

Global automakers press ahead with reopening in midst of coronavirus pandemic

Marcus Day
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The global automakers are moving ahead this week with either restarting production or finalizing plans to reopen operations, even as the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread. At the same time, the blatant disregard for workers' health and safety by capitalist governments, the corporations and their accomplices in the trade unions is generating widespread resistance to the back-to-work drive.

The auto giants have already begun to bring production in Europe back up. Last week, Fiat Chrysler (FCA) restarted its van plant in Atessa in Italy, the country hardest-hit by COVID-19 in Europe, even before the official lockdown was lifted. The company is starting up other Italian plants this week.

In addition, luxury automakers Ferrari in Italy and Rolls-Royce and Aston Martin in the UK are all resuming operations this week.

In North America, the Detroit Three auto companies are now targeting a restart date of May 18, less than two weeks away, despite the center of the auto industry, Michigan, continuing to be hammered by the pandemic. FCA has already begun erecting medical tents outside its Windsor and Brampton assembly plants in Ontario, Canada, along with some plants in the Detroit area. FCA, Ford and General Motors in recent weeks have solicited workers to return and beginning prepping factories to reopen in the US.

However, other automakers such as Hyundai, Kia, BMW, and Daimler have already restarted their factories in the US South, reopening plants in Montgomery, Alabama; West Point, Georgia; Spartanburg, South Carolina; and Vance, Alabama, respectively. Honda, Toyota, and Subaru are reported to be planning US production restarts next Monday, May 11.

The automakers confront virtually unprecedented challenges in restarting and coordinating vast supply chains across North America. Much of US assembly relies on parts produced in Mexico, where COVID-19 cases continue to rapidly climb. Like their brothers and sisters in the US, workers in Mexico confronting a lack of protective equipment and safety measures have rebelled in a series of walkouts at *maquiladora* sweatshops just across the border in recent weeks.

However, the government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) is collaborating closely with the US manufacturing industry and the Trump administration in

order to ensure that there is no disruption of supplies and parts to US corporations, regardless of the death toll. The president of Katcon, a global auto supplier, told the *Detroit Free Press*, "The feeling in Mexico, based on the statements from the government and the president of Mexico himself, have been very clear and sensible, balancing health and economic concerns as best as possible." AMLO, the company executive added, "has said if the US and Canada are going to reopen, we will allow the automotive industry to reopen. Dialogue in Mexico is very positive and encouraging."

On the part of the Detroit Three, press releases and public statements by company executives and union officials have ritualistically repeated talking points on the careful preparation of "safety protocols," and concern for workers' health being the "highest priority." The facts, though, speak otherwise. It was not until workers launched a wave of wildcat strikes in March across Ontario, Michigan, Indiana and Ohio that the companies were forced to idle production. Even so, the belated shutdown of plants still allowed the virus to spread unhampered for weeks, resulting in at least two dozen workers succumbing to COVID-19 at the Detroit Three companies to date, and many more seriously sickened by it.

The *Detroit News* reported Monday that four workers from FCA's Warren Truck plant had died, including 65-year-old Catherine Bright Pace, who worked in the paint shop where workers conducted a job action over the spread of the virus on March 16.

Both the companies and the United Auto Workers union are touting measures such as temperature checks as supposedly ensuring the conditions will be safe for workers to return. However, scientific reviews of the pandemic continue to provide evidence that large percentages of those who are contagious show no signs of fever or other symptoms, with a study in Iceland finding 50 percent of cases were asymptomatic.

Asked whether workers at GM Wentzville's Assembly plant near St. Louis felt it was safe to return to work, a veteran worker told the WSWs, "No! Everyone I speak to are not with it at all. A lot of folks are saying if they start back up so soon, they are immediately going on sick leave."

"My plant thinks that a mask and cleaning will keep us safe,"

an auto parts worker at Metalsa in Kentucky said. “I have preexisting conditions myself, which are linked to a higher level of death, so I am completely terrified. The UAW will not help, the local union president has never done anything but help himself.”

Workers also continue to take to social media to voice their opposition. Posts on the UAW’s official Facebook page typically attract dozens to hundreds of angry comments, with workers denouncing the indifference of the union to their health and safety.

In response to UAW President Rory Gamble’s letter on April 30 lauding talks with Ford on restart plans, one worker wrote, “Wanna know how we can avoid any infections? Stay shut down. Not even a question, we see the money influencing these decisions.” Another commented, “You can’t even keep the bathrooms clean.”

While it continues to slavishly repeat company PR about safety protocols, the UAW has at the same time begun ominously warning workers about the necessity of “self-reporting” symptoms, seeking to shift responsibility for any future outbreaks from the companies onto workers. Last week, UAW-Ford Vice President Gerald Kariem said, “We also recognize that we all have a role in self-reporting any exposure without repercussions and in following through on implementing these protections.”

The auto companies and broader sections of corporate America are angling to secure the same liability protections granted by the Trump administration to the meatpacking industry, in the hopes of dodging lawsuits for knowingly subjecting workers to hazardous working conditions.

Industry lobbying groups such as the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, the Motor & Equipment Manufacturers Association and the National Association of Manufacturers published a letter to Congress Sunday, writing, “Companies doing their best to control the spread of this disease with the limited guidance available deserve legal protection.”

Attempting to cloak their clutch for their pocketbook with the cover of preventing shortages in goods and services, the letter continued, “Temporarily suspending suits that threaten to shut down vital industries ... is a sensible step to ensure every American has access to basic life essentials without creating new shortages and exacerbating the crisis.”

Even as the auto giants are rushing to reopen production and renew the flow of profits, company executives and industry analysts have increasingly signaled their intentions to respond to the collapse in sales with ruthless cost-cutting measures.

On a recent conference call with investors, Ford CEO Jim Hackett said, “One truth, right? Don’t waste a crisis.” Hackett’s remarks reprise the comment made by Obama administration Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel in 2008: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” What Emanuel had in mind was to be made clear within a few months, as the Obama administration forced General Motors and Chrysler into

bankruptcy, working with the auto companies and the UAW to close down a swath of plants, lay off thousands, and slash pay and benefits for new hires.

And in a recent *Automotive News Daily Drive* podcast, Morgan Stanley analyst Adam Jonas outlined the drastic extent of layoffs and other cost cuts expected by Wall Street if there is not a rapid return to business as usual. He noted that if auto sales remain at the recent level of 11 million a month, the automakers “run the risk of being a zombie industry.” In such a scenario, “most companies to remain viable would have to *permanently* reduce their headcount and/or fixed cost bases by 30 percent or more [emphasis added].” This would entail tens of thousands of job cuts, in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The drive to restructure the auto industry at workers’ expense is already generating opposition.

On Monday, workers at Nissan’s Barcelona plant in Spain began an indefinite strike, the same day the company sought to restart production at the facility. Nissan has thus far refused to release longer-term plans for the future of the plant, raising concerns that it may eventually seek to shutter it.

Autoworkers must reject the false dilemma presented to them of either joblessness and destitution or sickness and death. In every country, workers confront the need to form new organizations, rank-and-file factory and safety committees, in order to protect themselves from the pandemic and ensure that their rights are secured.

In opposition to the demands of the companies and their union partners for profits over workers’ lives, rank-and-file committees must demand the extension of the shutdown of all nonessential production, full compensation and income protection for the unemployed and furloughed, and a massive expansion of testing and medical care. To achieve these demands, the multitrillion-dollar government bailout of Wall Street and the major corporations must be reversed, and the auto industry placed under workers’ democratic control.



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