

Ford Chicago Assembly worker tests positive for COVID-19 after North American auto plants reopen

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As autoworkers reported to work Monday across North America in the midst of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, there were reports that several workers had tested positive for the disease at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP). According to a post on the United Auto Workers Local 551 Facebook page, a veteran worker tested positive and was sent home Monday.

This follows the confirmed infection of another autoworker last week at the Fiat Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly plant outside of Detroit.

Workers are expressing growing concern over the inadequacy of safety measures being carried out by the auto corporations. The Trump administration is spearheading an effort to force a return to work, eliminating all pretense of combatting the spread of the coronavirus. The auto plants are a front line in this campaign and threaten to become centers for an acceleration of the pandemic.

According to the post on the UAW local union page, last Wednesday night a Ford Chicago Assembly worker felt feverish. On Thursday morning, she still did not feel well and decided to stay home from work. Later the same day she went to the local hospital and got tested for COVID-19. On Monday, she reported to work and filled out the survey reporting her health issues. The worker was then notified of the test results.

There are unconfirmed accounts of other workers infected as well.

According to workers, CAP shut down temporarily Tuesday. Under the terms of a letter signed by the UAW and Ford, if a worker tests positive in a factory, Ford will close the building where that worker is employed for deep cleaning.

However, workers said Ford stopped production only for several hours after the infection was reported. An angry CAP worker wrote, “Where’s the 24-hour shutdown for cleaning & disinfecting as they said to us in March before our plant stopped production March 18th?” He continued,

“Tell me, Ford, how all of us employees & our loved ones will all remain safe & healthy if they don’t properly clean & disinfect even after a positive result! Apparently, Ford was concerned about a few but NOT us ALL!”

Another CAP worker said of the incident, “Patient A returned to work last week to assist preparing for start-up Monday. She didn’t report Monday and alerted the plant of a positive COVID test. They didn’t alert the 14 coworkers she was with last week of her positive results until the end of shift yesterday, when they were told to self-quarantine.

“Our annex building at the SHO center [where the hybrid models of the Ford Explorer and Lincoln Aviator are finished] got word of two positives of employees who were at work yesterday but not today. They were dismissed at lunch. Production in the main building was released at eight hours.”

The worker sharply criticized the inadequacy of the safety precautions at the plant, saying, “There is no way to stay six feet apart. There are no pre-detection methods or even detection methods that don’t allow for an infected person to enter the corridor we all walk through first. Also, at the scanning stations we remove all PPE to be scanned, so an area everyone goes through is one of the areas we are least protected.”

In the days before the official restart of assembly lines by the Detroit-based automakers Monday, there were glowing media reports touting management preparations, including social distancing measures and health screenings, to protect workers from the deadly and highly infectious disease.

Workers contacting the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* have reported serious lapses of social distancing protocols and other health safeguards, refuting claims by management and the UAW that it is safe to resume production.

A worker at Adient, a seating supplier for the Fiat Chrysler Jeep plant in Toledo, said that at their factory “people are still upset about the lack of social distancing. They have put

up cheap plastic sheeting that's ripping, but we are standing not even one foot apart.

"A lot of people are scared and don't want to go in, so they are using their time off. They only made 50 seats in seven hours Monday. Usually, its 50-60 an hour. So that's all FCA is building. We are the only supplier for seats. They are going to force us to work."

The worker reported that at the Jeep plant some hand washing stations had already run out of soap, and management was claiming that supplies had been "backordered."

Another parts worker in northern Ohio said, "Nobody I talked to, and we do talk despite trying to do the social distancing, said they really wanted to come back."

Many workers spoke about the difficulty of wearing masks and face shields in the intense heat present in most work environments in the auto industry.

Expressing the feelings of many workers, an FCA Warren Truck worker told Reuters Monday morning his feelings about going back into the plant, "I don't know where people have been, I don't know what they've been doing. I don't like it, but what can I do, really?"

A full-time C Crew worker at Ford Chicago Assembly told the WSWS, "My shift has not gone back into the plant, but I heard from some coworkers who volunteered to go in last week that they had set up hand washing stations, they have masks ordered from Amazon, and a piece of tape that changes color when your temperature is too high that you have to put on your forehead before going inside. But this virus is unpredictable; some people don't have symptoms, so how can they know who is spreading it?"

Underlining the fact that the restart of production was based on economic pressure, not medical science, was the response of the financial markets. Wall Street hailed the restart of auto production, with GM's shares up more than 9 percent on Monday. FCA shares rose 7.3 percent, and Ford shares were up 6.7 percent.

"They know that there is going to be a second wave of the pandemic," said the Chicago Ford C Crew worker. "Some people are saying that going back into the plants right now is suicide or genocide. I think that the company is starving us out. They know we have bills to pay and that some people feel they have no choice but to go back to work.

"The companies have the power to give us everything we need to stay home for two to three more months, but they don't because all they care about is their profits."

He added, "And who's really running the government? It's corporate America. It's not run in the interests of the working class. I think that the difference between before, when the companies were closing plants and cutting jobs, and now, when they're telling us to get back into work and

that they can't stay closed, is that now they really see the threat to their wealth. Before, they felt like they had power and control over things, but now they don't. [The pandemic] is going to cause a big shift in the world."

The United Auto Workers is fully in support of the premature return to work. UAW Local 862 President Todd Dunn in remarks to Reuters identified with management. "Ultimately, we're in this together" he said. "Because if we don't build trucks, Ford Motor Company is gone."

A Ford worker in Louisville told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that at the Kentucky Truck plant, "Process coaches and people [are being] sent home because of exposure to the virus. As usual, the UAW has done nothing. They are puppets of the company. No one knows for sure what to do about this virus, but piling people in these plants with little to no air circulation is criminal."

The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* call for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the UAW in every factory and workplace to ensure that workers are protected and that medically approved practices are enforced. These committees must assert workers' right to life and health over corporate profits.

The forced return of workers to the auto factories is exposing the fundamental clash between the demands of the working class for a safe work environment and the insatiable drive for profit spearheaded by Wall Street. These life-and-death requirements are not negotiable. They point to the necessity for workers' control over production in connection with the demand for the public ownership of the auto companies and other major industries.



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