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Drive to reopen auto plants in North America threatens thousands of lives

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“I think the bottom line is the politicians and companies don’t care and made a decision to get auto manufacturing going again. While the union is just playing their part and preaching safety protocols, there will be a human cost from this. Everyone knows that.”

These remarks by a worker at the General Motors Fort Wayne Assembly plant express a growing feeling among autoworkers that they must take a stand to oppose the premature reopening of auto plants in North America. The Detroit automakers, with the full support of the United Auto Workers, are set to begin ramping up assembly lines Monday in the US, Canada and Mexico. Several Japanese and German automakers have already started producing cars.

The ruling class is reopening the economy, including the restart of giant auto assembly plants employing thousands of workers, despite the continuing rise in coronavirus infections and deaths and the lack of protection for employees. This was underscored Friday by President Trump, who declared at a press conference, “I don’t want people to think this is all dependent on a vaccine. Vaccine or no vaccine, we’re back. And we’re starting the process.”

Trump went on to mock concerns over the spread of the disease. “In many cases they don’t have vaccines, and a virus or a flu comes and you fight through it,” he said, adding, “Other things have never had a vaccine, and they go away.”

Without a vaccine or massive testing and contact tracing, something the Trump administration refuses to organize, health experts say it is exceedingly dangerous to lift lockdown measures.

Concerns over the reopening of the auto plants have been heightened by reports of COVID-19 infection among team leaders at Fiat Chrysler’s Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit. These workers were called in to work this week to prepare for the restart of production on May 18.

Fiat Chrysler (FCA) management confirmed at least one case at the plant. Workers widely shared a report on COVID-19 at SHAP posted yesterday on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Fox News interviewed a team leader at SHAP who said some of those who had been in contact with the infected team leader were not allowed to go home to get tested and self-isolate with pay. He remarked, “If this is what happened when we have 200 people in there, what will happen next week when there are thousands?”

Underscoring the danger of an early reopening of assembly lines

while the COVID-19 virus spreads unchecked is the assessment of medical experts, who warn that large factories pose a particular threat of the spread of the disease, as demonstrated by outbreaks centered in meatpacking plants. Detroit, a center of US auto production, is already also a hotspot of coronavirus infections and deaths.

According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, Dr. Chris Murray, director of the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, said a study from New Zealand showed that half of all COVID-19 transmissions came from large transmission events in that country.

“And that really, I think, puts the onus on employers and local governments keeping the limits on group gatherings down to a pretty small number, like 10 or less, just to avoid the risk of those hundred-people transmission events that we’ve seen quite routinely,” Murray said.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote: “‘That means that larger workplaces—such as places with assembly lines where people are close to one another—are particularly vulnerable as a threat for rapid spread of disease,’ said David Michaels, epidemiologist and professor in environmental and occupational health at George Washington University and assistant secretary of labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in the Obama administration.

“In Washington state, a single person who was showing signs of illness attended a two-and-a-half-hour choir practice at church on March 10 with 60 other people. After the practice, 52 people fell sick with COVID-19, a disease attack rate of 87 percent, and two died.”

A COVID-19 outbreak that started at Smithfield Foods in Sioux Falls, South Dakota has resulted in more than 1,000 linked cases. It is one of the largest identified outbreaks in the US.

Despite this, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration said it will not enforce any safety guidelines if employers “act in good faith.” In other words, workers are on their own. There are no safety rules on the books for dealing with infectious diseases after a decade of delays under both the Obama and Trump administrations.

Julia Heck, an epidemiologist and adjunct associate professor and researcher at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the concerns from an

epidemiological standpoint posed by the premature reopening of nonessential industry.

“From the perspective of an epidemiologist, the goal is to preserve life,” she said. “Undoubtedly, reopening the economy more broadly is going to result in more cases of COVID-19 and more death. I don’t know at this point if it would be realistic to change the whole environment in these plants for workers to go back to work in them safely when the companies expect them to.

