

Four deaths over the weekend raise COVID-19 death toll among US autoworkers to nine

Jessica Goldstein
30 March 2020

At least nine US autoworkers have lost their lives so far to the COVID-19 pandemic, after four deaths were reported in the media over the weekend. According to a Saturday report in the Detroit *Free Press*, two hourly Ford workers died after being diagnosed with COVID-19. Coworkers identified one of the workers as Gregory Boyd from Dearborn Stamping Plant, part of Ford's massive Rouge complex. The second death was a skilled trades worker at the Ford Data Center, also in Dearborn, whose identity is not yet known.

On Sunday, the *Free Press* reported that two more Fiat Chrysler workers died of COVID-19, one from Warren Truck Assembly Plant and another from the MOPAR parts distribution center in Center Line, Michigan. These bring the death toll to seven at FCA's US plants, including two at a single facility, Warren Truck.

Their tragic and completely preventable deaths confirmed over the weekend follow the March 24 announcement of the deaths of two Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers from Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit and Kokomo Transmission Plant in Indiana; Wednesday's announcement of the death of an hourly worker from the Warren Truck Assembly Plant; and Thursday's announced deaths of a worker at FCA Transport in Sterling Heights, Michigan and a salaried worker at FCA headquarters.

The primary and immediate responsibility for these deaths lies with the Detroit automakers and their lackeys in the United Auto Workers, which conspired to keep workers on the line as long as possible during the pandemic, without even minimal sanitation and safety measures, in order to produce highly profitable SUVs and pickup trucks.

Were it not for the fact that ~~workers~~ into their own hands and launched a wildcat strike wave two weeks ago, forcing the automakers to close their North American facilities at least temporarily, the death toll would almost certainly be far higher. This rebellion in the American auto factories was part of a growing international strike wave as major corporations continue to force millions of workers in nonessential industries to remain on the job, with the support of governments throughout the world.

As the death toll began to mount last week and the United States was surging past China and Italy to become the new epicenter of the pandemic, Ford and Fiat Chrysler were forced to extend their shutdowns past their original March 30 deadline to April 14, the day after a statewide lockdown order in Michigan expires. General Motors has extended its shutdown indefinitely, declaring that it would review their decision on a week-to-week basis.

The statewide lockdown ordered by Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer contained a loophole allowing "essential industries" including auto and other manufacturing sectors to remain at work, paving the way for the automakers to restart production early. However, the automakers decided against such a course of action, knowing that forcing a return to work during the lockdown would have risked triggering an even bigger social explosion among autoworkers.

Since the first confirmed case in Michigan on March 11, the number of COVID-19 cases in Michigan has exploded, in less than three weeks, to 5,480 on Saturday, with 132 confirmed deaths. The number of cases in the state increased more than fourfold since the beginning of last week and Detroit, where decades of

plant closures have led to a collapse in social infrastructure and the highest poverty rate of any large US city, is emerging as a new hotspot, with the city's healthcare on the brink of being overwhelmed.

Among the victims of the pandemic is state legislator for Detroit Isaac Robinson, the *Free Press* reported late last night.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to autoworkers in Michigan about their concerns in light of the most recent deaths.

A worker from the Ford Flat Rock Assembly plant said: "On the news they said they had a blue-collar team going throughout the plant to protect everybody, and they ran the story that Ford was doing everything they could to protect the workers. That was an outright lie! No one communicated to any of [the workers] what the dangers were, or what they were doing about it. It was a case of company management versus the health and safety of the workers.

"[O]n the 10th of March and again on the 16th, [t]he workers were very upset. They did not want to work, but they were forced to. Three workers were told to go down to dock 45, for example, to unload transmissions, [and] the company went and got someone who did not know what was going on, [a]nd got them to unload the transmissions.

"Health and Safety did nothing. The union did nothing. We had to pull over a guy on the hi-lo [forklift] and tell him what was going on. Ford does not care if we live or die. All they care about is the money. We knew that day when [a worker] was pulled off a hi-lo at Dearborn Truck Plant, [he] was quarantined because he tested positive for COVID-19.

"[One day], 20 or 30 people walked off the line. All the company did to protect us was to say 'keep your distance.' What good is that? You are touching at least 5,000 parts on every shift. We have 13 lines and 1,300 people working right next to each other and touching all those parts. It is a death trap. We knew this.

"The company does not care because they are making profit. If we report incidents to health and safety, they do not care. We need a job. What are we going to do?"

Workers at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) learned of two confirmed COVID-19 cases at the factory, one hourly and one salaried worker, through an announcement from Labor Relations on Friday. While the UAW has made passing comments about the plant

being "sanitized" during the shutdown, one full-time CAP worker said that he and his coworkers remain skeptical that any safety measures will be put into place, and that they are nervous about returning to work when the plant reopens.

Another veteran CAP worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that in addition to the two confirmed cases, there were two salaried workers at the plant who had been "clinically diagnosed." Other than the concise note from Labor Relations on Friday that instructed workers not to return to work for the next three weeks "unless notified by [a] supervisor," the workers received no further information.

"So we want to know: Have we been exposed? Has our area been exposed? What measures should we take? I think we're just starting to see the bad part of it," he continued. "We're very in the initial stage, and it's going to get worse. We have a horror show of a government, both the Democrats and the Republicans. If they try to get us back to work by Easter, I don't know how that's going to go... [people] are going to walk out.

"[H]ow can the US have all this money, but can't produce enough face masks for workers? It goes to show you the government's best interest is not in the people, because if it was, it would've been acting very differently. Here you have the best example of the working class saving the rest of society—grocery workers, delivery workers, healthcare workers, nurses. It's not the billionaires, it's not the corporate executives."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact