

Democratic governor and UAW collude with auto bosses to force return to work in Michigan

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Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced Thursday that manufacturing will be officially allowed to reopen in the state on Monday, May 11. The announcement stands in contrast to Whitmer's same-day extension of the state's stay-at-home order until May 28.

"Manufacturing is an important part of our economy—there is no question," Whitmer stated during a Thursday press conference announcing the plan. "As we continue to phase in sectors of our economy, I will keep working around the clock to ensure our businesses adopt best practices to protect workers from the spread of COVID-19."

This lip service to health and safety is belied by what the state will actually require manufacturers to do. They must have daily entry screenings for everyone entering a facility with temperature checks using no-touch thermometers, and require workers to fill out questionnaires about symptoms and exposure to people with possible COVID-19. Such measures are worthless for preventing the virus, since studies have shown in many cases that the virus can be transmitted by asymptomatic carriers.

In the beginning of March when the coronavirus pandemic began to spread in Michigan, Whitmer had declared that the auto industry was "essential" and that workers would be required to remain on the job with or without adequate protection. It was not until rank-and-file workers themselves refused to work and organized wildcat actions in the US and Canada against the corporations and the United Auto Workers and Unifor unions that auto production in the state was shut down.

The reckless decision to reopen manufacturing comes as the number of new cases in Michigan is on a slow decline, but the state still has the fourth highest number of deaths in the US, and the Detroit metro area still among the areas hardest hit by the pandemic.

The May 11 restart date comes as a result of pressure from the corporate ruling class to push ahead with production and the generation of profit. The plan primarily caters to the demands of the Big Three US auto corporations—Fiat-Chrysler (FCA), Ford and General Motors—to begin phasing in production in the

state as planned on May 18, by allowing auto parts suppliers to begin operating at least one week ahead of time.

The capitalist Democratic Party and their counterparts in the Republican Party voted unanimously in Congress to pass the stimulus bills that gave trillions of dollars to Wall Street and the banks and corporations, and left the working class with a pittance in the face of mass unemployment.

In spite of the financial burden borne by millions of workers unemployed and furloughed without benefits in the US due to the ruling class's utter negligence and failure to prepare for a global pandemic, the vast majority are opposed to returning to workplaces under conditions where the virus continues to spread at a substantial pace.

Revealing the two diametrically opposed class forces in the plants, in contrast to the opposition of the working class to the homicidal directives of the state and corporations, the United Auto Workers has applauded Whitmer's announcement, to which top officials have given their full endorsement.

UAW President Rory Gamble heaped praise on Whitmer after the announcement, saying, "Throughout this worldwide crisis, Governor Whitmer has been a leading voice to make sure that scientific data and the health and safety of all Michiganders was the priority in managing pandemic decisions. ... Governor Whitmer has at all times been inclusive and focused on building consensus to do what is right for the health and safety of UAW members and all of Michigan's working men and women."

In fact, Whitmer's decision to open manufacturing on Monday flies in the face of the warnings of medical authorities and evidence from within the US and around the world that relaxing social distancing measures too soon without the needed public health measures in place (such as contact tracing and widespread testing, which exist nowhere in the US) leads to new waves of transmission of the infection.

The UAW has been complicit with the premature reopening of the plants, exposing the class nature of the corrupt organization which has worked with the corporations to draw up inadequate "safety plans" that will do little to nothing to protect workers from the new virus about whose behavior

scientists still have many questions.

UAW Local 7 President Gary Hill issued a notice to workers at FCA's Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit outlining the inadequate conditions under which the union and company would force them to work, alleviating FCA of responsibility for workers' health and lives and leaving it up to chance.

"May 11th IS IN STONE FOR TEAM LEADERS AND SKILLED TRADES. OUR WORKPLACE IS GOING TO BE DIFFERENT. ...When you get to work ... Be patient. ...We all must answer Covid-19 questions daily. There are thermal imaging cameras being installed as I write this. Social Distancing is mandatory. When 6 feet isn't possible then extra protection will be provided. Like a face shield, curtain, or plexiglass. Washing our hands for 20 seconds as often as possible is helpful. We ALL MUST DO OUR PART TO PROTECT OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER."

Across North America, 51 autoworkers have died, including at least 26 employed by FCA, Ford and GM. Workplaces have been cited as major centers which fuel infection transmission, especially among the examples of meatpacking plants, grocery stores and shipping and logistics facilities worldwide where workers must work in close contact with one another as they do in the auto plants.

Autoworkers know better than to trust the misinformation campaign of the state and UAW meant to force them back into the plants under unsafe conditions to pump out surplus value for the corporations and their shareholders, who inhabit a world far removed from the dangers the workers face on a daily basis.

A GM worker from Detroit spoke to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* to voice the concerns of autoworkers toward Whitmer's announcement, "I have a friend who works for Mercedes in Alabama. They went to work last week, and five people were tested positive with the virus.

"I knew Whitmer was going to reopen the plants because she's been being pressured by the auto companies. It's about the economy—profits—nothing to do with saving lives. They don't care about saving lives, and it's obvious they don't care. It doesn't matter to them how many people will die ... all they care about is their profits and their million-dollar salaries.

"They say things are getting better, but that couldn't possibly be true. We're not even past the first part of this, and there's a second part coming. I agree that it is only the working class that can change this situation."

A worker from one of the Flex-N-Gate Michigan facilities voiced her concern about reopening auto production on May 18. Flex-N-Gate is a global auto parts supplier for the Big Three, as well as Toyota, Honda and Subaru with locations in the North and South America and in Europe.

"The vehicles should be the last things produced," she said. "Our health should be number one. If I can't go to a doctor because the doctor's offices are closed, then what makes them think I'm healthy enough to go to work?"

"We produce the bumpers for the Dodge Ram. I was all for

the shutdown. We heard about COVID cases at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant. Before our shutdown we were given one Clorox square to wipe down 30 torque guns on the front line and 20 torque guns on the rear line. One wipe for 50 guns! And, no masks or gloves."

Sterling Heights Assembly (SHAP) workers walked off the job in mid-March in opposition to the decision of the company and the UAW to continue production during the coronavirus pandemic.

The worker continued, "I was glad the SHAP workers took action. Too much is still unknown about the virus and the implications. We work on the assembly lines shoulder to shoulder. We have two people per station all the way down our lines. Eighteen or more people on one line, and at least 30 people on the other line, all criss-crossing torch guns, stepping into other work stations to cover the part being built.

"It's not just autoworkers. Look at what is happening to the meatpacking workers. So many have died. Is this what they want to happen to us?"

"Workers need a voice, and we need a voice other than the union. We voted down the union in our plant. We attended meetings to talk about a contract, but we never saw it. They wanted us to sign a membership card before we could vote on a contract we hadn't seen. Many of us signed the card, voted, and turned around and quit. They didn't want to hear from us and didn't want to answer our questions."

Autoworkers must prepare now to oppose the reopening of the auto plants and take the struggle for safe working conditions into their own hands by organizing rank-and-file safety committees, politically independent of the Democratic Party and their allies in the trade unions, to oppose any return to work under unsafe conditions.

These rank-and-file committees must fight to demand full pay and benefits for all workers while the plants are closed and for workers' control over the operations of the plants in North America, linking up with workers in Mexico, Canada, Italy, Brazil and many other countries around the world to oppose the global back-to-work orders and coordinate the fight for a scientifically planned, socialist solution to the pandemic and the internationalization of the auto industry against the anarchy of the capitalist system which places profits over workers lives.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* encourages any autoworker who wants to form these committees to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact