"Trump is more interested in getting the economy going than he is in our lives"

US autoworkers oppose rush to reopen plants

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Autoworkers in the United States are voicing their concern and anger over plans to restart the auto industry despite warnings by public health experts that congregating thousands of workers in factories will accelerate the spread of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Even as the death toll has reached 190,000 around the world and nears 50,000 in the US, automakers are reopening plants in Asia, Europe and North America.

"It is ridiculous to try to force us back to work," an FCA worker at the Toledo, Ohio Jeep plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The pandemic is far from over. If we go back, the wave will only increase. There is no way we can be kept safe in an assembly plant working on the line. You cannot build Jeeps standing six feet apart."

The North American auto industry was closed in mid-March after a wave of wildcat strikes and other job actions in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana, along with Ontario, Canada, over the refusal of the automakers and the United Auto Workers union to shut the plants, despite workers falling ill. The delay has cost the lives of at least two dozen Fiat Chrysler and Ford workers.

Auto executives met with Trump last week and are rolling out plans to open up assembly plants as early as the beginning of May. Governors in the Midwestern industrial states, including Michigan Democrat Gretchen Whitmer, have sought to present themselves as more cautious but have made it clear they will ease lockdown measures to accommodate the needs of the corporations.

"We are going to have to look at the process of reengaging sectors of our economy," Whitmer declared earlier this week. Although she is reportedly considering an extension of her stay-at-home order until mid-May, she said it would largely be up to businesses "to enhance your protocols, whether it's the cleaning of your workspaces or the wearing of cloth masks that you can procure now."

As of this writing, Michigan has 35,291 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 1,325 new cases recorded on Thursday, the highest number since April 14 and the third day in a row that cases have risen again. The three counties that make up metro Detroit—Wayne, Oakland and Macomb—which are also the center of state's auto industry, account for 75 percent of the cases and 82.5 percent of Michigan's nearly 3,000 deaths.

The UAW set up a joint Auto Coronavirus Task Force with GM, Ford and FCA to provide a cover to the corporations as they seek to reopen the plants and sacrifice workers in pursuit of their profits. "We are happy with the auto companies' response and cooperation on working through the health and safety protocols we will need in the workplace when it is appropriate to restart," UAW President Rory Gamble said Thursday evening.

Well aware that the reckless rush back to work would provoke a wave of opposition, including against the UAW, Gamble said, "We strongly suggest to our companies in all sectors that an early May date is too soon and too risky to our members, their families and their communities," and backed Whitmer's talk about an extension of the lockdown.

Local union officials, however, have already sent out messages looking for "volunteers" to come to work as early as next week to prepare for the reopening of factories.

"I got a robocall last week, which said that the plant would be open for work on Monday, April 27, basically inviting me to come back to work," a worker from Dearborn Stamping Plant, where fellow worker Gregory Boyd died from COVID-19, told the WSWS. "A lot of guys in the shop, I would say the majority, have preexisting medical conditions: diabetes, heart failure, obesity. After you put in your time in an auto factory, you've got medical problems. The company doesn't care whether you live or die. They just want to start production."

A young autoworker at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant added, "We shouldn't go back until we have this coronavirus under control. We need 100 percent testing and we don't have it. My auntie went to Sinai Grace Hospital for treatment of her preexisting conditions; and while she was there, she tested positive and died. She was 75.

"We have to know what is going on. I have been checking the internet, and you are the only people who have given me real facts that I can work with," he said, referring to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We need that. The media is telling us what the companies want us to hear."

The worker from Toledo Jeep denounced the UAW's attempts to pose as defenders of workers' health and safety. "What really angers me is how the union tried to take credit for the shutdown in March. They claimed they did it. No! Workers protested and walked out. Everyone saw the video where the union official is telling workers to 'calm down.' We're paying union dues to people who coddle the company. They know exactly what is going

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on in the plant and they do nothing. Our union dues are being used to pay the legal fees for our bribed and indicted officials. They won't even fight a grievance, so how can we depend on them to fight for our lives?

