

Following deaths of three autoworkers due to COVID-19

Fiat Chrysler and Ford set April 14 target to re-open US plants

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Ford and Fiat Chrysler announced plans to re-open US key facilities by April 14, days after Trump's call for the US economy to be "open for business" by Easter. As of this writing, General Motors has yet to announce a firm date to re-start its US production.

The April 14 deadline is only one day after the expiration of the statewide lockdown in Michigan, the center of the US auto industry, announced by Governor Gretchen Whitmer earlier this week. The text of Whitmer's order paved the way to allow auto companies to restart production earlier under the cover of guidance from the Department of Homeland Security designating the industry as "critical infrastructure." However, the automakers have evidently decided that attempting to force workers back into the plants before the expiration of the lockdown risked another explosion among autoworkers, who successfully forced a shutdown of the Detroit automakers last week with a wildcat strike wave.

Ford will be re-opening its Hermosillo, Mexico assembly plant a week earlier, bringing in one shift on April 6.

Before the temporary shutdowns, US automakers, with the full backing of the United Auto Workers union, were forcing workers to remain on the job indefinitely, without even minimal protection such as masks, gloves and sanitizer. But after the first worker tested positive at a Fiat Chrysler plant in Indiana autoworkers began taking matters into their own hands. What followed was a series of job actions, sit-ins, walkouts and refusals to handle vehicles at FCA's operations in Windsor, Canada; Tipton, Indiana; Warren, Sterling Heights and Detroit, Michigan; and Toledo, Ohio.

The actions were taken in opposition to the United Auto Workers union, which only hours prior to the beginning of the wildcats announced a rotten deal to allow the companies to continue production. The revolt by workers was captured in a video of angry workers confronting the vice-president of the UAW local at FCA's Toledo, Ohio Jeep assembly plant. Since then, the corporate media in the United States has been working overtime to write the wildcats out of history and attribute the shutdown to negotiations between the automakers and the UAW.

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.

A worker at the Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville, which is scheduled to reopen on April 14, told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, "We don't know the true number of COVID-19 cases and may never know" because of the lack of testing. "People need to make money to sustain themselves," but it wasn't "worth the risk to get sick or make someone else sick. I want to see my grandmother, but I'm afraid to because I'm near all these people at the factory, and I may give her the virus."

The corporations were being driven by profit interests, the worker said. "The capitalists are running the show," he said, but the "divide between rich and poor is getting so large we are reaching a breaking point. It's class war."

By forcing workers to expose themselves to infection during the pandemic, the corporations and the government have forfeited the right to control decisions relating to elementary health and safety. Autoworkers must insist that only they, with the advice of independent medical experts, have the collective right to decide when they should return to work. They must move now to form rank-and-file committees to oppose any premature return to work.

Meanwhile, tens of millions of workers are either being compelled to work in unsafe conditions or have been laid off and are at risk of financial ruin. The entire working class must demand that all non-essential industries immediately be shut down and, instead of bailing out Wall Street and the giant corporations, society's resources be used to fully compensate workers for lost wages, to treat and prevent the spread of the virus and provide for the needs of millions under quarantine, and reorganize productive capacity to produce life-saving medical equipment and protective gear for health care workers. This will require the transformation of the giant corporations into public enterprises under the collective ownership and democratic control of the working class.

The target date announced by the companies collides with elementary public health considerations and will expose tens of thousands of autoworkers to the risk of infection and death. According to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University, the United States has just overtaken Italy and China to become the new epicenter of the pandemic, with more than 80,000 confirmed cases. By April 14 millions of people could be infected and the death toll might reach the tens of thousands.

Detroit, the center of the automotive industry, is rapidly emerging as one of the epicenters of the pandemic within the United States. According to a White House press conference yesterday, Wayne County, where Detroit is located, is one of the two counties with the fastest growing number of cases in the country. The poorest large city in America, ravaged by decades of deindustrialization, the city's financially starved medical and social infrastructure is already being overwhelmed.

Even as the pandemic continues to spread throughout the country, the stock market has skyrocketed over the past several days in anticipation of massive government intervention to guarantee the bottom line of corporate

America, including a \$2 trillion "stimulus" bill in Congress.

In an official response, UAW President Rory Gamble praised the bill and urged that it be signed into law as quickly as possible, even as he himself was compelled to admit that it "fails to provide front line workers with the health and safety protections necessary to keep them from contracting Covid-19... includes no enforceable workplace standards and does not provide enough resources to frontline workers who are the first line of defense." In other words, it is nothing more than a massive transfer of society's wealth to big business.

Gamble combined this with pathetic moral appeals to the powers-that-be: "[W]e ask all those making policy decisions and in corporate boardrooms to be guided by one simple question: 'Would you send your family, your son or daughter, into the workplace and be 100% certain they will be safe.'"

In fact, within the corporate-financial oligarchy which rules the country, as well as among their trade union lackeys, there is a growing consensus that millions of workers should be allowed to die in order to safeguard the profits of the major corporations. This was expressed not only in Trump's declaration that the country should return to work by Easter and "fill the churches," but in editorials penned in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and other corporate news outlets.

Ford, whose financials are the weakest of the Detroit Three, became the first to announce its back-to-work plans on Thursday morning. Even before the pandemic, as the global auto industry shed hundreds of thousands of jobs, Wall Street was turning the screws on Ford in particular to accelerate the pace of its cuts. Ford's stock has fallen by nearly 50 percent since last January and its credit rating was downgraded to junk status last fall by Moody's. In a letter to employees yesterday, CEO Jim Hackett declared that the company will have to take "tougher action," including mass layoffs, if the pandemic continues for much longer.



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