

Automakers continue production restarts as US death toll tops 80,000

Marcus Day
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The automakers are moving ahead with their reckless and life-threatening plans to restart North American production, with Ford, General Motors, and Fiat Chrysler Automotive (FCA) preparing to bring large portions of their operations online on May 18, a week away. In Michigan, the center of the US auto industry, manufacturing activity is allowed to resume beginning today, under a revised stay-at-home order from Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

The United Auto Workers has granted its blessing to the companies' restart plans and Whitmer's announcement, demonstrating once more that the UAW is in the pocket of the companies and fundamentally hostile to the basic needs of workers. The same phrases were recycled in UAW press releases throughout last week, with President Rory Gamble intoning that "we all knew this day would come." He continued to lecture about the necessity of reporting symptoms or exposure to the infection, seeking to shift the blame for future outbreaks from the companies onto workers.

But the temperature checks and other screening measures lauded by the UAW and the companies are virtually worthless, with studies finding between 20 to 50 percent of those with the virus have no fever or other symptoms, yet still can transmit it to others. At a pork processing plant owned by Triumph Foods in Missouri, nearly 400 workers who tested positive for the coronavirus were asymptomatic, according to *Business Insider*.

Meanwhile, the UAW reported Friday without fanfare that two more workers had died due to COVID-19, UAW members employed at Caterpillar's Progress Rail subsidiary in LaGrange, Illinois, which has continued to operate during the state's stay-at-home order. At least 27 FCA, Ford, GM and Hyundai workers have died in the US, with dozens more auto parts workers dying in Mexico.

The companies are nonetheless rushing ahead to reopen with the support of the unions. FCA and Ford have already restarted production in Europe, and the Detroit Three companies and many of their suppliers have gradually recalled workers to prep production lines in the US in recent weeks. Ford's parts distribution centers are returning to full operations today, according to a company press release. Some 12,000 white collar workers in IT, facilities management, product development and other supposedly "location dependent" roles

not eligible for remote work are also being brought back.

GM, for its part, is restarting production today at its transmission plant in St. Catharines, Ontario; its components plant in Lockport, New York; and its DMAX Duramax Diesel plant in Moraine, Ohio.

While thousands of workers are being forced into crowded plants and workplaces where the virus can run rampant, thousands of others will face the prospect of unemployment with no end in sight, as auto sales and demand have plummeted catastrophically. Ford has stated that plants which previously had three shifts will only resume with two, and a number of plants that had two will only begin with one. The number of shifts, automakers say, will depend on demand.

Some foreign-owned automakers, including Hyundai, Kia, BMW and Daimler, have already restarted US operations, or are planning to do so beginning today, in the case of Honda and Toyota.

On Saturday, electric car maker Tesla Inc. filed a lawsuit in federal court in a bid to reopen its Bay Area assembly plant in Fremont, California. Although Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom allowed large segments of state businesses and manufacturing to begin reopening Friday, Alameda County health officials put a halt on Tesla's plans to rush to restart production without adequate safety measures.

Throughout the pandemic, Tesla CEO and celebrity billionaire Elon Musk (the 23rd richest person in the world, according to *Forbes*) has used his Twitter account to spread conspiracy theories downplaying the danger of the virus and has denounced social distancing measures in increasingly unhinged and deranged terms.

On Saturday, Musk escalated his offensive against efforts to protect the population and his workforce from the pandemic, threatening to withdraw Tesla's operations from California, tweeting: "Frankly, this is the final straw. Tesla will now move its HQ and future programs to Texas/Nevada immediately. If we even retain Fremont manufacturing activity at all, it will be dependent on how Tesla is treated in the future."

The drive to reopen factories is proceeding at the behest of Wall Street and despite the rising toll from the COVID-19 pandemic, with deaths nearing 81,000 in the US at the time of this writing. The rollback of social distancing that this will

entail defies all the warnings of infectious disease experts and threatens a massive increase in new cases and deaths.

This ruthless disregard for human life is provoking deep-seated anger among workers, who see no reason to expose themselves and their families to the virus in order to boost the profits of the automakers.

“Nobody is happy about going back,” a worker at FCA’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant said. In March, workers at the plant rebelled against efforts to continue production as the virus spread, joining a wave of wildcat strikes and job actions in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Ontario, compelling the auto companies to idle production.

“Nobody feels safe. We don’t see how they are going to keep us safe,” the worker continued. “I don’t see how we are going to do this social distancing. I don’t get it. I think we will have another wave of coronavirus starting up again.”

She said that many workers were under heavy financial pressure due to the almost universal difficulty in securing jobless benefits. “Some people haven’t got their unemployment, and they say they have to go back because they don’t have any money.”

Underlying the disorganized and ramshackle character of state unemployment systems lies a deliberate policy by the ruling class of using economic coercion to compel a return to work. State governments and businesses are now working together on plans to claw back unemployment benefits from workers who refuse to return to unsafe conditions, with Ohio, a major seat of manufacturing, launching a maliciously named “Covid-19 Employee Fraud” form for employers to report absenteeism.

“There have been people working in my sweatshop (Faurecia) since this has begun,” a worker at the auto parts supplier in Indiana said. “They’ve been calling people back for the last three weeks.

“What’s scaring me is our ventilation system. Last year they didn’t care if we even had clean air to breathe. It was so smoldering hot you couldn’t even catch your breath. This year will be twice as bad wearing a mask with no outside air. We’re all going to suffocate.”

A worker at Fiat Chrysler’s Kokomo Transmission plant in Indiana expressed outrage at the return-to-work announcements, saying: “It’s inhumane! They still have people dying from COVID-19 that work for FCA. We all know they will not give us hot water, soap, gloves, masks or sanitizer. If you work on a sub-line or assembly line, there is no such thing as six-foot distance. How will they be able to protect people when the front-line workers of the [response to] the COVID-19 pandemic don’t even have enough personal protective equipment?”

Commenting on the senselessness of the return to work, she added: “Who is going to buy a new car right now? They have warehouses full of transmissions and the car lots are full, so what is the point? This will just expose people to death, then

take it home to their families.”

The worker pointed to the interconnected dangers facing working class families, saying: “Some workers are married to employees who work at the meat factories such as Tyson. These people are exposed to the virus and are going to bring it right into the plant.”

Following the walkouts at auto plants in Europe and North America in March, opposition has continued to mount among workers across many different sectors around the world, including at meat processing plants, at Amazon and other logistics companies and at grocery stores. Dozens of workers for auto parts manufacturer Lear Corporation protested outside one of the company’s facilities in Port Elizabeth, South Africa last week, and a strike has shut down Nissan’s main assembly plant in Barcelona, Spain since the middle of last week.

Workers all around the world confront a ruling class utterly opposed to taking any serious measures to address the pandemic. From company executives to the trade union officials to the capitalist politicians, all are indifferent to the mass death and suffering the mad dash for profits is causing.

Workers cannot allow themselves to be led back to the slaughter! Rank-and-file factory safety committees must be organized to stop the premature return to work. The demands must be raised to halt all non-essential production, to immediately provide full income and benefits to those affected by shutdowns, and to reverse the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and the major corporations, which must be redirected toward life-saving needs.

The corporate owners have demonstrated that they are incapable of protecting workers’ health and safety and have thus forfeited their right to run the factories. The auto industry must be taken over by the workers themselves, placed under their democratic control and operated in the interests of society, not the parasitic financial oligarchy, as part of the fight for socialism.



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