"If hospitals can't get PPEs they need, how will autoworkers get it?" they continued. "Many of my coworkers have asthma, diabetes, and other underlying health conditions. There is no way we are going to be safe in there. We have 6,000 workers in two shifts, plus truck drivers, plus parts people. How in the world will we be safe in that environment? Before the pandemic, the company always keeps the line moving when workers are injured or drop dead. So, what will it be like with lots of sick people?

"The company sees us as expendable. They would like us to quit or die so instead of paying me $29 an hour they can pay someone else $15 an hour. We produce 500 Jeeps every shift, so the less we get paid the more the profit is for the company. Some choice we're being given—either you go to work and possibly die, or you lose your job."

GM's attitude to the safety of workers has been demonstrated by its decision to keep open its Customer Care and Aftersales warehouse near Flint, Michigan, despite the infection of at least six workers, and by its firing last month of a local union shop chairman, Travis Watkins, at the GMHC axle plant in Wyoming, Michigan. Watkins was terminated, with the complicity of the UAW, for posting warnings about the spread of the disease in the plant on a private Facebook page for workers after at least 10 workers were "walked out in medical carts and facemasks."

"To go back to work now would mean keeping the coronavirus pandemic going," a GM worker from the Flint Assembly Plant told the WSWS. "It has not leveled off, very few people have been tested, there's no contact tracing. Trump is more interested in getting the economy going than he is in our lives. He's a murderer and pushing drugs that haven't been properly tested.

"The situation in the nursing homes is unbearable to see. Dead corpses piled up in closets! You can't just flip a switch and tell people to come back to work. The government is incompetent, and [Democratic presidential candidate Joe] Biden is scary. As for the union, it doesn't tell us what is going on. They're totally in the pockets of GM."

In order to ramp up production in the US and Canada, the automakers must first get their supplier plants going, including in Mexico. Last week, hundreds of workers walked out of the Lear Automotive factories in Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, after management and the CTM union concealed the deaths of workers. At least sixteen Lear workers have died at two facilities in the city.

Mónica Rosales, whose father Raul Rosales died earlier this week, told the WSWS: "My father began having symptoms on March 28. On April 5, he entered a private hospital because he was able to pay the higher medical costs. He told us he had contact with a person who looked sick at work, that they checked that person but didn't send him home. They didn't close the plants even when Lear closed in the US. It's irresponsible that they kept it open and exposed their employees."

Workers at other maquiladora sweatshops in Matamoros, across from Brownsville, Texas, also struck, forcing the closure of their plants. "Even though there is fear of retaliation and there is deprivation at home," one Matamoros worker told the WSWS, "what matters is our health and the security of our families." Referring to the deaths in Ciudad Juárez, she added, "We are the most unprotected class; it's as if we were disposable for the employers."

The UAW and the Democratic and Republican Parties will do nothing to encroach on the profit interests and economic stranglehold of the corporations and Wall Street. Instead they plan to use the increasing economic disaster—with more than 26 million filing for jobless claims over the last five weeks—to stampede workers back to work.

Workers must reject the false choice of dying on the job or starving. To fight for their rights to health, a safe workplace *and* economic security, workers should form rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW.

With the companies, UAW and political establishment accelerating their efforts to restart business with criminal recklessness, the formation of these factory committees is an urgent task. Such committees must oppose the reopening of nonessential production, and instead demand a massive expansion of free and universal testing and full income protection for those affected by shutdowns, along with the oversight of any return-to-work plans by workers' committees in consultation with medical experts.

In opposition to the nationalism of the UAW, these committees should unite with workers in Mexico and Canada and organize cross-border struggles.

GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler have made record profits since the 2009 restructuring based on slashing the jobs and wages of workers, and have squandered billions on stock buybacks, dividend payments and executive pay. Instead of workers paying for the crisis, they must instead assert their own class interests, fighting to transform the corporations and banks into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically run by workers, based on production for human need, not private profit.

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