

“They don’t care about the safety of the workers”

As assembly plants reopen US autoworkers speak on premature rush to restart production

Our reporters
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Over the weekend scores of autoworkers have been in contact with the World Socialist Web Site to express their concerns over the premature return to work being organized by the auto companies and auto parts suppliers with the support of state authorities and the corporate media.

Workers began returning to auto factories today for the restart of production at assembly plants throughout North America. The return to work has been sanctioned by the United Auto Workers and the governors of Midwestern states including Democrat Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan. This is despite the fact that lockdown orders are still in effect in Michigan and other areas, under conditions where COVID-19 is far from contained.

Enormous pressure is being brought to bear on workers, including the threat of termination and loss of unemployment benefits to get workers back into the factories. Despite this, there is strong opposition by workers who are seeking a way to collectively resist the mad drive for production and profits by the corporations and their union front men.

The following are some comments received by the WSWs Autoworker newsletter.

GM Flint Assembly

A GM Flint Assembly worker said she is scheduled to go back to work Monday. “I’m scared to death. Normally we’d go in at 6:42 am, but we’ve been told to be in at 9:42 am due to a ‘safety orientation.’ We received five flimsy paper masks in the mail. These are not N95 masks. They last two hours, and I don’t think they do much of anything. Then we’ll have alcohol wipes. I want to go back to work because we need the money, but I am very worried, I don’t want to die for the company. I think GM will use tomorrow’s opening to show off in front of the news crews. The company doesn’t care about us.

“My daughter works at a parts distribution warehouse. Several weeks ago there were six COVID cases there. They never really shutdown; they asked for volunteers in March. My daughter did not volunteer, and during her second week of layoff she received a very nasty letter from the company that in order to keep her health insurance, she’d have to pay \$1,905 to have coverage for the next six months or come back to work for one week in April. Now they’re all back and very worried. I agree with you that the union is on the side of the company and they have not opposed the return to work.”

FCA Trenton Engine

“A and C crew are going in tomorrow, while B Crew is going Wednesday. Workers at Ford feel the same as we do; scared and angry about going back in so soon. The company thinks ‘we lost billions so send them back to work.’ They don’t care.

“Who will take care of my family if I get sick? They are packing people into buildings and they don’t know who is sick or not. Those temperature tests are not reliable. Some people don’t have symptoms. These big wigs sit at home safe and sound while we go in to risk our lives. Are we essential?

“I’m worried about my family and putting them at risk. I would love to see management try to say something to us during this time. It’ll be like a ticking time bomb with workers. No one will stand for this.

“For older workers they want them to die so they don’t have to pay retirement or benefits. My relatives work at [FCA] Warren Truck. One has asthma and the other cancer. They are fearful. This is like making us walk the plank. It’s like walking to our death.”

Faurecia

A worker at the Faurecia parts plant in Saline, Michigan, said, “This is ridiculous! They don’t care about the safety of the workers. It’s all about selling cars and money. They are bringing the low seniority workers back this week because they are afraid to try to do this to the high seniority people.

“It’s not safe. Workers that have been in there this week have already posted on Facebook that the plant is not clean. This is not right! The place should have been spic and span before anybody went back.”

Another worker at Faurecia said, “Our union rep said we have to wash our hands before we enter the building. They’ll give us two masks and two gloves. And right now there’s no refrigerator, no microwave and no fan in there. They have also said they would take our temperature, but that doesn’t tell you whether you have it or not. They’re saying you might have it, but not know and you could spread it around.

“I’m concerned because my understanding is that we are still standing close to each other at work. You got the mask on but ... really they’re just taking our temperature and not testing. And I don’t know why they won’t test us. How are they going to keep us alive if they don’t do that? How

much is a test, anyway?

“Not too long ago they had on the news that some people walked out of Amazon because someone had gotten sick.

“We’re returning back to work and I don’t feel safe because they’re not doing the testing. It’s not safe to me. We had people in my family who passed away due to COVID-19.

“They’re going by seniority to try to get at least a hundred people back to work. A lot of people said ‘no.’ They did not want to go back because they did not feel safe, because they know someone from the Big Three who caught the virus already.”

Flex-N-Gate

Feeling uncomfortable with an order to return to work beginning Monday, May 18, a number of workers from Flex-N-Gate, an auto supplier company with plants in the Detroit area, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* over the weekend.

Flex-N-Gate, a manufacturer of bumpers and other parts for all the major automakers, is owned by Shahid Khan, currently worth over \$20 billion, according to Forbes. The company has grown since 1980 to 64 facilities globally, with 24,000 employees. In 2012, the Urbana, Illinois plant sent 11 workers to the hospital suffering from the effects of sulfuric acid fumes. The Occupational, Safety and Health Administration fined the company a mere \$57,000. In 2011, a facility owned by Khan in Highland Park, Michigan, adjacent to Detroit, was found to have leaked hexavalent chromium over years.

The workers at Flex-N-Gate overwhelmingly feel it is too soon to go back to work, with COVID-19 continuing to ravage the Detroit area.

“They never even shut the plant down because of COVID,” explained one worker from the Detroit facility, which employs about 300. “There was a fire in the plant on March 18, and there was so much smoke we had to evacuate. Then they wanted us to go back in but we said there was too much smoke. Then we found out one of the workers had both tested positive for COVID-19 and also had pneumonia.” It was only following the fire that the plant closed. Then Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer ordered all non-essential businesses closed on March 22.

“They say they are setting up a tent in the parking lot to take our temperature when we go in, and if we go out for any reason we have to do it again, but I just don’t feel comfortable,” the worker continued. The fact that someone can transmit COVID-19 without having a temperature or other symptoms is something most workers being called back in the premature rush to “reopen America” are acutely aware of.

