

Georgetown, Kentucky Toyota plant remains open as autoworker tests positive for COVID-19

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In yet another case of COVID-19 infection in a major auto plant, Toyota reported that a worker at its giant Georgetown, Kentucky auto plant has tested positive for the disease. This week, workers also tested positive for COVID-19 at auto plants in Michigan, Illinois and Indiana.

The Toyota worker, employed by an outside contractor, was last on-site on May 14. Despite the positive test result, Toyota has not shut down the plant to perform cleaning, let alone quarantine workers who may have been in contact with the employee.

Toyota spokesman Rick Hesterberg reported: “The affected employee will remain in self isolation, and will not return to work until cleared by a physician. The health and safety of our team members, business partners and community are a top priority. We are working with state and local health officials on this issue and will continue to follow their guidance on all proper protocols.”

The plant resumed operation on May 11, after 5 weeks of shutdown, meaning the employee may have unknowingly spread the disease for 4 days, transmitting it to other workers, with it now possibly spreading silently among the 10,000 workers employed there.

The nature of the disease is such that a person can be infected and contagious for days without showing symptoms. This means that an infected worker in a factory that employs thousands, working close to one another, touching and using the same equipment and breathing the same recirculated air, is in an environment that can promote the rapid spread of the disease. This has already been demonstrated by the thousands of cases reported at meatpacking plants.

In the absence of testing, it is likely that many more

infected workers are in the auto plants, unaware that they are carriers.

This has not stopped auto companies from rushing ahead to restart production. As the pandemic claims thousands of lives every week, the auto corporations, with the full backing of the government and unions, are demanding a return to work, placing profits over the safety of workers and their families.

On Tuesday morning, hundreds of workers were sent home from Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) after two workers tested positive for COVID-19.

On Wednesday afternoon, a Ford Dearborn Truck Plant worker tested positive for COVID-19, forcing Ford to temporarily shut down its plant in suburban Detroit. As at Toyota, the worker was sent home to self-quarantine for 14 days after having worked 10-hour shifts on Monday and Tuesday in the plant’s chassis department after coming into contact with an unknown number of workers and union representatives. The Dearborn Truck Plant is the second Ford facility to close this week, only days after the auto corporations forced tens of thousands of workers back into the plants after an eight-week shutdown. Both management and the United Auto Workers sought to convince workers the factory protocols have made the plants safe.

Also on Wednesday, a worker tested positive for COVID-19 at the Lear Corporation plant in Hammond, Indiana, which supplies seats to the Chicago Ford plant, leading to the temporary shutdown of the facility. Additionally, while not confirmed, workers at the Magna Seating plant in Detroit, which supplies Fiat Chrysler, also reported positive cases at their plant. Moreover, workers reported on Facebook of positive cases at the FCA Toledo Jeep plant and that some

workers were sent home.

As their coworkers succumb to the deadly disease, autoworkers have expressed their outrage at being forced to work under unsafe conditions. Many have taken to social media to condemn the unsanitary conditions and have been sending in emails and photographs to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. A growing nervousness prevails among auto bosses, knowing the back-to-work order under conditions of the continuing unchecked spread of the coronavirus will inevitably fuel social opposition. In mid-March, the auto industry was forced to shut down after workers walked out and carried out job actions to protest the unsafe working conditions amid the spread of COVID-19.

A Ford CAP worker in the trim department said of the conditions Wednesday night: "It's terrible. Somebody threw up on the production floor. The plant that makes the seats [Lear] had a COVID-19 carrier, so those workers all left. Managers knew about this situation and continued to run production. We were supposed to leave at 12 but didn't leave until 4:30. They let other workers leave and made a specific group stay."

Another CAP worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "Neither the UAW nor Ford have given me any information regarding this virus; I have to find it myself."

"Ford said that they are cleaning, but I didn't see anyone cleaning anything. The union health and safety rep on night thinks that members should just shut up and come to work without complaining because if they don't, Ford would just lock the doors. It's by design that workers pay with our lives. You can lie on your daily tests and no one knows. Ford should test everyone before going back to work by a virus test from a medical clinic with proof you had the test done."

Fearful of new walkouts and job actions, the auto bosses have attempted various public relations maneuvers. Ford CEO Jim Hackett, Executive Chairman Bill Ford Jr., and UAW Vice President Gerald Kariem toured the Ford Dearborn Plant on Wednesday. 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." One wonders if the tour extended beyond the entrance of the

plant.

Wednesday, GM CEO Mary Barra was slated to do a similar public relations stunt with UAW officials at the Delta Township plant near Lansing.

The auto companies, backed by Wall Street and the Trump administration, will do nothing to prevent workers from continuing to get sick and die. The back-to-work movement expresses the irreconcilable conflict between the insatiable profit drive of the corporations and the health and safety of workers. Workers must organize to prevent their lives being sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit.

Yesterday, the WSWS published the statement "Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives!"

It states: "This is why workers require their own organizations. In every factory, workplace, and office, workers should organize and elect trusted and respected workers who will represent them. They should utilize all available tools, including social media, to reach out to workers throughout their industry and in other sectors to coordinate their activities and share information."

We urge autoworkers to read and discuss our statement. Contact the *World Socialist Website Autoworker Newsletter* for more information.



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