

“It can’t be a choice between dying at work or being homeless”

Workers oppose rush back to work as death toll rises among grocery, transit and autoworkers

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Strikes and other job actions are continuing as workers demand the closure of non-essential workplaces and protection against the coronavirus pandemic. The number of COVID-19 cases worldwide has surpassed 1.5 million, with nearly 90,000 deaths as of this writing.

In the US, the daily death toll hit a new record for the second day in a row. Total deaths have neared 15,000. The staggering loss of life includes an increasing numbers of grocery store, warehouse, delivery, public transit and health care workers, along with teachers and school employees. In New York City alone, 41 transit workers and at least 25 teachers and other Department of Education employees have died from COVID-19, while 500 firefighters have tested positive.

Although there were more than 30,000 new cases on Wednesday, bringing the US total to well over 430,000, President Trump, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and the news media are pushing the narrative that “the curve is flattening” and the worst will soon be over. This is part of a new push for an “orderly” return to work, regardless of the threat to workers and their families.

On Wednesday, Trump tweeted, “Once we OPEN UP OUR GREAT COUNTRY, and it will be sooner rather than later...Our Economy will BOOM, perhaps like never before!!!”

Supermarket and delivery workers have joined the ranks of frontline and essential workers protesting unsafe conditions and the lack of protective gear. At least four grocery store workers have died in recent days, including a Trader Joe’s worker in Scarsdale,

New York; Leilani Jordan, a 27-year-old greeter at Giant’s Campus Way South store in Largo, Maryland, and two Walmart workers—Phillip Thomas, 48, and Wando Evans, 51—at the same Chicago-area store.

On Tuesday, grocery store workers in Boston from a number of chains, including Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s and Stop & Shop, demonstrated. After nine Barnes & Noble workers at a Monroe, New Jersey warehouse tested positive, workers staged a protest Tuesday to demand the closure of the warehouse for two weeks, paid time off, and full disinfection of the facility.

“We’re putting our life on the line for \$10 an hour,” one Dollar General worker told NBC News. “Essential really means we’re exhausted and dispensable.”

Although a supervisor from UPS’s giant Worldport facility in Louisville, Kentucky died Saturday, the giant package delivery company and the Teamsters union are keeping more than 1,000 workers on the job. There is growing sentiment among UPS workers to take matters into their own hands. Three workers at the Chelmsford UPS warehouse near Lowell, Massachusetts tested positive, and at least two UPS workers died in the Chicago area.

Last month, Fiat Chrysler workers conducted a wave of wildcat strikes and other job actions after management, the United Auto Workers and the Unifor union in Canada resisted workers’ demands to close the plants.

“When we walked out of the auto plants it was a clear sign that we can take charge over what is going on,” Ryan, a young second-tier worker from the Sterling

Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“This was a great, I’d say, revolutionary movement but it was tarnished by the claims of management and the UAW that they decided to close the plants for our safety. This was a movement against the union. They were keeping the plants open and we said, ‘No, we don’t want to get sick and die, let’s get the people out of there.’”

“We have to have the right to withdraw our labor until we have safe conditions. They can’t just cast us aside like our lives aren’t worth anything. Before we walked out, some people were working sick because they didn’t have any sick time and were just trying to make a living. It can’t be a choice between dying at work or being homeless.”

Detroit has become one of the epicenters of the pandemic. The state of Michigan ranks third in the country behind New York and New Jersey, with 959 deaths. In addition to the conditions of poverty in the city, which has been ravaged by decades of plant closings, a contributing factor to the spread is the fact that workers were kept on the job while the contagion was spreading.

The death toll has risen to 18 autoworkers. With the backing of the UAW, the automakers are now pushing for a restart of production in early May. The efforts to continue parts operations in Mexico to feed plants in the US and Canada, however, have encountered opposition from maquiladora workers in the border city of Matamoros, who have launched a wave of wildcat strikes .

While Honda announced that it was extending the shutdown of its US and Canadian plants through May 1, Toyota announced that it would resume production on April 20, Hyundai will restart its Alabama plant on Friday, and Volkswagen will resume production in Chattanooga, Tennessee on Sunday.

A worker at the Ft. Wayne, Indiana General Motors plant told the WSWs, “I do not want to suddenly risk getting sick or getting my family sick. I’m a single mother for my teenage son and couldn’t imagine what to do if either of us were to get sick. Returning to GM could be a death sentence to anyone in my orbit.

“There are over 4,500 employees at my plant and most of us touch the same truck that goes by. It’s impossible to stay away from the virus working

shoulder to shoulder with people from all over Indiana and Ohio. It’s impossible to disinfect every single truck that goes by every 53 seconds. I know more time off would mean working 7 days a week the rest of the year, but my family’s health is more important than [GM CEO Mary Barra] making \$6 million a year.”

The corporations, with the full assistance of the UAW, are seeking to exploit the economic distress of workers to force them back into the plants. At GM’s CCA (Customer Care and Aftersales) parts warehouse in Flint, Michigan, the UAW has recruited a “voluntary” workforce by “dangling health insurance over our heads,” as one worker told the WSWs. There have now been four confirmed COVID-19 cases at the facility, including one second-shift worker who has been absent since March 28.

The pandemic and the response of the ruling class is radically changing the outlook of workers. “Building cars right now is not essential work,” Ryan, the Sterling Heights Assembly worker said. “We should be building ventilators and lifesaving equipment. Every day I see the infection and death numbers rising, and I want to know what we are doing to save lives.

“This is a 100 percent capitalist system. The people in power want to defend their interests and oppose anything that would really help us. People are dying and the news cameras are focusing on the stock markets going up.

“Workers are not just going to give up. It is inevitable that this movement is going to spread to all workers. The workers at Amazon, Starbucks, in the supermarkets and hospitals, everybody in the working class should come together to combat the corporations and the government,” Ryan said, “so we can be the masters of society, and over our own lives.”



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