Another Flex-N-Gate worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* she felt that the company was “treating us like we’re lying” if they answer “yes” to any of the five questions the company sent out in its return-to-work health questionnaire. She reported that after responding that she had “contact with a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case,” someone from the Human Resources department called to question who the person was, what their name was, and other personal details. “I just told her ‘I can’t give you medical information about someone else.’ She was asking me to violate confidentiality and I can’t do that.”

A third worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “I don’t want to doubt the safety practices, but the place was never clean. There was never even any soap in the bathrooms, there were sewage problems for months, and there was hardly any hand sanitizer around.” Before the governor closed businesses due to the pandemic, “There were no cleaning solutions. We were told to request them, to clean our work areas. We can hardly leave the line, how would we ask for cleaning solutions?”

The same worker, expressing her distress at being forced back to work,

said, “They should allow those who aren’t comfortable going back to at least continue to collect unemployment benefits, but they won’t. Even Amazon workers could get unemployment if they felt uncomfortable. I have had several deaths in my family from COVID. We just had a funeral today, and we don’t even have time to grieve, and they just want us to go back to work.”

A worker at another Detroit area parts plant that is non-union spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter*,

Responding to Dr. Rick Bright’s testimony, he paraphrased, “Unless the country gets its act together, next fall could be the worst ever. And Trump attacked him. I wonder what in the world is going on.

“It blows my mind what is going on in the world. ... You’ve got these multi-millionaires running these companies, talking about going under and all the money they are losing. But they want to call me back to work and watch me get sick and possibly die?”

“The government ... passed the CARES Act with \$3 trillion, but they don’t want to talk about providing healthcare or a universal basic income. ...

“The whole world situation scares the crap out of me. On top of everything else, we have to worry about the virus. I used to pay \$50 per month for health insurance. Now I have to pay COBRA which is \$600 a month or I would lose it. The people who own these companies are millionaires and they really can’t help their employees with their health care during a time of crisis?”

FCA Sterling Heights Assembly

A former Fiat Chrysler Warren Truck Assembly worker who transferred to Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) said, “I know a lot of people who have passed from COVID here and there are more than what they’re saying in the media. A lot of them were in the paint shop. A bunch of people from Warren Truck actually had it and the UAW didn’t do anything. They kept us working.

“They said they’ll take people’s temperatures but it doesn’t prove anything. They gave out a health questionnaire but you have people who will be afraid to fill it out because they’re scared and have to go back to work. They’re trusting people to fill out a questionnaire correctly and then they sent out some paper-type thermometers. The president sent an email out saying if people are here and start getting sick, they’ll send medical help out.

“The plants, especially Sterling Heights Assembly, are so big—here’s thousands of people. We got basically four different entrances: north body, north paint, south body, south paint, and then you’ve got the main building. A lot of them come from the city, (Detroit) and we know the outbreak was really bad there.

“You’re saying a hair or nail salon can’t open, but you’ll let a place that holds thousands of people open back up? What is that going to do?

“Depending on the area you’re in—say, trim, or those types of jobs—you can’t social distance in there! They’re saying that stuff for the media, but it’s impossible. It’s just impossible.

“The email the UAW sent out said you can take a leave of absence, but then you don’t get paid. They don’t care. And I’m pissed that the people who are supposed to be protecting us are not.

“As we see with [UAW President] Gary Jones and all these other people, they’re all caught up in court right now. That’s because they have been undermining us for over a decade. The UAW is just not there for workers anymore, they’re there for the company. Whatever the company says, they do it. And I think the only reason they shut SHAP down when they did was because they had a skilled trades guy in there who died. That

first week in March, after he died, then they shut it down. And even that guy had been all over the place working.

“There are people who take care of the elderly, there are people who no longer have childcare. I have a [friend] who works at JNAP [FCA Jefferson North Assembly Plant] and her daughter has asthma. She was debating whether to go back to work or not. Even if she does, now she has to find somebody to watch her daughter while she’s at work.

“Someone said that the international [UAW], they’re going to have all those guys get a test. But they can’t make sure every worker gets a test?

“How much did [Trump] just put into the stock market? Trillions. That’s all he’s worried about—let’s keep the stock market looking good.

“I just heard that even Amazon and Kroger—they’re taking away that extra \$2 extra hazard pay, as if COVID is over. It’s not going away anytime soon.

“I’m trying to see what’s the urgency to build all these vehicles again. Are people really going to be out here breaking their necks to buy these vehicles that they’re in such a hurry to build? It’s not just a ‘Michigan’ thing, this is a worldwide thing. We have Dodge Ram trucks sitting there for 50, 60, 70 thousand dollars, and there are people out here suffering badly who don’t even have food to eat. Who are they even building these vehicles for?

“The UAW is not for us anymore. The tier one workers went over ten years with no raise, no bonus, no profit sharing, no nothing, the whole time they’re saying ‘We’re trying to help save the company,’ when all along the companies had been profitable and it was the union lying to us.

“Even that strike [GM strike in 2019]—I think they called that strike because they’re trying to get some credibility back with the people. They did that to keep the heat off of them for a minute, but that didn’t work. Then they say ‘Buy American,’ but we’re not even owned by Americans—we’re owned by Italians, it doesn’t even make any sense.

“Look at Amazon. This man [Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos] is about to be a trillionaire. The (Amazon) workers were just complaining about their safety—they’re in there packing masks but he won’t even give them one wear. How crazy is that?”



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