divides—it can't keep going.

"Most people, workers that is, want to do what's right for the public good. But everything is run by the capitalists, the people with money. We're approaching an eruption of class war."



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