

# “This is forced labor”: Six GM workers stricken with COVID-19 at parts warehouse

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The number of positive COVID-19 cases has reached six at the General Motors CCA (Customer Care and Aftersales) parts warehouse in the Flint, Michigan suburb of Burton.

GM reopened the facility after a brief shutdown on March 23, with a “voluntary” workforce. Currently, there are approximately 200 workers between both shifts. Prior to the pandemic, 1,200 workers worked at the plant on 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, work schedules. The Burton facility opened in August 2019; the 1.1 million-square-foot facility is triple the size of the warehouse that it replaced.

GM management made the announcement Thursday at the morning’s “huddle-up.” Of the two most recent cases, one of the employees worked in the facility until April 8. This means that one worker was possibly spreading the contagious virus for more than a week. The day before, a fourth case was announced.

A CCA worker told the WSWWS that temporary workers make up a substantial part of those who have returned to the plant. “This is not voluntary. It’s forced labor,” the worker said. “The company and the union are dangling the loss of health insurance over the heads of the temps forcing them to choose between losing medical insurance, income, or life.” In addition, unless temps “voluntarily” return to work, they lose their accumulated consecutive days necessary for being converted to full-time.

UAW 651 official Anthony Cheatham posted an update on Facebook after the fourth case was announced. Promoting GM’s claim that the return to work is voluntary, he said, “I am continually fighting the company on us being open during this time. Sadly if this company remains open I will make sure the members continue to have a choice to be here.”

A seniority worker told the WSWWS, “It’s really

scary. I’m 35 years old and I’ve never seen anything of such a magnitude. There was the swine flu, H1N1, but the coronavirus has shaken the whole world. What played into my decision to return to work was my worry about how many people would be unemployed and I thought I might be able to side-step the severity of it. I watch my fellow co-workers and it’s hellish, it’s a nightmare. My biggest worry is not me getting it, but bringing it home to my kids, my family.

“As far as General Motors goes, their bottom line is money. Their number one priority is to make money. So they say we are essential workers because the vehicle parts we supply may be needed by health care or other essential workers to get to their jobs, or maybe for ambulances or firetrucks. So I guess we’re essential, but what’s really ‘essential’ to GM is money. I listened to Gretchen Whitmer’s news conference today about how health care workers don’t have sufficient PPEs [personal protective equipment]. To me, this is heart-wrenching. Who’s essential?

“We were on strike for 40 days [last fall]—we only got \$250 strike pay from the union. That in itself taught me a few things, one of which is that I can’t depend on the union. Both the temps and the seniority workers got screwed. GM now has 3–4 tiers, there should be just one. They try to pit us against each other, but we all got screwed.

“I try to stay out of politics. I don’t like the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. I see how Wall Street is getting lots of money, but there’s not much for the workers. I guess you could say I’m open to something else that would be for the working class.”

A temporary worker who returned to work described the situation to the WSWWS: “It’s extortion. It’s not really voluntary. There is so much wrong about what is happening, it’s hard to know where to start. The union

says, ‘GM gave us the choice to work,’ but really the contract with the so-called ‘gains’—and we’ve never seen the printed book—is why we are being forced to work.

“As a temp, I will lose my health insurance if I don’t go in and work for a week. I will also lose the buildup of my consecutive 30 days in order to be hired full-time. So I have to expose myself and my family to coronavirus in order to have medical coverage and a job! The union is selling us out. They’re letting GM do this to us and push the distortion that this is a voluntary choice.

“My family and my wife’s family grew up in Flint. We are a family of autoworkers. It’s like our heritage, but all I see from the union is a lack of representation, a lack of interest and knowledge. They want to keep us in the dark, like they did during the strike. GM declared this facility to be ‘essential’ and the union accepts that. You tell me what is essential about mirrors for the Cadillac Escalade? Or what about emblems or brake pads for the Corvettes? They try to tell us that the parts we re-package are for municipalities’ emergency vehicles. If this place were really for essential production, then why wouldn’t everyone be working? And why aren’t we being supplied with full protection?

“Every morning we have our ‘huddle-up’ with a supervisor who always begins with, ‘Your health and safety is our primary concern.’ These meetings are held without regard for social distancing, we’re told we cannot bring in our own cleaning solutions and are given wipes and spray bottles. There are no paper towels, because ‘they’re on order.’ I know for a fact that the bathrooms on the second shift are cleaned at 2:30 p.m. and 11:30 p.m., instead of every two hours. We have three computers to print labels which are used by everyone, and not properly cleaned. Our break rooms are small and there is virtually no social distancing.

“When the pandemic was at its height in China, we were receiving parts from that area of the outbreak. The ship date showed the items arrived at our plant in four days. GM told us, ‘Don’t worry, the virus doesn’t live on surfaces that long.’ All the parts that we repackage are generated by workers all over the world, but the union and the company try to divide us when we all face the same things. They just want us to work and don’t care about any of our lives.

“The anxiety I have now is not like anything in my whole life. I heard about two athletes, a 19-year-old and a 20-year-old, both from Flint, who passed away from COVID-19. I’m not in the same shape as those athletes; I’m older and could lose a few pounds. I feel like I’m close to being hired, but do I quit or what?”



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