

“We need our jobs, but our lives and health are more important”

COVID-19 cases at Ford plants in Detroit, Chicago as anger grows over inadequate safety measures

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Ford was forced to temporarily shut down its Dearborn Truck Plant in suburban Detroit Wednesday afternoon after a worker tested positive for COVID-19. The worker, who was sent home to self-quarantine for 14 days, worked 10-hour shifts on Monday and Tuesday in the plant’s chassis department, coming into contact with an unknown number of workers and union officials.

The truck plant was the second Ford facility to close just days after the auto corporations brought tens of thousands of workers back after an eight-week shutdown amid claims by management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) that factory changes and new protocols had made the plants safe. On Tuesday morning, hundreds of workers were sent home from Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) after two workers at a factory annex tested positive.

New cases of infection have been reported at the Lear Corp. plant in Hammond, Indiana, which supplies seats to the Chicago Ford plant. Workers at the Magna Seating plant in Detroit, which supplies Fiat Chrysler, also reported there were several cases at the plant, but these have not yet been confirmed. Workers on a Facebook page at the Toledo Jeep plant have posted that there are also cases at their plant, and some workers were sent home after a worker tested positive.

Videos sent by workers from inside the Dearborn plant show workers standing around and not working. It is likely that management decided to send them home before they simply walked out.

In a crude attempt to mollify the concerns and anger of workers and prevent a repeat of the walkouts and job actions over unsafe conditions that forced the mid-March shutdown of the auto industry, CEO Jim Hackett, Executive Chairman Bill Ford Jr., and UAW Vice President Gerald Kariem toured the Dearborn plant earlier in the day, garbed in protective personal equipment. According to a Ford statement, the tour was “to observe firsthand the robust safety measures Ford has put in place to help support a safe and healthy environment for the company’s workforce.”

GM CEO Mary Barra was scheduled to do the same publicity stunt with UAW officials at the Delta Township plant near Lansing, Michigan. President Trump will be in Rawsonville, Michigan today with Ford officials to tout the reopening of the

auto industry, although whether he plans to wear a facemask has reportedly been a cause of anxiety for company officials and state officials, who waived the ban on unnecessary tours for the president and corporate heads.

“Being at Ford is not safe,” a Chicago Ford worker told the WSWS. “We definitely opened back too soon. The cases are going to increase and not slow down. We all need our jobs, but at the same time our lives and health are more important.

“People are in fear because they don’t trust the company. They feel if they miss days due to [COVID-19] they’ll be replaced. The workers feel like the company should close the plant because people in the plants have died or are in intensive care right now as we speak. We need to take action immediately,” the Chicago Ford worker said.

After the Dearborn closure, Ford claimed it was “deep cleaning and disinfecting the work area, equipment, team area and the path that the [infected] team member took.” The company added, “We expect to resume production tonight.” Workers on the “B Crew” were scheduled to report at 6:00 p.m. Wednesday night, meaning production of Ford’s most profitable vehicle, the F-150 pickup truck, would be halted after less than five hours.’

Autoworkers have noted that the letter sent out by UAW Vice President Gerald Kariem in March said any facility where a worker tested positive should be closed for 24 hours, citing Centers for Disease Control guidelines. In fact, the CDC recommends waiting 24 hours before beginning a thorough cleaning.

Workers on the “B” shift at the Chicago Assembly plant, who build the Ford Explorers, Lincoln Aviator SUVs and police cruisers, were robocalled in to work Tuesday night, but sent home around midnight after the shift began. After a brief restart Wednesday morning, the plant shut down operations again, sending workers on the “A” shift home around 11:30 a.m. after company representatives reported a shortage of parts from a supplier.

A Lear worker in Hammond told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that one worker on the sub-assembly side of the plant tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday and that workers on the “A” shift

Wednesday were sent home around 8:30 a.m., with the company promising to “deep clean” the building.

“I found out that it was a woman working on front seats on the Sub [sub-assembly] side, on the trim station. Another man who was working next to her has been told to quarantine for 14 days. We are in here working, and we don’t have enough [workers] to run the lines.”

