

More Ford, FCA workers die from COVID-19 in Detroit area

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A fifth worker at Ford Motor Co. and an eighth worker at Fiat Chrysler Automotive have died from the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a late afternoon report in the *Detroit Free Press* Thursday. The workers, who have yet to be identified as of this writing, were hourly employees at Ford's Livonia Transmission Plant and FCA's MOPAR parts distribution center in Center Line, respectively.

Both plants are located in the Detroit area, which has become one of the fastest growing centers of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. Michigan's official tally rose to 10,791 cases and 471 deaths Thursday, behind only New York, New Jersey, and California, and greater than the number of reported cases in Japan, Brazil or Australia.

The latest deaths at Ford and FCA bring the confirmed total fatalities of Detroit Three workers in the US to 13.

The responsibility for this completely preventable loss of life lies squarely at the feet of the auto companies and their lackeys in the United Auto Workers, who forced workers to stay on the line as long as possible, pumping out profits while the pandemic gathered speed. It was only after workers took matters into their own hands and began a wave of job actions and walkouts in Ontario, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio that management began to idle production, fearing the further spread of wildcat strikes throughout the North American continent.

Although many states such as Michigan have issued "stay-at-home" orders and stipulated the shutdown of non-essential enterprises, the auto companies are angling to utilize their designation as "critical infrastructure" by Trump's Department of Homeland Security to get workers back into the plants at the earliest opportunity.

In fact, many workers under the UAW, including at the agricultural and heavy equipment companies John Deere and Caterpillar, are still being compelled to report to work, with little to no safety protections, endangering

themselves and their families in the interests of corporate shareholders. According to the *Free Press*, FCA did not shut down its MOPAR Center Line facility, where two workers have now died, until Wednesday last week, after Michigan's shutdown had gone into effect. Justifying FCA's decision, UAW spokesman Brian Rothenberg had said "the business has been open with paid volunteers" because of its "essential" status, claiming, "They're deep cleaning and following protocol."

Prior to the most recent deaths, a worker was reported Monday to have died from the coronavirus at Ford's Dearborn Diversified Manufacturing Plant. The factory is part of the sprawling Rouge complex that includes the Dearborn Stamping Plant, where another worker, Gregory Boyd died of COVID-19 last week.

In semi-daily press releases, UAW President Rory Gamble has been barely able to conceal the union's pathological indifference to the growing number of fatalities and workers' increasingly desperate situation. Following the same callous template of previous letters, Gamble's communication Thursday noted in passing "the sad news" of the deaths at Ford Livonia and MOPAR, before moving on briskly to "some positive news," applauding GM for supposed safety training at its Kokomo, Indiana, facility, where he states ventilators are soon to be produced.

The UAW has been at pains to deflect mounting anger over the unprecedented health catastrophe away from both the corporations and themselves, promoting illusions in the belated and in many cases non-existent safety measures which they are "working very closely with" the companies to implement. In reality, the collaboration of the union and automakers consists primarily of backchannel discussions on how early they can force workers back into the plants again without provoking a total rebellion.

After reading Gamble's letters, many workers

responded with disgust and outrage. A young assembler at Ford in Dearborn, Michigan, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “He is implying that the death of a worker is no more than the cost of doing business.”

Gamble “is not defending the workers’ interests,” he continued. “For him the company chooses if the workers live or die. The company could have retooled to protect us, but instead they squeezed a little more profit out of us at the expense of our lives.”

Another worker responded to Gamble’s Tuesday letter on the union’s Facebook page, saying, “It’s going to take someone to die at John Deere. Corporate GREED. Quarantined people today. Quarantined people last week. Just disinfect the area and get back to work. Don’t care to hear them say for your safety again because they clearly don’t care about my safety or our families’ safety as long as we produce.”

The global tally of COVID-19 infections has passed 1 million, with more than one out of every four of those confirmed cases now occurring within the United States. The toll of preventable deaths from the disease among autoworkers continues to climb at an alarming rate.

Nonetheless, the heads of the major capitalist economies are directing their resources and efforts not at adequately addressing the pandemic, providing medical care or rapidly producing protective and life-saving equipment, but rather at keeping the corporations and financial markets afloat. Meanwhile, the major automakers have been rolling out furloughs and pay cuts of salaried workers, with further severe measures impacting workers more broadly inevitably to come.

Earlier in the week, Ford CEO Jim Hackett, who has been under unrelenting pressure from Wall Street in recent years to cut costs and restructure more aggressively, discussed planning by the company over how to restart production. Having temporarily retreated from attempts to reopen the plants earlier in April, Hackett told the *Detroit Free Press* that their aim was to reopen the plants in a “stepped way” by early May. In a threat to workers and promise to Ford’s investors, he warned, “[A]s time goes on, I’ll have to make more changes.”

Similar plan are being made in Germany and elsewhere. *Automotive News* reported in an article Thursday, “Merkel and German auto execs seek ways to restart factories,” on a phone conference late Wednesday in which “Merkel and the executives discussed measures to minimize contagion risks and protect workers health once assembly lines resume churning out vehicles.”

Hildegard Mueller, the head of the German cars lobby VDA, and Joerg Hofmann, leader of the IG Metall labor union, were in attendance.

The article continued, “The country can ill afford a prolonged shutdown of its car industry, which employs more than 800,000 people and is a key indicator of industrial health in Europe’s largest economy. Volkswagen Group said it currently burns through 2 billion euros (\$2.2 billion) per week as most of its sites sit idle.”

The rebellion in the auto factories against demands that workers’ sacrifice their lives in service to the wealth of the ruling elite—beginning in Italy and Spain and spreading to the US in recent weeks—is part of a sharply growing wave of the working class struggle internationally.

Workers must organize in rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus and prepare to expand their fight and ensure their safety. The widespread anger at the colossal failure and criminal negligence of every official institution requires a political perspective.

The profit interests and reactionary nationalism intrinsic to the capitalist system—promoted relentlessly by the Democrats, Republicans, and the unions alike—produced this disaster. They must be counter posed with the struggle for socialism, in which the major corporations and financial institutions are nationalized and placed under the control of workers in order to ensure safe working conditions, expert and fully paid medical care, no loss of income, and the global coordination of doctors and scientists to combat the pandemic.

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter urges workers who agree with this perspective to contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org and discuss with us how to join the fight for socialism.



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