

Auto companies plot out plan to restart production in North America despite coronavirus pandemic

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While tens of thousands of new COVID-19 cases continue to be confirmed in the US each day, Italian-American automaker Fiat Chrysler (FCA) announced Monday that it intends to restart US and Canadian production beginning May 4. Honda, Toyota, BMW, Volvo, Hyundai and Tesla have all indicated plans to restart US production in the first week of May as well.

Ford and General Motors (GM), the other two major US automakers, have not publicly announced restart dates, but signs point toward a similar timeframe, with their suppliers getting ready to begin production in the next two weeks.

Bridgestone, which manufactures tires, has announced plans to begin production on April 13, and Lear, which manufactures seats and electrical systems, has published a so-called “Safe Work Playbook” signaling that it plans to return to production soon.

The corporate drive to get workers back into the plants takes place even as deaths among autoworkers continue to mount. The *Detroit Free Press* has reported 19 deaths due to COVID-19 in the Detroit Three US auto plants since March 22. A worker at FCA’s Chelsea Proving Grounds in Michigan was the latest confirmed death, dying Thursday morning. Twelve workers have died at FCA and seven at Ford, while no deaths have been reported among GM workers yet. In addition, at least one autoworker at a non-Detroit Three auto plant has died, at Hyundai’s Montgomery, Alabama factory.

Had it not been for workers taking matters into their own hands to shut down production at several auto plants in the US last month, the death toll would undoubtedly be higher. In defiance of the wishes of management and the United Auto Workers union (UAW), workers at FCA plants in Ontario, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana carried out a series of wildcat strikes and job actions, walking out or

downing tools in protest of the conditions that put them and their families at risk of contracting the virus.

The auto corporations’ efforts to restart plants and renew the flow of profits at the earliest opportunity are in line with the aims of the Trump administration and substantial sections of the ruling class to reopen the US economy, in defiance of the World Health Organization’s warning against prematurely ending social distancing.

An autoworker at General Motors Fort Wayne Assembly Plant in Indiana spoke out against the corporations’ push for a return to work under conditions of an escalating pandemic, telling the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “What’s the sense of going back if it’s inevitable that people WILL get sick? This just makes me sick because I know a lot of people that live with their elderly parents and have newborns and young children that they go home to as well. I will not return to work on April 14th. Returning to GM could be a death sentence to anyone in my orbit.”

Both the auto corporations and their lackeys in the trade unions are demanding that workers risk their lives to go back to work in the factories in order to satisfy the profit interests of the capitalist class, falsely promising that they will enact adequate safety precautions.

In a statement on Wednesday, UAW President Rory Gamble said that the union was in “deep discussions with all three companies to plan ahead over the implementation of CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] safety standards and using all available technologies to protect all UAW members, their families and the public.”

Cindy Estrada, vice president of UAW-FCA, wrote in a letter to members on April 7, “We will be having discussions with FCA Leadership to ensure processes and safeguards are in place prior to members reentering our facilities. Whether the startup is May 4th or a later date, I

want to ensure you that our top priority is the health and well-being of all who work and enter the workplace.”

The corporate-union partnership in devising a plan to force workers back to work is not limited to the US. FCA aims to restart its operations in Italy as soon as April 13, when Italy’s national lockdown is proposed to begin easing up, and announced yesterday an agreement with the Italian auto unions over the framework in which it will take place.

Raffaele Apetino, a representative of the Italian union FIM, told Reuters in remarks indistinguishable from that of a company spokesman’s, “We want be ready to restart most profitable production just after Easter, if the government allows it.”

He added that “FCA has showed great willingness to accept our proposals,” which includes a plan to put employees back to work in crowded factories while “testing workers’ temperatures, providing safety devices such as face masks, and sanitizing premises during work hours” and “moving meals to the end of shifts.”

GM, for its part, has stated that it is studying the coronavirus response at Amazon, where workers are routinely denied masks and are not guaranteed safe social distancing on the job, resulting in a spreading wave of walkouts and protests by workers at the company.

The auto industry plan for restarting production was outlined April 8 in a webinar hosted by the industry think-tank Center for Automotive Research titled “The Playbook for Restarting Production.” The presentation featured two representatives of Magna, a major US auto supplier and Division 1 global parts manufacturer with operations in 27 countries, including many in China.

Jim Tobin, executive vice president of Magna International and president of Magna Asia, described how a “playbook” for restarting the global auto parts industry is being drawn up based in part on the company’s experience in restarting production in China. He repeated the ruling class’ determination throughout the call that “we got to get the industry, the country back working again.” Tobin also stressed the need to ready supply chains and begin a staggered “ramp up” of auto parts production in the coming weeks, in order to prepare for carmakers to reopen in the beginning of May.

Aaron McCarthy, executive vice president and chief human resources officer for Magna International, made clear that safety measures would not be guaranteed to workers returning to work at auto plants. One plan suggests that automakers phase in the number of workers in a plant at one time, relying solely on social distancing

measures and plexiglass barriers, with no guarantee of PPE.

In a blatant disregard for workers’ safety, McCarthy said that the wearing of “masks should be a last resort” and that only “people in harm’s way” will get N95 masks “if it comes to that...we don’t need to take supply from doctors and nurses,” having the gall to add that “personal hygiene, personal accountability” was one of the “best options to stop the spread.”

The *Autoworker Newsletter* also spoke with a legacy worker at a General Motors plant in Kokomo, Indiana, who raised concerns about being sent back to work under unsafe conditions and criticized the complacency of the United Auto Workers.

“When the plant closed about two weeks ago, we got a text message an hour before our shift telling us not to report. Around three hours into our shift, we saw the message and we started talking among ourselves, saying that we are here for nothing and we should go home. The union steward did not tell us that we did not need to be there; someone had to go ask him about it.

“About three days before the plant closed, the Big Three companies announced that they would begin rotating shifts to sanitize the plants. We saw the cleaning being done, but they were cleaning in the floors and under the conveyors, which was good for the equipment but it’s not a place where we touch with our hands.

He spoke to the conditions in the plant itself, which aided the spread of the virus. “I really wasn’t comfortable being there. The restrooms are crowded and as filthy as ever. You are lucky if you get a stall when you walk in and usually there is a line. There was no social distancing whatsoever.

“I believe our plant would not have closed if it weren’t for the brave workers in Michigan who walked out. When the companies finally announced they were closing plants, it was not because they had our best interest at heart, but because they were forced to. I read that the UAW even tried to stop the workers in Michigan from walking out! It really tells you something, that they don’t represent us.”



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