“If there was widespread rapid testing, that could be a key to reopening also, but that doesn’t seem to be on the horizon any time soon.”

A worker from Indiana wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*: “I have been recalled to the filthy GM foundry (Bedford, Indiana) who liberally sprays known poisons in the air. This is concurred by their own industrial hygienist. I start May 18 while they are still running ads in Indiana to stay home. ... Because of my age and health, I have concerns that to date haven’t been addressed.”

A young worker at SHAP agreed, “Yes, it’s too soon. I had to report on Monday. They passed out unwrapped facemasks and made us go through an obstacle course to get to the turnstiles. I didn’t feel safe one minute of the shift.”

He said that his son had been diagnosed with Kawasaki disease in October, which has been linked to the coronavirus.

“I had to suppress panic attacks the whole time on Monday,” he said. “Yesterday, I had a video visit with my primary physician and expressed my anxiety and concern with the possibility of contracting the virus and passing it on to my son.

“I won’t put my son at risk to go in and build a damn truck that’s not even going to sell at the moment.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the *Autoworker Newsletter* urge autoworkers to organize independently of the UAW to prepare a fight against the premature return to work. We call for the building of rank-and-file factory safety committees.

Networks of communication need to be established between factories and different affected industries, including auto, meatpacking, logistics and transportation in the US, Canada and Mexico. There should be no return to work at nonessential industries until the virus is contained and healthy and safe conditions are established in the plants. This must be monitored by the democratically chosen rank-and-file committees.

The Fort Wayne worker said, “I can see it leading to more walkouts maybe if locations see large amounts of infections. The problem now is the union and government agencies are green-lighting starting back up and are not going to intervene if there are outbreaks. Business as usual at the cost of human lives.”

Another SHAP worker said that management was concerned about possible heavy absenteeism. “They are definitely trying to get as many TPTs [temporary part-time workers] as they can in place of full timers. People are worried about going. It is crazy that people are making desperate decisions.”

He said that one temp worker said he planned to drive 10 hours straight to get back to SHAP. “They were under the impression that they wouldn’t come back until June 1. Since they are on an at-need basis, it’s come back or else.”

A worker at Dearborn Truck said, “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?”

Workers across North America are calling for joint action against the gang-up by the corporations, the political establishment and the unions against the workers.

A Canadian FCA worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*: “I work for FCA Brampton Assembly in Ontario, Canada. I for one believe it is too soon to open up the auto plants in Mexico, USA or Canada.

“COVID-19 is not under control, and I believe auto companies and governments are jumping the gun all for money instead of human health. We in Canada will be watching our brothers and sisters in the USA and Mexico closely with this horrendous virus. US plants have lost too many workers already. Please, let’s not lose any more of our loved ones. Please be safe, everyone.”

A worker at the Windsor Assembly plant in Ontario, Canada said, “It’s odd that you can’t go see your mother on Mother’s Day. No gathering of more than five people here. But you have to go to work. How sensible is that? So 100,000 people die. They don’t care. What will be done? Nothing.”

At the General Motors plant in Silao, Mexico, which is scheduled to restart production Monday, a rank-and-file group called Generating Movement issued a statement, “An international call for solidarity and action in support for the workers’ struggle at General Motors.”

The committee rejects management’s bogus “safety” measures as inadequate and warns of “the crime that the owners and managers of General Motors are about to commit by forcing our co-workers to return to work on May 18, during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, and May 30 for those co-workers that are most vulnerable.”

The life-and-death issues raised by the drive to push workers back into the factories above all pose a political challenge to the working class. In the US, both the Trump administration and Democratic governors, such as Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, have lined up behind the auto companies’ reckless campaign to restart production.

This fight requires the development of a political movement of the working class to fight on a socialist program aimed at the defense of human needs and human life, not corporate profits. We encourage workers who are interested in more information to contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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