

Auto companies continue opposition to mass testing as COVID-19 spreads in factories

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Despite confirmed cases of COVID-19 at several US auto factories this week, automakers are defending their current totally inadequate safety measures and opposing universal testing of workers. Even as the virus continues to spread among autoworkers, the auto companies claim it is impossible and inadvisable to carry out mass testing.

In the latest report of COVID-19 among autoworkers on Thursday, General Motors reported that two workers at its components plant in Lockport, New York had tested positive for coronavirus. The plant normally employs more than 1,400 and resumed operations May 6, though it is not clear how many workers were called back. A GM spokesman said that one worker had experienced symptoms at home and called in sick. There were no details on the other case. The plant was not closed for cleaning, and production continued without interruption.

GM attempted to downplay the report, issuing a bland statement declaring, "We believe there is very little risk that anyone inside the plant has been exposed to the virus at work because everyone, including the individual, has been following our extensive, multilayered health and safety procedures, which include wearing masks, hand washing and sanitizing, temperature screening and physical distancing."

Earlier in the week, two workers at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) and one worker at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant outside of Detroit had tested positive for coronavirus. There were also confirmed cases at the Toyota Georgetown, Kentucky plant and at the Lear seating plant in Hammond, Indiana. Though not confirmed, there were reports on Facebook of cases at the Magna Seating plant in Detroit and the Fiat Chrysler Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio.

A cell phone video shows a shift workers at the Dearborn Truck Plant (DTP) refusing to work Wednesday after hearing reports that a worker on that shift had been sent home the previous day and had tested positive for

COVID-19. After failing to restart production, management eventually sent the shift home and closed the plant temporarily for cleaning.

The temporary shutdown of DTP follows the temporary shutdown Tuesday of production at CAP following reports of COVID-19 cases.

There is widespread opposition to the premature return to work being carried out by the auto companies with the blessings of the political establishment and the bought-and-paid-for United Auto Workers. Typical were the comments of one worker writing to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*: "It's very premature for workers to return back to work during this period of time (Pandemic). I feel if the UAW members are allowed to get tested before returning to work, and or, not have to return to work during this time: ALL workers should be given the same equal options. Workers are returning to work with symptoms, and later being tested Positive for Covid-19. This puts everyone, and their families' lives at risk!!!"

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Belvidere, Illinois Assembly plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "No one has really been inside the plant yet. But no one really wants to go back. They are mandating masks and are telling the workers that we also can't have our fans on inside the plant.

"Our plant has zero climate control and can easily get to 120° in there, especially now. Only the corporate office has air conditioning. Having to use those masks in that hot factory, without any type of fan, is absurd. People will pass out in that plant. Hopefully no one dies."

He continued, "No testing has been discussed. Just that we got to get our temp checked at the door and we have a questionnaire to fill out. It's a joke. Everyone I've talked to about it, thinks it's very messed up they want us back. We do not need to be back in there."

Despite workers' misgivings, the auto companies have

been able to use growing economic distress and threats of loss of benefits to restart assembly lines, which are set to gradually ramp up over the next two weeks.

There are reports that General Motors is delaying adding a second shift to its Flint Truck Assembly Plant and Fort Wayne Assembly due to an inadequate supply of parts. The plants produce highly profitable light trucks. Supplies of the vehicles were depleted due to the 40-day autoworker strike last fall.

Meanwhile, the Mexican government headed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has given GM permission to reopen its plants in Mexico, including its massive assembly plant in Silao, Guanajuato that builds the Chevrolet Silverado. Production was set to begin at the Silao plant Friday. Mexico had originally set a June 1 date for the reopening of factories under conditions of the rapid spread of COVID-19 at Mexican maquiladora factories.

Workers have reported that even the largely cosmetic safety measures introduced by the auto companies in collaboration with the United Auto Workers are not being adhered to. In many cases it is impossible to maintain distancing on the assembly line and break rooms are overcrowded.

These conditions underscore the need for rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, as advocated by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to enforce standards of health and safety.

The growing anger on the part of workers to the conditions in the auto plants has evoked nervousness in the boardrooms of the auto companies. In an attempt at damage control, GM and Ford officials toured auto plants this week to try to assuage workers' fears. This was followed by a visit by President Trump to the Ford Rawsonville facility in Michigan, which has been repurposed to make ventilators. Trump praised Ford's safety record while launching into a fascistic rant against the foreign rivals of US capitalism.

On Thursday, CNBC published a worried piece on the potential for disruption caused by reports of confirmed COVID-19 cases at auto plants. They write, "Production interruptions because of new infections is expected to be an ongoing issue for the foreseeable future as plants across the country continue to ramp up manufacturing."

They go on to quote Kristin Dziczek, an analyst with the Center for Automotive Research, who declares, "This is going to be rocky" in reference to attempts to restart production.

CNBC reports that GM, and by implication other automakers, remain opposed to mass testing. They write, "Gerald Johnson, GM executive vice president of Global Manufacturing, told CNBC last month that mass testing 'is impractical' and 'not even the smart thing to do.' GM spokesman Jim Cain on Thursday reaffirmed the company's position: 'If all the protocols are followed, mass testing isn't necessary,' he said."

Earlier in the week, Ford CEO Jim Hackett told National Public Radio that mass testing was "just not practical."

The opposition to the auto companies to mass testing, a basic measure needed to control the pandemic and ensure workers health and safety, speaks volumes. In fact, from the standpoint of the ruling class, anything that impinges on the profits of the corporations is "impractical," which is why states are lifting all restrictions on nonessential production. In other words, workers' lives must be sacrificed for the sake of share values.

In support of the argument that mass testing is not necessary, CNBC reports in passing that "only" six members of the UAW international staff tested positive for COVID-19 in a recent mass screening. In fact, six positive cases out of a staff consisting of only perhaps several hundred people is not an insignificant number. A similar percentage, if applied against the 150,000 Detroit Three employees, would translate into several thousands of cases.

Given the highly transmissible nature of COVID-19, the rapid spread of the disease in the auto plants is inevitable without a strict regime of testing, quarantine and contact tracing. That is why recent reports that UAW officials would be tested, but not factory workers, evoked so much anger.

In their fight to defend health and safety, workers must depend on their own strength and organization. The insistence on the right to health and safety brings workers into direct conflict with the profit-driven capitalist system. Workers can only prevail if their struggles are guided by an internationalist and socialist perspective aimed at reorganizing economic life on the basis of production for human need, not private profit.



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