

“We are not going back to unsafe conditions”

After FCA Sterling Heights Assembly workers contract COVID-19, anger mounts over premature return to work

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15 May 2020

With a May 18 restart date for auto manufacturing plants approaching there are reports that several workers have been sent home at the Fiat Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit with suspected cases of COVID-19. On Wednesday, FCA management confirmed one case.

Workers are reporting on Facebook that one of the SHAP team leaders called into work to prepare for the reopening of the plant self-reported she had a cough Monday, was sent home, then got called back in Tuesday after management asked her if the cough could be allergies. The worker then received her positive test result Wednesday after having already returned to work and potentially infected others.

The reports of cases of COVID-19 at SHAP have heightened workers' opposition to the premature return to work being engineered by the auto companies with the support of the United Auto Workers and the blessings of Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The governor gave the green light to reopen factories, despite Michigan being an epicenter of coronavirus infection.

There have been over 3,300 new reported cases of COVID-19 in Michigan over the past week and more than 460 deaths, bringing to 4,700 the statewide death toll, the majority in the Detroit area, the center of auto production.

If Fiat Chrysler, Ford and GM are successful in forcing more than 50,000 workers back into factories in the Detroit area, these plants will be a huge vector for the transmission of the deadly disease to workers' families and residents throughout the metropolitan area. It is noteworthy that the week after Trump ordered the reopening of meatpacking plants, the number of cases in counties with these plants jumped by 40 percent.

The reopening of the auto industry has the support of virtually the entire Democratic Party apparatus. Typical were the remarks of first-term Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin, a former CIA operative, who in a television interview Thursday praised the restart of auto production, calling it an example of “how to

reopen safely.”

This rosy picture was contested by a young worker at SHAP, who told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, “They are putting people at risk. Who is to say everyone who came into the factory since those people returned to work hasn’t contracted it and gone home and given it to their families?”

“We could all go into work and if we don’t have proper testing, we wouldn’t know we have it. It’s like they don’t care.

“People are worried about being rushed back to work and catching COVID.”

Reports that the UAW is requiring its international staff to be tested for COVID-19 before returning to work at the union’s Solidarity House headquarters in Detroit or joint training centers has evoked an angry response from autoworkers. Many have expressed outrage that UAW officials will be getting tested, but not workers returning to the plants.

One worker posted on Facebook, “If leadership and management are the only ones required to be tested before coming back to work, where does that leave us? Are we guinea pigs?”

“Why are they required to be tested before they go back, but we can only be tested if we show signs? It’s too late then.”

In response to the reported new COVID-19 case at SHAP, Mark Stewart, chief operating officer of FCA North America, issued a letter stating that plans for the restart of production Monday were going forward at full speed.

“This is a **great opportunity** (my emphasis) for me to remind you to study in detail the Return to Work information that has been sent to you,” the letter read. “Our protocols are designed to provide safety measures at multiple points and on multiple levels. In the case of our colleague at Sterling Heights, her co-workers at the plant were protected by the face masks and eyeglasses we provide each day, protected by the measures created to enforce social distancing and protected by the deep cleaning and sanitization of workstations.”

At least three workers employed at SHAP have died from COVID-19, as well as two workers from the nearby Sterling Heights Stamping plant. Altogether, 22 FCA workers have died during the pandemic. The death toll would have been even higher if matters had been left in the hands of the auto bosses and the UAW. But workers at SHAP and other FCA facilities in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Canada carried out wildcat strikes and other job actions, forcing the closure of the North American auto industry in mid-March.

A Detroit area autoworker told the *Macomb Daily*, "I'm personally not ready to return to work and feel they are rushing to get us back into the plant to make a profit at the expense of those working there. While they have stated that they are actively engaged in making the plant safer with COVID-19 guidelines, it is almost impossible to (be) social distanced and work the line at a major auto plant. Especially one pumping out on average about 625 trucks per 10-hour shift."

On the role of the UAW, the worker added, "We're supposed to be united so why is the UAW always dividing us just because FCA says jump."

Management and the UAW were counting on economic pressure to force many workers back into the plants, the SHAP worker told the WSWS. "Part of the economic strain is being used to drive people to come into work. That's the first thing they are going to use, 'Do you want a job, do you want to make money?'"

This pressure was being compounded by delays in federal and state assistance to the unemployed, he said. "People are online talking about it. Some people haven't even received stimulus checks. There are stimulus checks going to dead people.

"I have started being more conscious about what is going on around me, not just around me personally, but in the world.

"Ultimately, that is the only way we are going to stop the negative impasse in the world. I think everyone should have a fair shot in life. I feel with capitalism it is all about exploitation, how much can we get out of you before you are used up."

A tier two worker at Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit also spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter*. The first shift at the plant, A Crew, is scheduled to come in Monday, with second and third shifts scheduled to return over the following two weeks.

"We have an issue going on now. People are coming into the plant and the masks are laid out on the table. They are not in plastic. People are touching one or two or three before they pick the one they want. That's contamination. It should be inside of something.

"At the beginning of May, [UAW President] Rory Gamble made a statement that it was too soon to go back. It wasn't a week later that he said that it was not up to him, that contractually they can start when they want to. That's real nonsense. It pissed everybody off even more.

"It's ultimately our health and safety. We are very aware that at some point we have to go back to work, but it is definitely

too soon. They are not making it safe for any of us. The fact is if it's not safe, we are not coming back. It's serious. To say we are scared for our safety is an understatement."

The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* have called for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the UAW to lead the fight against the premature return to work. Workers must insist that non-essential production be halted until the pandemic is contained through universal testing and contact tracing, while workers receive full income and medical coverage.

At the same time, these rank-and-file safety committees must oversee safety conditions in the plant, working in conjunction with scientists and medical experts committed to defend workers, not the profits of the corporations. If these committees observe unsafe conditions, they will inform all workers and have the power to halt production, so workers can safely leave the plant.

In March, following job actions at the FCA Windsor Assembly and Warren Truck Assembly plants, workers at SHAP stopped production after cases of COVID-19 were reported in the plant, sparking further walkouts.

Commenting on the wildcat strike, the SHAP worker said, "I felt that was a very important moment. It showed us we can make things happen. It was a very important moment for any worker. Workers felt we were being mistreated, not getting their just dues.

"I have seen blood, sweat and tears working in this environment. I am sure all those [who] have had that type of experience may have felt they wanted to walk away from it. But need drove them to be in this high stress situation. The walkout was symbolic of how a lot of people felt."

The Jefferson worker added, "No one is ready to go back. Everyone says they are too much in a hurry. We were the ones who stopped them working because we refused to go with the flow. The virus was running rampant and people were catching it. People are still catching the disease and dying. Why should we allow them to do that?

"We should keep the same energy now. We should not just be rushing back into the plant. We need to develop a collective understanding that we are not going to just come back to unsafe working conditions."



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