

“The company and the union are trying to pacify us, but they don’t care about our lives”

Detroit autoworkers oppose rush to reopen plants as COVID-19 death toll rises

Jerry White
12 May 2020

Thousands of auto parts workers returned to factories in Michigan and other states on Monday, a week before production is scheduled to start at the giant assembly plants operated by General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler. After a seven-week shutdown, forced by the walkout of workers in infected factories, the Detroit-based auto companies plan to recall thousands of workers to their North American plants on May 18, despite the continuing spread of the deadly virus.

According to reports in the local Detroit newspapers, American Axle, Nexteer, BorgWarner, Flex-N-Gate, Magna and other suppliers reopened plants on Monday, while Lear Corp. will restart next week. Last week Michigan’s Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer said manufacturing companies could resume operations on Monday, May 11, even as she extended her stay-at-home order through May 28.

Michigan has 47,552 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 4,584 fatalities, ranking the fourth highest nationally for deaths behind New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Detroit alone has 2,100 deaths, and the three counties that make up the Detroit metropolitan area—Wayne, Oakland and Macomb—have a fatality rate of 11.6 percent, 10.9 percent and 11.5 percent respectively, according to Johns Hopkins University’s Coronavirus Resource Center.

“We’re apprehensive and scared because it is too early to open the plants,” Tonya, a Fiat Chrysler worker at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The vast majority believe it’s too soon. We know if we go back people are going to get sick and die. The company and the union are lying to us about the plants being safe. They are trying to pacify us to get us back. We have no faith in them.

“Our plant is a city inside a city. There are supposed to

be thermal imaging cameras at the turnstiles on the east and west parking lots, and we are supposed to fill out a questionnaire, saying we are healthy and haven’t come in contact with anybody who is infected. But you might not have a temperature or chills, and you can spread it around half the plant without anyone having a clue, and then you could drop dead from COVID-19.”

Last week plants were opened by BMW (Spartanburg, South Carolina), Hyundai (Montgomery, Alabama) and Kia (West Point, Georgia). On Monday, Toyota opened 14 North American plants, including in San Antonio, Texas, Georgetown, Kentucky, Woodstock, Canada and Tijuana and Guanajuato, Mexico. Volvo Cars USA also opened its Ridgeville, South Carolina plant Monday.

On Monday skilled trades workers and team leaders were called back to General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler plants in the US. GM plans to bring back 49,000 hourly workers in the US, 16,000 in Mexico and 3,800 in Canada, and an unknown number of salaried workers by May 18. Ford is calling back an estimated 59,300 hourly and salaried workers in the US, 5,300 in Canada and 6,775 in Mexico next Monday. Fiat Chrysler will call back 44,000 hourly workers in the US, 11,000 in Mexico and 9,000 in Canada, in addition to salaried employees who cannot work from home.

The United Auto Workers (UAW), Unifor in Canada and the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) have all given their blessings to reopen the plants, despite the deadly danger to workers.

Tonya commented, “People are asking the union stewards what about childcare. The schools are closed, and you can’t take children to day care centers because it’s not safe. If we stay home with our kids, are we going to lose our jobs? If we go to work, we can bring this home

to our spouses and children.

“They’re using economic pressure to get us back. Why are they asking nonessential workers to come back anyway? It’s all about making money, not our well-being. They don’t care about our lives. They don’t want to spend the money on testing, but that’s the only way to find out who has it.”

Tonya responded to the revelation that top UAW officials were being tested before they returned to the union’s Solidarity House headquarters in Detroit and the joint training centers run by the companies and the union. “It’s outrageous, the UAW officials are getting tested before they return to work while they send us back to the plants without tests, to get sick and die. It’s just like Trump and the White House staff. They’re getting tested to protect themselves, but they’re telling workers they don’t have enough tests to make sure we’re all right. And some of the tests we are getting are no good.”

One worker posted the following message on a local Facebook page for Jefferson workers: “I have been tested 3 different times for COVID-19, and each time came back negative, but the hospital said I have all the symptoms. I just don’t know. It’s too soon for work because imagine someone saying they tested negative three times but still got sick. This is scary as hell.”

Commenting on Michigan Governor Whitmer’s decision to allow the resumption of manufacturing, which employed 623,000 state workers in March, Tonya said, “If you’re going to send the multitudes back into the plants, it’s no different than reopening the whole state. Whitmer talked a good game, acting like she was not going to get bullied and would defend the lives of Michiganders. But when the auto companies said reopen the plants, she caved.”

“But she didn’t close the plants in the first place. If it hadn’t been for the workers walking out on our own, we would have been in the plants for the whole pandemic,” Tonya said, pointing to the wave of wildcat strikes and job actions in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Ontario that forced the closure of the North American auto industry. These actions were in defiance of the UAW, which sided with management, and the delay cost the lives of at least 27 FCA, Ford and GM workers, along with dozens of parts workers employed in the maquiladora sweatshops across the border in Mexico.

Pointing to the growing resistance of workers all over the world, including demands by GM workers in Silao, Mexico for a joint struggle against the reopening of the plants, Tonya said, “All over the world, workers are fed

up. We pay union dues, and the unions do nothing for you. The union says, ‘We got trucks to build!’ But ultimately, it is up to the workers to refuse to work if there is going to be any outcome in our favor. We are going to have to fight for ourselves.”

“Rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, is what we need. These committees would create an avenue for workers to get answers and demand safe working conditions, without being bullied and strong-armed by management and the union,” she said.

Workers are being rushed back to work, regardless of the danger to their lives, to finance the massive bailout of Wall Street and the superrich carried out by the Trump administration with the full backing of the Congressional Democrats.

In opposition to that, the Socialist Equality Party calls for the rejection of the demand for a return to work until the spread of the pandemic is stopped, and safe and healthy conditions, overseen by rank-and-file safety committees, are established in all workplaces.

At the same time workers must be provided with a monthly income, sufficient to guarantee a decent standard of living for their families until a safe return to work is possible. In opposition to the government bailout, the SEP calls for the expropriation of all large financial and corporate institutions, their conversion into democratically-controlled public utilities, and a massive increase of the tax rate to at least 90 percent on salaries and all unearned income derived from speculative activities of the richest five percent of the population.

“These demands are needed,” Tonya said, “A 90 percent tax on the rich would be right. They say they don’t have money to provide for testing and safe workplaces, but they have trillions for the rich. What happened to the billions in profits we made for Chrysler?”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact