

“I am not going to die for this company that only thinks about the millions they have in the bank”

Mounting opposition among autoworkers on eve of industry restart

Marcus Day
16 May 2020

Anger among autoworkers is mounting as the clock ticks down to Monday, May 18, the auto industry’s target restart date.

The auto giants and other corporations, with the support of their representatives in the big-business political parties, are forging ahead with reopening the economy despite the desperate warnings of infectious disease experts that it threatens a vast spike in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

The Detroit Three, General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA), have recalled skilled trades workers and team leaders to prepare the plants to reopen over the preceding weeks. New cases of the virus have already emerged at FCA’s Sterling Heights Assembly (SHAP) this week, demonstrating the worthlessness of the claims by the companies and the UAW to have implemented adequate measures to protect workers from the pandemic. A report on the WSWS on the new outbreak at SHAP was shared widely among workers on social media Friday morning.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party call for workers to form rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW and other unions, in order to call an immediate halt to the premature reopening of nonessential industries and assert workers’ control over health and safety conditions. The demand must be raised for a monthly income for all families until the pandemic is stopped and a safe return to work is possible, to be funded by a reversal of the multitrillion-dollar Wall Street bailout.

To voice your opposition to the life-threatening back-to-work drive and to learn more about joining the fight to build rank-and-file committees, email us at autoworkers@wsws.org. Workers’ comments and identities will be kept confidential.

Our reporters spoke to autoworkers around the US on Friday and received a number of emails from others objecting to the return to work. Below is a selection of their comments.

FCA Sterling Heights Assembly, Sterling Heights, Michigan

“The A-crew goes back on Monday. At first, I was kind of hopeful about all the talk about how we would be getting the best protection, how the best practices would be implemented to keep us safe and on and on. The report about the confirmed and suspected cases at the plant this week tells me that nothing has changed since we forced the shutdown of the plant in March. If people are wearing masks and gloves, how did they

become infected? Well, I saw photos of our break rooms and there is no social distancing, plus you can’t eat wearing a mask.

“Management is using the same useless ‘disinfectant’ in the paint shop where contaminants cannot be used, so they’re using a Mr. Green product from the Dollar Store! What’s happening is the company and the union are forcing us everyday citizens back to the front lines. I don’t foresee anything good happening by putting 3,000 people in one space. With a few dozen team leaders in the plant last week, look what happened!

“People need assistance, but all the aid is going to the wrong people; it’s going to Wall Street. Unemployment is not enough to live on, which is why workers feel the pressure to return to work. The pandemic is deadly, and we workers need food and provisions. The right-wing protests in Lansing get lots of media attention even though they have very few people. The majority of workers agree with the stay-at-home lockdowns, but we can’t live on ramen noodles.

“We need a government of the people, by the people and for the people. I think socialism is needed, but I’m not sure how it will come about, because there’s uncertainty and confusion about it.”

Auto parts workers

A number of workers at auto parts companies wrote in to the WSWS. Many suppliers have already restarted in order to ready the necessary components for the final assembly plants. One wrote in the comments of yesterday’s report on the spread of the coronavirus FCA Sterling Heights Assembly, “I would like to add that although not the big three, hundreds if not thousands of smaller companies are returning to supply and support the big three.

“Most of us have no union and are in an even more dangerous situation. Our company has cut corners before this pandemic and now are in charge of the safety of our health. It is bare minimum for us. Some coworkers worked this week and no masks, no sanitizer, no social distancing.

“I’m told if I refuse to return Monday I must resign. This is not going to make it to the media but it’s just as big as any issue. And we’re on overtime for the next six weeks so if only one of us has it we are all going to have it.”

Another parts worker told the WSWS she is also scheduled to return to work on Monday, May 18. She said, “Our biggest concern is being safe. After I heard what happened at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant about the confirmed COVID case and other possible infections this week, I’m

really worried. I got a call from our HR [human resources] Department to fill out a survey with 15-20 questions: Have we been out of the country? Do we have flu-like symptoms? and so on. We were told there will be a tent outside, another questionnaire, and a 'goody' bag with masks and shields and then we'll have our temperatures taken.

"I feel like we're being sent into a death trap. The companies knew at least a week ago that we were being sent back. Why is there no testing for us? There was plenty of time to get the test results. This tells me they don't care about us. Production is more important than workers' lives."

Commenting on the more than 35 million jobless workers, she said, "To be honest, if a factory worker dies, the company would have a posting up immediately for his or her job. In fact, it would be posted before the obituary comes out in the *Flint Journal* or M-Live.

"What about the factory workers? What are we to do? If we refuse to return to work, we'll lose our health care by May 30, we won't be eligible for unemployment compensation. If we go in on Monday, and do not want to return, we can go on FMLA [medical leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act], which only covers 12 weeks. I used up four weeks plus a week's vacation taking care of an ill parent in the beginning of the year, so there is not much to fall back on.

