

Hundreds of Mexican maquiladora workers dying after back-to-work orders take effect

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The decision by Wall Street and the Trump administration to restart production has produced an unprecedented health crisis in northern Mexico, where workers at maquiladora sweatshops that produce parts for export to the US are contracting coronavirus by the tens of thousands and dying at alarming rates.

On Saturday, the health secretary of Northern Baja California announced that 432 of the 519 people who have officially died from the virus in the state were maquiladora workers. In Baja cities like Tijuana and Mexicali, as well as other border cities like Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, doctors report that their hospitals are overflowing with sick maquiladora workers, some of whom are dying in their work uniforms. Mexican maquiladora workers make between US\$8 to \$10 per day.

Hospital officials say the government's official death toll and total number of positive cases nationwide—5,177 and 49,219 respectively, as of yesterday afternoon—vastly understate the real impact. They claim that hundreds or thousands more maquiladora workers are dying than is officially acknowledged, and that the Mexican government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador is obscuring the real toll in an effort to force workers back to work.

An investigation published yesterday by the *San Diego Union-Tribune* shows the death toll may be ten times higher than the official count:

“A review of 120 death certificates provided by a worker at a crematorium in the northern border city of Ciudad Juárez showed a total of 63 listed ‘probably COVID-19’ as the cause of death. Another 30 named pneumonia or other respiratory ailments often associated with coronavirus. Only 12 listed COVID-19 as the confirmed cause, meaning that only those cases would become part of the official count.”

The end of the last work week saw a spike in new positive cases nationwide, with 2,400 testing positive on May 14 and 15. But testing is almost nonexistent in Mexico, which has a rate of 0.5 tests per 1,000 people, compared with 27 per 1,000 people in the United States, where the need still far exceeds current testing levels.

But even by the limited official count, one out of every 1,000 Tijuana residents has already tested positive—worse than some of the hardest hit parts of the United States, including Wayne County, Michigan.

The spike is the direct product of López Obrador's “back to work” initiative, ordered from Washington and Wall Street. In Tijuana, the Mexican government opened 100 maquiladoras at the beginning of May, despite protests from workers. Yesterday, a Tijuana business association said the city's maquiladoras were functioning at 60 percent capacity.

López Obrador has responded to the growing death toll by demanding an even more rapid return to work. Earlier this month, López Obrador stated that auto parts production at maquiladoras would reopen on June 1. Several days ago, however, the government reneged and has begun forcing plants to open this week, violating its own regulation.

The announcement came after GM CEO Mary Barra told investors that the company has been in “regular dialogue” with López Obrador's administration and said the discussions had been “very constructive,” adding: “We're in a good position as we talk to country leaders.” General Motors then announced it would force workers at its Silao facility in Guanajuato back to work this Wednesday.

Reopening Mexican production is imperative for American industry. Yesterday, the *Detroit News* explained, “nearly 40 percent of all part imports into

the US come from Mexico, meaning the success of any domestic industry restart will rest heavily on a successful simultaneous rev-up south of the border.”

Ambrose Conroy, CEO of the pro-industry consulting firm Seraph, told CNBC, “Stoppage in Mexico would cause problems within a week.” The companies learned this in early 2019, when 70,000 maquiladora auto parts workers in Matamoros launched a weeks-long wildcat strike, slowing production across North America.

The Trump administration has applied tremendous pressure to force the reopening of Mexican factories as quickly as possible, regardless of the human cost. On April 30, US Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau threatened, “You don’t have ‘workers’ if you close all the companies and they move elsewhere,” urging plants to reopen despite the resulting loss of life. “It seems myopic to suggest that economic effects don’t matter,” he said.

The Pentagon has issued similar warnings, explaining that Mexican maquiladora workers produce parts that are necessary for the American imperialist war machine. On April 30, the *New York Times* said the Pentagon’s “talks with the Mexican government have been successful,” quoting spokeswoman Ellen Lord, who said, “We appreciate Mexico’s ongoing positive response.”

Shortly after his discussions with the Pentagon, López Obrador appeared on national television on May 2 and declared: “We are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.” Daily positive tests have doubled since then.

Mexican workers are not the only ones whose lives the auto companies are prepared to sacrifice. In the US and Canada, yesterday was the first day of production at dozens of auto plants, and workers told the WSWS that next to nothing had been done to clean the facilities or protect workers’ lives.

The spike in the death toll in Mexico’s industrial cities shows what autoworkers in the US and Canada should expect in the coming weeks. The fact that workers in the US and Mexico are handling parts coming out of maquiladoras where masses of workers are infected is another sign that their lives are in danger. The virus can survive on metal and glass for almost one week.

Across North America, the trade unions are serving as the company’s enforcers, threatening workers that they

will be fired if they do not return to work and filling workers’ ears with sweet phrases about nonexistent safety precautions at work.

In the US, former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell was released from prison due to concerns that he might contract the coronavirus in jail. As the companies sentence tens of thousands of workers back into the dangerous auto plants, Jewell, who was convicted for accepting bribes from the company in exchange for forcing sellout contracts, will serve the rest of *his* sentence from the safety and comfort of his home.

The corporations, governments and unions will send wave upon wave of workers to their deaths until the workers recognize that they are strong enough to organize their own response and take action to protect their lives and the lives of their loved ones waiting for them at home.

The companies and unions will oppose anything that cuts down on line speed and profit. But the right to life is more important than company profit. To defend their lives, workers must elect committees to take control of their own health and safety conditions at work. They must elect worker-inspectors to patrol the facility, share violations on social media and exercise the power to stop production to fix anything they deem to be a danger to even a single worker’s life.

These basic demands place workers up against the capitalist system. But workers in Mexico, the US, Canada and worldwide possess tremendous social power that they can and must unleash together to stop the deaths and reorganize production to meet human need.



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