

“We don’t want to be the guinea pigs”

Strikes, job actions escalate as corporations rush to reopen amidst coronavirus pandemic

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28 April 2020

“A dollar isn’t worth my life,” Chetara Alexander, a young worker at the American Apparel factory in Selma, Alabama said as she and other workers walked out of the plant last Thursday after learning that several coworkers had contracted COVID-19. “They don’t care about us. They just want us to work,” Alexander declared in a live-streamed video as she and other workers protested outside the factory, which makes masks for the US Army.

The low-paid garment workers in Selma, the site of the famous 1965 civil rights battle, rebelled against management’s effort to conceal the spread of the infection and force workers to remain on the job with promises of bonuses of up to a \$1,000 if they maintained a perfect attendance record.

“I haven’t gotten my stimulus check, and this is really the only way I’m living,” Alexander said in the video. “But I got two children, and they don’t have anybody but me,” she said, vowing not to bring the infection home from work.

Last week, management admitted that one worker had tested positive, but insisted there was no danger to the rest of the workforce because the infected employee had allegedly not been in the plant for 12 days. When workers arrived for the morning shift the next day, however, they learned that at least five workers had been infected.

“One of those workers is in critical condition, and she is fighting for her life,” Alexander said. “The company didn’t even say anything about her, but the family reached out and told us.” As workers streamed out of the factory, she said, management passed out a leaflet promising to disinfect the entire plant. “You can’t disinfect because that material that we sew on, this stuff goes from person to person, it is going to everybody. It only takes one person to infect everybody. No job is worth our lives.”

She continued: “The CEO came here and said, ‘If we don’t like the rules, there’s the door.’ So today, we took the damn door. The virus is real, but we had to show them how real we are too.”

On Monday, the number of cases around the world surpassed the three million mark, with 211,202 deaths internationally as of this writing, and more than one million cases and nearly 57,000 deaths in the US alone.

In his briefing Monday, Trump reasserted his call for the reopening of the economy, going so far as to say it would be a “good thing” for millions of students to return to school, because “young children have done very well in this disaster.” Scientists have warned that such a reckless return to work, under conditions where there is and will be no universal testing available, will lead to tens of thousands, if not more, unnecessary deaths.

The Selma walkout is part of the continuing wave of strikes and job actions, from bus drivers in Dublin, Ireland and auto parts workers in Mexico to Amazon, hospital and nursing home workers in the US. Everywhere workers are demanding the closure of nonessential industries and protection from the virus if they are providing critical services.

On Monday, 10,000 nursing home workers at 40 Illinois facilities, mostly in the Chicago area, voted to authorize a May 8 strike. Workers are demanding protective equipment, safety protocols, hazard pay, base pay, paid time off for COVID-related illness, increased staffing, health insurance and transparency about COVID-19 cases in the nursing homes, where 35 percent of Illinois’ nearly 2,000 deaths have occurred.

This follows last Friday’s strike vote by 130 nursing home workers at St. Monica Center for Rehabilitation & Healthcare, a 180-bed facility in South Philadelphia. At least 19 residents have died from the disease, and 20

workers have tested positive. Nursing assistants, housekeepers, dietary aides, activity aides and other workers could walk out as early as May 4.

Following walkouts in New York City, Chicago and Detroit, a group of Amazon workers in Shakopee, Minnesota, near Minneapolis, walked off the job Sunday to oppose the firing of a worker who had stayed home to protect her children from the virus. The company reportedly backed down and agreed to rehire the worker this week. At least one Amazon worker has died as the infection spread throughout the company's 110 facilities.

Resistance is also growing to the efforts of the auto industry to restart production in North America over the next several weeks. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Monday that General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler are targeting May 18 to resume some production, after talks with leaders of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

The automakers, working with the UAW, have already brought in "volunteers" to prepare plants for production. German and Asian-owned automakers are restarting their southern US and Mexican operations as early as this week. However, the supply chain for the North American auto industry has been disrupted by strikes by auto parts workers in Mexico and the US.

"For one fleeting moment last week, it looked as if the North American auto industry was about to come back to life," the industry publication *Automotive News* reported, adding regretfully, "It did not."

"Tesla, eager to recapture its recent sales momentum, attempted to restart its US supply chain of Midwestern parts makers, including a Faurecia injection molding plant in Saline, Mich., 50 miles from Detroit," the publication said. But Faurecia's factory workers "balked at being called back, saying it appeared to some of them that they were being pressed into action despite unanswered questions about their safety from the coronavirus upon returning to plants."

"None of us wants to go back because we think that it's not safe yet. We don't want to be the guinea pigs," a Faurecia employee who asked to remain anonymous told *Automotive News*.

Strikes have also spread across the maquiladora factories in the northern Mexican cities of Ciudad Juarez, Matamoros, Reynosa, Mexicali and other border towns after the deaths of at least 13 workers at plants owned by Michigan-based Lear Corporation.

In mid-March, FCA workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Ontario launched a series of wildcat strikes

and job actions, independently of the UAW and the Unifor union in Canada, which forced the closure of the auto industry.

"Until we did this nothing was happening," a young worker at FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit told the WSWS. "It was the workers who got this thing going. On the news and in the e-mails, they made it seem like the company was doing something for us. When we finally walked out it was all of us that were walking out.

"The biggest reason they are pushing for people to go back is because they want to be making money."

After the deaths of at least 24 FCA and Ford workers, the UAW is now trying to convince workers it is safe to return based on a few cosmetic "social distancing" measures in entryways and breakrooms. But the auto giants intend to use the crisis to slash thousands of jobs and impose new UAW-backed concessions to gain a competitive advantage in the struggle to dominate the new electric and self-driving vehicle markets.

The UAW and the other unions have done nothing to ensure the safety of workers. They are working closely with the corporations in an effort to get workers back on the job.

In every workplace, rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corrupt unions, must be formed. These committees must demand no return to work in nonessential industries and a massive expansion of protective equipment and safety measures for essential workers.

At the same time, they must demand full income security and debt relief for those who are unemployed or furloughed, workers' control over health and safety, in consultation with medical experts, and free and universal testing and medical treatment for all.

Instead of another bailout to the giant corporations and banks, which squandered trillions on stock buybacks, dividend payments and executive pay since the last bailout in 2008-09, these corporations should be transformed into public enterprises under the control of workers, with no compensation to their super-rich shareholders.



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