

US auto companies push for return to work at parts distribution centers

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Fiat Chrysler and the other Detroit-based auto companies are continuing operations at their vast warehouse system, despite the temporary shutdown of assembly plants. The enterprise-wide shutdowns that closed auto production plants in Michigan and across the US were only ordered after a series of walkouts by autoworkers in March.

In the face of a rebellion by rank-and-file autoworkers against attempts to maintain production in the midst of the pandemic, the UAW reached an agreement with the companies to keep their parts distribution warehouses running with so-called volunteer labor. To this end they accepted claims that the parts depots were essential services because they supplied parts to service emergency medical response, police and fire vehicles.

In fact, the parts distribution operations make up a sizable chunk of the business that goes on in car dealerships and is a substantial source of profit for automakers. The union has given little information to warehouse workers being urged to “volunteer” at the distribution facilities in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

The drive by the UAW and management to force an early return to work in the midst of the pandemic raises urgently the need for workers to establish rank-and-file committees to enforce the paramount priority of health and safety over corporate profits.

Like logistics workers at Amazon, auto parts distribution workers are being forced to work without protective gear and other minimal safety measures. These conditions have sparked walkouts by Amazon workers in the US and internationally.

Fiat Chrysler MOPAR parts distribution workers in discussion with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* explained that at the smaller Center Line facility there were three cases of known COVID-19 infection and of those, two were fatal. Ford and Chrysler

have reported six and 11 deaths respectively related to COVID-19 of workers employed at their US facilities.

A MOPAR worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “They have hired temporary workers to replace us.” She estimated 30 people were on the floor in the smaller Center Line packaging plant. “Now they are working 12 hours a day seven days a week,” she said.

“That virus is really prevalent. I don’t think anyone should be in the plants. They should set a protocol for who works. I don’t think it is an essential workplace at all. Is money more important than lives?”

“We all know it’s about profits. The executives are at home and getting paid. We are struggling. We have to collect unemployment, which is a big problem. I am not going back until all of this stuff is cleared up.”

She explained that she followed the wildcat strikes that led to the shutdown of auto plants across the US and Canada: “I was very pleased to hear about the protests at [FCA] Sterling Heights and Jefferson that forced their hands. The UAW always feels as though their hands are tied.

“It did not affect MOPAR. We continued work. By the time we came in Thursday they said we could go home if we wanted to; there was going to be a short work week. Then the UAW met with management and pushed the voluntary layoff. We had to file for unemployment benefits.

“[UAW] Local 1248 picked up 45 temps. We have 800 regular members and 45 or 50 supplemental [at MOPAR]. We have five buildings.

“It saddens me to know that all lives don’t matter. I hope we can get hold of this thing before we lose more people than necessary. I hope 100,000–200,000 [deaths] is not a real number. This is very overwhelming.”

Another veteran MOPAR worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that FCA was attempting to ramp up production at MOPAR and he had been given until this

past weekend to decide whether he would return to work or take an indefinite layoff. He said he felt enormous pressure to go back to work, despite the dangers, due to the fear of not having a job to come back to.

The giant auto companies claim the in-house parts distribution work is “essential” and allowable under Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s stay-at-home order. General Motors is currently running a large television ad campaign to drum up more business to its vehicle servicing operations.

GM and its Customer Care and Aftersales (CCA) division opened a new 1.1 million-square-foot, \$65 million processing center in Burton, Michigan, near Flint, just last summer. The new AC Delco and GM Genuine Parts processing center near Flint employs over 800 hourly and salaried workers when fully staffed. It is almost three times the size of the former Davison Road parts processing in nearby Flint.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to a worker in one of GM’s parts facilities. GM is using its Automated Notification System (ANS) to push more workers to “volunteer” over the next two weeks. They are banking on workers returning to take advantage of the two holidays that will fall in this period and will bring triple-time pay for some workers on those days.

“The place where I work isn’t shut down, but is operating with volunteers. They are using their automated notification system, called ANS, and asking people to make a decision immediately and notify their supervisors and commit to working two weeks at a time.

“I speak to co-workers and it seems like everybody is asking ‘who is going back to work? Do you think it’s safe to go back to work?’ Instead of answering the questions people have about whether things have improved in safety conditions in the plant, their motto now is ‘enter at your own risk.’

“Some people probably need to get into work and will commit because they don’t have funds to wait for an unemployment check or that stimulus check. Last Friday was my last paycheck. Now it is a week later and I have no money and nothing coming in. I finally got to Costco to buy toilet paper and now there is no money left.

“They sent out a new chart estimating sub [supplemental unemployment] pay that starts at a \$26 hourly rate. I laughed. I only make \$18 an hour so I am not even on there! In the earlier chart two weeks ago my sub pay would have been next to nothing anyway, \$11.45 every two weeks in addition to whatever I get for unemployment.

“I can’t live on unemployment, which is much less than weekly pay. If they hadn’t been working us so much overtime, mandatory overtime pretty much every weekend since the strike, I don’t know how I would have made it up to this point. Now they are telling everyone the \$600 unemployment increase from the federal government will be deducted from sub pay.

“I know my situation is dire, but I think the company has failed to prove to me that what I do is essential. When I last was in there, before the walkout and the shutdowns happened, we were already worried. At that time they were not issuing gloves except the kind we usually use, not the protective ones that would prevent the virus from getting to us.

“Here’s how they think. Before the plants were shut down people started to come in wearing their own masks. They were scared. I think they told them they could not wear them and it got around that the company was threatening people with being fired if they wore a mask and saying they didn’t want people seeing the masks and having it cause a panic.

“Everyone was very uneasy at work and couldn’t understand why they were still working. We had several people quarantined, but I have not been able to find out if they actually got sick. I remember thinking at the time that it’s hard to believe we are put in the position of coming to work and contributing to the spread of the deadly virus or face discipline. The next thing you know we are forced to choose by the company calling the work ‘voluntary.’

“I have been helping a lot of people with filing for unemployment, getting their taxes filed so they can get the stimulus check, doing everything I can to get people help who aren’t used to doing this paperwork stuff.”



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