Another worker reported on conditions at the Lear Plant. “Hand sanitizer and disinfectant have been watered down. The men’s restroom has just one soap dispenser, so most people have not washed hands. No one wears safety glasses or face shields. There is a sign that says face masks are required and must cover our nose and mouth, but it is not enforced. Some have them hanging off one ear; others have them below their chin with their nose and mouth exposed.”

UAW Local 2335 did nothing to protect or inform Lear workers about the case except to send the following message, “We are aware of the occurrence at Lear. We are in contact with the Company, and we had a CDC-approved company clean the facility. A robocall has gone out as well as an OmniAlert. We will continue to closely monitor the situation and keep you informed of any and all factual changes.”

Lear was the first parts supplier to publish a “Safe Work Playbook” as part of a national framework for restarting the US auto industry during the pandemic. In addition to the confirmed case in Indiana, at least 18 workers have died of COVID-19 who work at the Rio Bravo plant in Mexico, one of 10 Lear factories in Ciudad Juárez, just across the border from El Paso, Texas. Workers at the Rio Bravo plant make seats for Mercedes Benz, which has had to halt production in an Alabama plant due to parts shortages from Mexico.

Workers have been sending in emails and photographs to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, exposing the real conditions in the plants, contradicting the claims of the corporations, the UAW and the news media. One worker at Fiat Chrysler’s (FCA) Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio sent a picture of the flimsy surgical face masks which the company is giving them. The masks break easily during the course of a shift.

A worker at GM’s Flint truck plant said, “I was working up until the shutdown, and they said they were taking all these sanitary precautions. But they weren’t doing anything. We have nuts and bolts that we touch that the other shifts touch too. There’s no way they’ve made it safe for workers. I definitely do not want to build a truck in a mask and safety glasses. It’s already getting hot outside, and it’s going to be very tough to work in those conditions.”

Describing the immense financial pressure being exerted on workers, she added, “I haven’t gotten my unemployment yet, and I have two little girls I need to support. So I have to go back to work. We stopped work on March 26, and I filed for unemployment the next Monday. I’ve had eight certifications, and none of them has been processed. I was on the phone waiting for five hours, and finally I reached someone, and she just said to stop calling.”

Workers at Ford’s assembly and Kentucky truck plants in Louisville, Kentucky, which together have over 12,000 workers,

have reported that safety protocols that both the UAW and Ford promised are being openly flouted.

One worker posted on Facebook that he had tested positive for COVID-19 less than two weeks before going back to work and was cleared due to not having fever symptoms. “I went to work, security let me in, and went to medical. ... It took them 30 minutes to see what policy they were going to use as my doctor’s note said I could go ahead and go back. I’m cleared for work even though I’m COVID-19 positive because the note says once there are no signs of fever, I can return to work.”

Another worker from Louisville remarked on Facebook that social distancing was not being enforced because jobs were not restructured to accommodate a safe distance between workers before the reopening of the plant. “I’ve been training a new hire for two days straight, and there are two jobs doubled up on each side of me.”

A Fiat Chrysler worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit emailed the *Autoworker Newsletter* saying, “It is very premature for workers to return back to work during this period of time (Pandemic). If the UAW members are allowed to get tested before returning to work, they have to return to work. ALL workers should be given the same equal options. Workers are returning to work with symptoms and later testing positive for COVID-19. This puts everyone and their families’ lives at risk!”

The Democratic Party has been just as eager and willing as the Republicans to reopen the auto factories without any concern for the health and safety of the working class. Democratic Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer, seen as a top choice for presidential candidate Joseph Biden’s running mate, greenlighted the restart of all manufacturing in the state on May 11, even though she is keeping limited stay-at-home orders in place until the end of the month.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges autoworkers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corrupt UAW, to oversee the safety measures in the plants with the assistance of trusted medical experts committed to the defense of lives, not corporate profit. These committees must fight for workers’ control over line speed and production so that operations can be staggered to allow for universal testing and contact tracing and the isolation and immediate treatment of ill workers. At the same time, the most up-to-date and high-quality PPE must be guaranteed. If conditions are not satisfactory, these committees will have the right to halt production until a safe environment can be guaranteed.



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