US automakers planning return to work before coronavirus danger subsides

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On Monday, Fiat Chrysler announced it would push back the restart date for its North American production facilities by three weeks, from April 14 to May 4. Ford indicated the same day that it would likely no longer restart in April as currently planned. General Motors has never officially announced a set timetable to reopen its plants, declaring that it would instead evaluate the situation on a weekly basis.

Also, this week, Nissan, Honda and BMW, which operate assembly plants throughout the American southern states, announced they would place workers on unpaid furloughs for the first time since the 2008 financial crisis. While they will continue to receive health insurance, workers will have to apply for unemployment in order to replace their lost income.

Many of the industrial states where the American auto industry is concentrated will likely remain under lockdown orders throughout the month of April. Michigan, the center of the US auto industry, is currently under lockdown through April 13, although this will likely be extended. The Michigan state legislature voted yesterday to extend governor Gretchen Whitmer's emergency powers through April 30. Michigan has the third-highest number of cases in the country, at more than 17,000.

The ultimate decision over when to reopen the plants, however, has been left to the discretion of the auto companies, whose operations are considered "critical national infrastructure" under federal Department of Homeland Security guidelines.

The twin announcements do not come out of an abundance of caution for autoworkers' safety. All three Detroit automakers, with the collaboration of the United Auto Workers, used lies and threats to keep workers on the job until a wave of wildcat strikes and job actions in mid-March forced them to shutter North American production. Rather, the automakers are biding their time, carefully but assiduously planning out a return to work before the pandemic danger subsides.

From the point of view of Wall Street, the potential loss of billions in revenue during a prolonged shutdown is totally unacceptable. Even before the pandemic, the auto companies were under immense pressure from their investors to improve their profit margins, under conditions of declining sales worldwide, through "restructuring," including mass layoffs and plant closures.

While the stock markets have rallied on the basis of the injection of trillions in cash by the world's central banks and governments, this money must ultimately be paid out through the increased exploitation of the working class. Following the Wall Street bailout in 2008, the Obama administration carried out a forced restructuring of the auto industry in 2009, which slashed pay for new hires by half, gutted retiree health benefits and vastly expanded temporary labor.

President Trump is escalating his demands for a return to work as soon possible, repeating the mantra taken up by much of the political establishment and corporate media that the "cure cannot be worse than the disease."

On April 2, the Center for Automotive Research (CAR), a prominent industry think tank, hosted a webinar titled, "Arsenal of Health: How automakers and suppliers are stepping up to support the medical response to the COVID-19 crisis." In spite of the title, the central preoccupation of the assembled industry analysts and executives was restarting production as soon as possible. CAR is holding another webinar this afternoon, more bluntly titled "The Playbook for Restarting Production."

The webinar was held shortly before the official death toll among US autoworkers rose to 17, including 11 Fiat Chrysler workers and 6 Ford workers. General Motors has not announced any death totals, although 26 people have already died in Flint and the surrounding Genesee County, where much of its production is still located.

The challenge, auto parts lobbyist Julie Fream, a former vice president for Visteon, told the webinar's participants, is to balance "employee safety" with the "need of these companies from a financial perspective to get moving." Fream explained that her lobby group, the Original Equipment Suppliers Association, was heavily involved in crafting the language of the massive bailout passed by Congress last month, ensuring in particular that mid-sized auto suppliers received a cut of the $2 trillion on offer.

Fream admitted that the auto industry's conversion of a small fraction of its industrial capacity to producing medical equipment such as ventilators and face shields is primarily a "feel good" measure, both for public consumption, and to test out methods the companies need to convince workers to return

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to work, despite the continued danger. Ford and GM, working with the United Auto Workers union, have recruited a few hundred workers for these projects in Michigan and Indiana.

"When you talk about," Fream said, "making a product for the medical device companies or [personal protective equipment], especially for suppliers it is a relatively small portion of what they do. There is a really feel good factor about this, but there is also a pulling together of the workforce behind this, and the team supporting this. Many suppliers have looked for volunteer workers at this time and done some unique things to manage the cost basis."

"This is a North American issue," CAR president Carla Bailo added. "Returning back to work requires that the US, Canada and Mexico all be in sync. It can't be a hodgepodge because our sourcing and supply chains are so intermingled together."

Fream replied, "In looking at that we have to understand what Mexico is saying about businesses coming back on-line so we can define how the rest of the rest of the North American region comes back on-line. We need to work together so we can have a strong, rapid-as-possible and safe start."

While the US automakers would no doubt like to use Mexican workers as their guinea pigs to restart production throughout the continent, opposition is already spreading among Mexican auto parts workers. Wildcat strikes have broken out among thousands of auto parts workers in the border city of Matamaoros, who have been kept on the job under cover of the government's malleable definition of "essential businesses." As with the massive strike last year by many of the same Matamoros workers, waged both against the companies and the CTM union, this new wave of strikes has been completely blacked out in the English language press, with the exception of the *World Socialist Web Site* .

Much of the rest of the discussion in the webinar centered on social distancing and other measures which the companies could enact, including plexiglass dividers, touchless doors and water fountains. But these are only stopgaps which will, at best, slow but not stop the spread of the virus. By contrast, the city of Wuhan, China's "Motor City" and the initial epicenter of the pandemic, is only now ending its lockdown after 76 days, after the number of new cases across the entire country has dropped to zero.

Before last month's wildcats, the auto executives and the UAW made similar promises about sanitizing plants and protecting workers. In reality, workers were forced to stay on the job in filthy conditions, without even access to masks, gloves, sanitizers or even running water in some cases.

The real measures being planned were spelled out in a 51-page "Safe Work Playbook," published by the parts supplier Lear and intended as advice for the entire industry. Pages 12 and 13 argue that masks are unnecessary for all but a "very limited number" of personnel and advises against using gloves at all. "The COVID-19 virus does not harm your hands," the document stupidly declares, and people who wear gloves "are less inclined to wash their hands." Proper removal of gloves would also require training, according to the document, which the company does not want to provide.

The UAW is working overtime to reassure workers that the companies are taking workers' safety seriously. In a recent notice sent to workers at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, one of the plants where autoworkers downed their tools last month, UAW Local 7 president Gary Hill acknowledged three confirmed COVID-19 cases among plant workers. The letter then praised the guidelines being prepared by FCA and declared that the plant had been thoroughly cleaned.

Among autoworkers, there is widespread opposition to a premature return to work and the sacrifice of workers' lives to build unessential vehicles and boost the profits of the corporations. To protect their own safety and to prevent the spread of the virus in their communities, autoworkers should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the corrupt UAW, to organize workers to prevent any premature return to work.

At the same time, autoworkers should fight for an end to all inessential production and the conversion of the auto and other industries into production for life-saving equipment and protective gear for health care workers. Rank-and-file committees must oversee safety conditions in these plants in conjunction with health care professionals.

The safety of workers is incompatible with the relentless drive for corporate profit. That is why the movement to protect workers lives, which is spreading throughout every industry and across countries, must be guided by a socialist perspective, including the transformation of the auto industry into a public utility, collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

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