

“They are willing to kill us for their profits”

US autoworkers oppose early return to factories

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The Detroit Big Three automakers have now set May 18 as the restart date for their North American operations even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues unabated. Michigan, the center of auto production in the US, is among the states hardest hit by the virus, with about 1,000 new cases being reported daily and over 100 daily deaths.

Japanese-based Toyota is now planning to restart North American operations on May 11 as is Honda. Nissan and German-based Volkswagen have not set firm restart dates but will likely follow the lead of the other major automakers.

The drive to restart production is not based on medical science, but naked concern over profits and stock valuation. Investors are clamoring to get assembly lines moving again in order to pump out profits off the backs of workers.

More than two dozen workers at the Big Three have been confirmed dead from COVID-19, including 15 from Fiat Chrysler, whose operations are centered in Detroit, which has been hard hit by the virus.

In preparation for reopening US factories the US government has launched a campaign to also reopen auto parts plants in Mexico that supply critical components for North American assembly operations. Many plants have been closed due to wildcat strikes as workers face a mounting death toll from the virus.

In connection with this, three hundred US CEOs have sent a letter to Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador saying they were “deeply concerned” over the closure of Mexican factories.

These actions are in sharp contrast to the mood among workers, who are making it clear that their first concern is the health and well-being of themselves, their families and coworkers, not management’s bottom line. In conversations with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* workers expressed their opposition to a premature return to work.

Brandon, a young Detroit area auto parts worker, said, “I work for a supplier for Honda and other companies. Before

the shutdowns, there were no cleaning supplies, wipes or even hot water in the plant and the lunchrooms were filthy. You can’t stay six feet apart. Sometimes there are three or four people working in a cage at a workstation.

“These plants are death traps. To send us back into the plants is criminally negligent, even homicidal. We need rank-and-file safety committees because the unions are wholly owned subsidiaries of the companies, which only look out for the union executives.”

While mouthing pious declarations over their concern for workers health and safety, the auto companies have proposed only cosmetic gestures that will do nothing of substance to protect workers forced back into the factories. The United Auto Workers (UAW) has made it clear that it endorses this charade and will not oppose an early restart of production.

This was demonstrated by the recent statement of UAW Local 12 President Bruce Baumhower at the Fiat Chrysler Toledo North assembly complex who said, “We still have some work to do but as I’ve said many times, we’ll start tomorrow. It’s not that we don’t want to go back. Our members want to go back but they want to make sure they feel safe.”

Autoworkers disputed the notion that social distancing could be maintained in the crowded environment of an auto plant.

Richard, a worker at the FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit, said, “We should stay out. It’s not possible to do our job in a factory and stay six feet apart, with the timeframe we have to push out cars. The whole production system would have to be completely changed for safe distancing and we would have to have testing and PPE [personal protective equipment].

“At Warren Truck, they’ve set up an entry line and a tent, which will probably be used to take temperatures. But those are only small, cosmetic steps. You can be carrying the virus without having a temperature.

“The only way to prevent the spread is to be in the safety of your own home. We should not go back until the plants are 100 percent sterile and we have a safe environment.”

A recent interview published in the *New York Times* with Ford officials made it clear the auto companies do not plan to enforce even the most basic safety provisions, including mass COVID-19 testing or the use of regulation N95 face masks.

According to the *Times*, “Ford’s human resources chief Kiersten Robinson said the automaker will not have a ‘reliable and scalable testing solution’ for COVID-19 for several weeks if not months and the company was forming a task force to see how it can move faster to achieve that.”

Gary Johnson, head of Ford manufacturing, told the *Times*, “the company was not planning to provide workers with N95 respiratory masks, which are designed to filter 95 percent of airborne particles, as the regular face masks and shields were good enough. Slowing the speed of production lines in plants would be too complex, he added. Some union leaders have suggested lines could be slowed to allow for greater physical separation between workers.”

In comments to *Automotive News*, Mark Fields, former Ford CEO, noted the contradiction between the demand by workers for a safe environment and the “practicalities” of intense production. “We have to convince people that it is safe to come back to work. Industry has to implement widespread testing to do that.

“What I mean is temperature testing when you come into the plants. I think COVID testing is very impractical, if you test every employee. Because if that is the case, shift change would take, instead of 15 minutes, probably five hours. But there is going to have to be some level of testing protocol.”

Marty, a young worker at Ford’s Dearborn Assembly Plant, said, “The companies look at this like the percentages of business they have lost, not the human lives being lost. They are boosting illusions that temperature checks and plexiglass on lunchroom tables will protect us. But there is still no universal testing, which is the only way to know who has it and prevent it from spreading.

“They’ve got \$6 trillion to pump into Wall Street, while people are lining up for miles at food banks and meatpacking workers have no masks and are being told pull their hairnets down over their faces. They call the nurses and doctors ‘heroes’ but don’t give them PPE. Then they want to reopen the economy so the hospitals will be overwhelmed again, forcing health care workers to decide who is going to get a ventilator and who is going to die.”

Workers also stressed the need to develop structures independent from the UAW and management to take measures which will protect their health during the pandemic.

Anita, a Detroit area FCA Mopar parts worker, said, “They’re already taking ‘volunteers’ to work in the parts plant. But I believe in the health and safety of my family. Ever since they implemented the World Class Manufacturing plan the union and management have joint health and safety committees. If you complain to the union rep about something dangerous, they’ll tell you, ‘I have to check with my management counter-part.’ Both management and the union are working together against us.”

Marty, the Ford worker, added, “It’s the beginning of the month and people are being forced to make choices about paying rent or paying for other necessities. The priorities of the capitalists are against ours. They are willing to kill us for their profits. Workers have to connect up in different industries and around the world to fight this.

“At the Jeep plant in Toledo, the Fiat Chrysler workers confronted the UAW official who was telling them to get back to their workstations. But they decided not to touch any of the vehicles coming down the assembly line. If the workers hadn’t shut down the industry, the death toll could have been even worse. But they stepped up, sacrificed and united, showing our strength.

“Our needs are different from the union and the companies. That’s why we need rank-and-file safety committees to take up the fight for our needs. Workers have to fight for power so we can restructure society for our needs.”



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