

GE Appliances and GE Aviation workers fight unsafe conditions in Kentucky and Massachusetts

Jerry White
3 April 2020

Anger is reaching a boiling point among GE Appliances workers in Louisville, Kentucky after management acknowledged one “probable” COVID-19 case earlier this week, forcing local union officials to raise the possibility of a strike. The 3,800 workers at GE’s 900-acre Appliance Park complex, who manufacture refrigerators and other household appliances, are demanding the closure of their complex to protect their lives from the spread of the deadly coronavirus disease.

Workers at GE Appliances, which was sold by General Electric in 2016 and is now owned by China-based Haier, are demanding safe conditions across the company’s global operations, which employ 200,000 workers in more than 130 countries.

Louisville is a massive manufacturing and logistics hub, with tens of thousands of GE, Ford and UPS workers, who are all want non-essential production closed and other necessary public health measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Where such shutdowns have occurred, however, it has been through the independent action of workers, not the unions.

The auto industry was only closed after rank-and-file workers rebelled against the United Auto Workers union, which worked with the automakers to keep workers in the plants despite the risk to their lives. This movement has since spread to bus drivers, sanitation workers, Instacart, Amazon, Whole Foods, and other sections of workers throughout the United States and the world, who are demanding safe conditions for themselves and the public they serve.

For weeks, the International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) has done nothing more than issue verbal complaints and advise management to take measures to prevent a revolt by workers. In the meantime, union officials sanctioned the resumption of production on Monday, March 30, after a one-week temporary shutdown. Management claims it sanitized the facility during the shutdown and reconfigured the workplace for social distancing.

But when workers returned to work, they were outraged by management’s inadequate measures, the grime and filth that

remained in the factory and the lack of soap, sanitizers and cleaning supplies. With workers threatening to walk out, the IUE-CWA called a protest Tuesday.

Workers outside the complex chanted “Shut it down!” Others drove their cars with homemade signs in the windows declaring “GE employees and their families do matter” and denounced the company for subordinating their lives to corporate profit.

In comments to the local media, one worker said, “I don’t want to come back to work and lose my life. Our lives matter. They think being off a week and halfway cleaning up, putting up shower curtains, tape on the floor, is going to keep us safe—it isn’t going to. We make dishwashers, refrigerators and stoves. We don’t need to be working. Let us stay out, we don’t want to die.”

On Facebook, workers posted photos of a high-end refrigerator on the assembly line, with “Health not wealth” written by workers on the back. A Facebook post read: “My dad’s life is worth more than the dishwashers he makes! My dad’s life is worth more than ANY appliance GE Appliances Park makes! We cannot forget our Louisville family and friends that work for GE. This is a NONESSENTIAL business.”

Instead of halting operations, management announced a brief, 48-hour closure of Building Three and that the infected worker who worked there was put in quarantine. When work resumes today, the “affected area” where the employee worked will still be off-limits for 14 days, the company said, while production continues in the “unaffected area,” according to a report in the Louisville Courier Journal.

Union officials have told workers to place their confidence in local Democratic Party politicians, who have invariably sided with the company. Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer said during a press briefing on Wednesday, “GE has got to be looking at the sustainability of their business and how long that they can be down. They also—I know they are—working through the lens of it has to be safe as well ... There’s a strong desire, I believe, on both sides here to have a safe facility so that they can operate and that they can sustain the business and grow the business as well.”

With anger growing, IUE-CWA Local 83-761 President Dino

Driskell sent a memo to workers claiming that he is "pushing the company to respond to our demands and take this virus seriously park-wide." He added reluctantly, "I will be exploring the possibility of taking a park wide strike vote in light of the company's unwillingness to respond to this crisis."

Workers face similar conditions at the larger General Electric conglomerate, which continues to operate power, renewable energy, oil and gas, aviation, healthcare, transportation, and lighting divisions. After cutting tens of thousands of jobs, the company's stock prices shot up 50 percent in 2019, and it paid its CEO Larry Culp \$24.6 million, up by more than 50 percent from \$15.4 million in 2018.

General Electric has responded to the pandemic with a new round of mass layoffs, announcing last week that it will lay off nearly 2,600 workers at GE Aviation, or 10 percent of the division's domestic workforce, in order to save between \$500 million and \$1 billion.

GE Aviation workers at the company's Lynn, Massachusetts aircraft engine plant have been demanding the closure of the plant for weeks, even as management and the IUE-CWA kept the 1,260 hourly workers on the job.

"The machinists, hand-tool operators, and inspectors who build jet and helicopter engines for the US military were concerned that their shared workstations weren't being sanitized between around-the-clock shifts while the highly contagious coronavirus ravages the country," the Boston Globe reported last week. "They knew of co-workers who had reported to work with COVID-19-like symptoms because they couldn't get tested and didn't have enough sick time to quarantine themselves. They worried about their 300-plus co-workers over the age of 60, who are considered higher-risk."

A work crew nearly revolted shortly after clocking in last Friday when they learned that two members of a coworker's household had tested positive. According to the Boston Globe: "A union representative yanked the roughly 20-member crew outside, called in union higher-ups, and pleaded with the company to allow everybody to be sent home, with pay, for two weeks. When that was rejected, the union tried for five days of self-quarantining until the man's test results came back, followed by temperature checks at the plant's medical center before anyone was allowed back to work ... The company's solution: Clear the building for a two-hour deep-cleaning of work spaces and common areas that day, then back to work."

The Globe added: "The [infected] man quarantined himself for a week but ran out of sick time — GE workers get only the state-mandated 40 hours a year of paid sick leave — and worked last week with a cough and red, glassy eyes," the Globe reported.

On Monday, after another worker was sent home, workers in Building 74 on the second shift gathered in the parking lot and chose not to work in "abnormally dangerous conditions for work," according to a report in the *Nation*, and the third shift followed suit.

It was only after this that IUE-CWA decided to call a protest to try to get ahead of the workers' job action. CWA International President Chris Shelton appealed to Democratic and Republican congressmen to "convince GE to begin manufacturing ventilators" at plants in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Kansas, Kentucky, and Texas, along with implementing "workplace health policies that meet the needs of those who are currently at work."

Hundreds of thousands of more ventilators must be built, and workers are willing and determined to do everything they can to save lives. At the same time, workers producing lifesaving equipment must be given the protections they need.

But the corporate-controlled politicians who just backed the multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and giant corporations are not going to do anything that cuts across the profit interests of big business, no matter how many lives will be lost. GE Healthcare has said it is raising output at its Wisconsin plant, but will not release any numbers. As for the joint GE-Ford plan to produce 50,000 ventilators in Michigan, this will not be accomplished until July, long after the expected peak of the pandemic in the US.

Emergency action must be taken now based on what workers need not what the companies claim they can afford. GE workers should organize rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the company unions, to shut down all nonessential production, guarantee full compensation for lost wages, and guarantee safe conditions in the factories producing ventilators and other essential equipment.

Above all, the growing industrial movement of workers must be guided by a socialist program, including the nationalization of GE and other corporations, with no compensation to their wealthy shareholders, and their conversion into public utilities committed to production for human need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact