

North American auto industry reopens amid mounting opposition by workers

Marcus Day
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Autoworkers begin returning en masse to factories and other production facilities around the US today. The auto giants, with the support of state governments and the Trump administration, have pushed ahead with their reopening plans despite the uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus pandemic and widespread opposition by workers to a premature and life-threatening return to work.

Over the weekend, reported cases of COVID-19 in the US surpassed 1.5 million, with over 90,000 deaths, according to the Worldometer web site. Throughout last week, over 20,000 new cases and over 1,000 deaths were reported each day. Chicago, where Ford is restarting production at an assembly plant on the economically hard-hit South Side tomorrow, is not even projected to reach its peak in cases until mid-June, according to state health officials' models.

Approximately 133,000 workers are expected to return to automotive assembly plants this week, the Associated Press has estimated. This does not include the tens of thousands more at auto parts suppliers, many of whom were recalled last week. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that roughly 400,000 autoworkers did not work in April due to plant shutdowns.

The ruling class views the auto industry reopening both as a test run to gauge the level of resistance by workers and key to restarting the flow of profits for America's corporate and financial elite. "Restarting the entire auto ecosystem is how we restart the economy," Ford's CEO Jim Farley said on a recent conference call cited by the *New York Times*. "The auto industry is America's economic engine."

The restart at General Motors, Ford, and Fiat Chrysler today, along with the Subaru plant in Lafayette, Indiana, follows the earlier reopening of Honda and Toyota last week, and of BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Hyundai, and Kia at the beginning of May. Volkswagen was also expected to restart its plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee yesterday.

Last weekend, electric carmaker Tesla also reopened, defying an order by California county health officials. Billionaire CEO Elon Musk, who has promoted conspiracy theories downplaying the lethality of the virus, threatened to

move the company's operations to Texas or Nevada if he was not allowed to restart, perversely describing social distancing efforts as "fascism."

But as the *Financial Times* noted Friday, "Mr. Musk may also have had sound financial reasons to act out. UBS analyst Patrick Hummel estimates that Tesla is foregoing upwards of \$500m in revenues a week amid the shutdown, money that a company that has never had a profitable year can ill-afford to forego." Scott Panier, founder of a car subscription service and friend of Musk, added that the billionaire executive is a "very libertarian, free-market type" who has "never wavered on that stuff."

The companies, the United Auto Workers union, and the corporate media have all touted new safety measures such as temperature checks and screening questionnaires in the run-up to the May 18 start-date. But the profit interests of Musk and his fellow oligarchs are incompatible with the provision of adequate protective measures.

"They are not testing people so the one standing next to you could be a carrier and doesn't know it," a worker at a parts supplier in Toledo, Ohio, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Nobody in their right mind would want to go back with workers breathing on top of each other."

Even with the shutdown of the auto industry since mid-March, forced by the wildcat strikes of autoworkers in a number of states that month, COVID-19 has claimed 22 workers at Fiat Chrysler, 11 at Ford, and one contract worker at GM.

The dangers posed by the lack of regular, universal testing were shown again last week, when a worker at FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant tested positive for the coronavirus after working to prep the plant for several days. According to others at the plant, the worker had forthrightly reported that she had a cough on FCA's questionnaire, and yet was called back to work the next day after management asked whether the cough could be due to other causes, such as allergies.

Workers have widely shared the understanding that it is not yet safe to return to work. A worker at a Lear auto parts

plant in Michigan said, “We have a Facebook group and have been talking about it. We sent a survey that got 200 responses, and only three people wanted to go back, just because they didn’t want to be stuck at home anymore.

“Right now, there’s still safety concerns. You still have a ton of people testing positive, an enormous amount of positive tests every day, and it’s really scary. By us working so close together, there’s not enough room between us to keep us safe.”

“Going back to work puts our whole house in danger,” a worker at the Ford Chicago Assembly said. “I’m afraid of catching the virus and spreading it to my own children. Returning back to a plant with so many other people or sending my children out to be looked after gives us a higher risk of being infected.”

The auto companies, the UAW and the government are also attempting to use extreme financial pressure, including the threat of losing unemployment benefits or permanently losing their jobs, to strongarm the workers back into the plants. The companies in particular hope to blackmail temporary workers, who receive less unemployment pay and have fewer benefits, key concessions given up by the UAW in recent contracts.

Temporary part-time workers, also known as TPTs, can be fired or lose any chance of being rolled over to full-time if they refuse to work when called in. Fiat Chrysler is reportedly ordering all TPTs to report to work Monday morning because the company anticipates that large numbers of older workers on the “A Crew” will not show up and use sick time or Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) time.

Ford has reportedly hired 1,300 temporary workers because of anticipated absenteeism. A Ford Dearborn Stamping Plant worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I’m extremely worried. I go back on Monday night. If I don’t go back, I’m sure to lose my job. If they think this won’t affect our safety, they are nuts.”

A number of anxious commentaries over risks facing the auto industry restart have appeared in the corporate press in recent days, concerned about the vulnerability of US supply chains to disruption due to the impact of COVID-19 in Mexico. Mercedes-Benz, owned by Germany’s Daimler AG, was forced to idle its plant in Vance, Alabama on Friday because of a shortage of parts. Dozens of workers have died at auto parts plants in Mexico, including 20 at Michigan-based auto supplier Lear Corporation’s facilities in Ciudad Juarez.

The Trump administration and corporate lobbyists have been exerting significant pressure on the Mexican government to allow suppliers for US businesses to reopen in time for the May 18 auto industry start date. The administration of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López

Obrador has signaled that it will oblige, announcing Friday that auto companies in the country can restart before the country’s nominal lockdown ends on June 1.

For its part, the UAW’s “Solidarity House” has gone virtually silent in recent days, issuing no statements from President Rory Gamble since last Monday, after spending weeks falsely claiming a return to work is now safe. But local UAW officials have continued to beat the drum for a return to work and advocate for the companies’ bottom line. “Everybody is burning cash,” Todd Dunn, president of UAW Local 862 in Louisville, Kentucky told the *New York Times*. “And the company needs to produce, or we won’t have a company to go back to.”

Workers will not be protected by management, corrupt unions or federal and state safety regulators, which are all beholden to the corporations’ profit interests. That is why they must take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every factory and workplace. These committees should select trusted medical experts committed to protect human life and oversee health and safety conditions in the factories. This includes the provision of protective equipment, enforcing social distancing and demanding regular testing of workers, regardless of whether they show symptoms.

These measures must be implemented regardless of their impact on production and the bottom line of the corporations. If management refuses to implement these basic precautions, if supervisors conceal information about infections in the plants or retaliate against workers for informing their co-workers about unsafe conditions, the committees reserve the right to call all workers out. The guiding principle of these safety committees must be that workers’ lives take precedence over corporate profit.

“Who is going to be held responsible if the worst comes?” the worker at Ford Chicago Assembly asked. “I feel that we are heading for a big setback by starting too early. And not only are workers put on the front lines, but their families and children are too. All for an extra dollar for the company.”



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