

UAW gives its blessing to reopen auto plants as pandemic rages on

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United Auto Workers President Rory Gamble issued a statement Tuesday giving the UAW's blessing to the plans by US automakers to reopen their factories on May 18, despite the ongoing spread of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Less than two weeks ago, Gamble said there had not been enough testing done to conclude "that it is safe to have our members back in the workplace."

Underscoring the utter inability of the UAW to defend the health and safety of workers, Gamble said it was the companies, not the workers, which would determine when and how the factories would be reopened. "As for the start date, the companies contractually make that decision and we all knew this day would come," he declared.

In March, autoworkers rebelled against management's unilateral decision, supported by the UAW, to keep the factories open even as the pandemic spread, leading to the deaths of at least 23 Fiat Chrysler and Ford workers. FCA workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, along with Windsor, Canada, launched a wave of wildcat strikes and job actions in opposition to the unions, which forced the closure of the North American auto industry. Since then, auto parts workers across the border in Mexico have struck suppliers like Lear Corp., which has delayed the restart of the industry, originally planned for late April.

The UAW has been working behind the scenes with the auto executives and state governors, including Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, to reopen the plants without a repeat of the rebellion. With Michigan being one of the epicenters of the pandemic in the US, with 44,000 cases and 4,100 deaths, Whitmer was forced to extend her stay-at-home order until May 15. The auto plants are set to open three days later.

In an earnings call Tuesday, FCA CEO Mike Manley said the company has been in "continuous discussions" with the UAW, Governor Whitmer and other governors of states where FCA operates. With the outbreak leading to a loss of nearly \$2 billion in the first quarter of 2020, Manley told Wall Street investors that FCA planned to open all North American production, with the exception of its Belvidere, Illinois plant, by May 18.

In order to ensure the supply chain to assembly plants in Michigan, other states and Canada is ready, the Michigan Manufacturers Association (MMA) has urged Whitmer to allow suppliers to reopen a week before the automakers resume production, MMA CEO John Walsh said Tuesday, according to a report in *Automotive News*.

The UAW has dropped any pretension that widespread testing should be done before the plants are reopened. "We continue to advocate for as much testing as possible at the current time and eventually full-testing when available," Gamble wrote pathetically.

The UAW is peddling the lie that the automakers have taken sufficient measures to protect safety. Fiat Chrysler workers have scoffed at the packages mailed to them, which include disposable thermometers. Workers are supposed to use the thermometers to take their temperatures before reporting to work. However, it is widely known that someone can carry and spread the coronavirus infection without showing any symptoms, including higher temperatures.

"We got a robocall from the plant manager saying we will be re-starting soon and that everything is safe," Tonya, a worker at FCA's Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit, told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "What Gamble is saying is BS. Just a week-

and-a-half ago, he was saying it was too soon to reopen. He says it is up to the company to decide, that they have the contractual right—but not to kill us.

“There are workers in the plant that lost family members, their parents. They haven’t done anything to make it safe for thousands of workers to come back. They’re telling us to wear masks, but a lot of workers have asthma and other conditions, you know they’re not going to wear them for 10 hours. It’s not worth going back and losing your life or bringing the disease back home.

“All the company is, is money-hungry. We can’t accept a choice of not having an income or worrying about dying from the virus. FCA is testing the waters to see if workers will take it or will walk out again. If we hadn’t gone out on strike, we’d still be in the plants now and people would still be dying.

“We’ve had 3-4 workers die at JNAP, but the company refuses to tell us. We need transparency because they are not giving us information about how many workers got infected and how many died. The medical department is a joke. One worker had a fever and they sent her back to the line. She later got COVID. The UAW health and safety committees are not for us either. If you tell them the roof is leaking, they’ll tell you to move a few steps away.

“We need rank-and-file safety committees to defend our own lives.”

Projections by the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Modeling and Evaluation say the current number of US COVID-19 deaths—over 72,000—will more than double by August and reach as high as 243,000 because of the easing of social distancing restrictions.

The reckless and homicidal rush back to work must be opposed by workers. There is no time to lose. Autoworkers should begin discussions now on setting up rank-and-file safety committees to link up with the broadest sections of the working class across the US, Canada, Mexico and other countries to oppose the reopening of non-essential industries, including the auto industry.

It is impossible to contain the pandemic or even judge its scope without a massive program of testing, contact tracing and quarantining to isolate those who are infected and provide them with immediate medical treatment. There should be no return to work without

verifiable proof that the pandemic has been contained. At the same time, all workers affected by shutdowns must be guaranteed full income and medical coverage and a moratorium on mortgage, rent, student and car loans, and credit card payments.

Rank-and-file safety committees will not bow to the profit interests and “management rights” that are enshrined in every UAW contract but will fight for the rights of workers, including for a healthy and safe working environment.



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