"The pandemic has opened up my eyes a lot. I see what the entire government is doing to us, I see how the working class is being treated. Elon Musk's opening Tesla says it all. They don't care if we live or die. We have no say, no voice."

A worker at an auto parts supplier in Kentucky told the WSWS, "I have an auto immune disease and my immune system is very low, for which I am under a specialist's care and on prednisone. I am over 60 and terrified to have to go to work with hundreds of people working around me.

"I am an autoworker, and have been for over 40 years, but I am not going to die for this company that only thinks about the millions they have in the bank."

Ford Dearborn Truck, Dearborn, Michigan

"I think it is totally insane that we are going back on Monday. There is no way possible you can work in that environment and not be put in danger. Think of what that will mean under the present circumstances. There are just too many people and too many unknowns. Even before, people were bringing in their own fans, blowing the air around and all that. Who knows what will happen now?"

"My issue is that I am hearing about all these changes they are supposed to be making. For example, initially were going to start with an eight-hour shift. They tell us we won't have a lunch break during the shift. The lunch break will be at the end of the shift. So, it will be two 20-minute breaks and that is it for a break for the whole time we are there. They said we would go back to a 10-hour shift sometime later.

"The whole thing is so much BS. It is like Ford is now making profits off of everyone else's health. They tell you you can't do this and you can't do that, but you can go to work!"

"There is a letter from Labor Relations telling us 'don't come over' and talk about anything to them. They said put it in writing instead and forward it. So, they don't want us coming in there to meet, for their benefit, but they want us to go to work!"

"This thing with the temperature strip is just a band-aid. You can be carrying the virus and infecting others and show no symptoms. So how is taking the temperature going to help? Am I going to catch something there and bring it home to my kid?"

"I have no faith in our union. I have been heavily involved in the union in the past, heavily involved. I even went to those conventions in Las

Vegas, and after seeing stuff that went on there I became very skeptical. All it was somebody pushing their agenda.

"But year after year what I saw was the favoritism. It is still going on. I gave them chance after chance to turn things around, but it never happened. It took me a long time to decide, but after two-and-a-half years I finally just quit the union altogether. I quit paying my dues and everything. When I saw the last contract that was it. I quit because the union was not representing us.

"The union says they're supposed to unite workers but they're really dividing them. The contract was settled and there are still all these divisions.

"They have a slogan: 'One Ford.' They are trying to say with that slogan that the workers and Ford are somehow altogether. What they really mean by 'One Ford' is that the union and management are all together.

"I have said before that you should be able to vote for the president of the union. But I also have considered your demand to form new committees in the plants, to have our own committees. It was not an easy decision to get to this place, but I am ready to move."

Kokomo Transmission, Kokomo, Indiana

"It is inhumane! Corporate greed. Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois—we are red on the COVID-19 map.

"Why expose people to death on purpose? They have warehouses full of finished product. The UAW safety reps should be held accountable as well. If you feel that your life is threatened, you have the right to not do your job.

"Some plants have hundreds to thousands on one shift. That is a lot of people's lives and their family they go home to in jeopardy for a vehicle. And people can't pay their utilities. Who is running to buy a brand new car right now?"

Ford Stamping, Chicago, Illinois

"They tell us that we're supposed to go back to work at Stamping on Monday, but why would we go back when the state government tells us that nothing is supposed to reopen until June 1st? Are we really that essential? I think if the government says to stay home, we should stay home.

"I don't know what's going to happen Monday. It's going to be chaos. They want to split the C Crew shift between A Crew and B Crew, but right now there is not even enough work for A and B Crew to do to justify going back."

The worker agreed that the government and the corporations ultimately looked after the same interests. "They're not thinking of the virus infecting us. They're thinking about the money, and the economy. But the problem is if so many people get sick and die, who is going to be left to run the economy?"

He was critical of the UAW and Ford's proclamations that all necessary safety measures were being taken to protect workers who were being forced to return to the plant. "What is being safe? You can give us a mask, a face shield, gloves and hand sanitizer, but it's still too hard not to come into contact with other people in there. It would be difficult staggering bathroom and break shifts.

"We also have the worst air quality in the plant. Even before the

pandemic, the welding being done was not contained, so particles were floating in the air that we breathed in. I coughed up black particles every day because of it.”

He spoke to the sharpening class divide brought to the surface under the conditions of the pandemic. “When you’re rich you can be sheltered from the virus. Donald Trump can say whatever he wants about it and not wear a mask, but in reality, it’s [us] in the trenches who are dealing with it, at home barely able to make ends meet, without unemployment or a stimulus check.”



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