

“The company is covering up the situation to keep the plant from closing, while they are killing us”

## Maquiladora workers expose deadly COVID-19 outbreak in Matamoros, Mexico

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A worker at a Schumex-Schumacher *maquiladora* factory in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, a border town in Mexico across from Brownsville, Texas, has informed the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that the Illinois-based car battery charger manufacturer is forcing them to work despite a COVID-19 outbreak at the plant, which employs around 300 workers.

Last Thursday, Gilberto Blass Camacho, a union delegate at the plant, died from breathing complications after working during the shutdown for a bonus of 300 pesos (\$13). On Friday, a group of workers struck and demonstrated outside of the plant, demanding the release of information about this and other cases of infections and the shutting down of production.

The SITPME trade union, which belongs to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and management continue to deny that the death was caused by COVID-19, pointing to an early false negative test on May 15. However, the Health Ministry confirmed on Friday that a second test came out positive. According to comments from his wife to *EnlaceMX*, Blass belonged to the health and safety committee of SITPME.

“The company wants to cover up the situation at any cost to keep the plant from closing, while killing us,” explained the Schumex worker who requested anonymity “since these companies have the power to blacklist us so that we never find employment again. All of us are actually afraid to speak out—layoffs are on the agenda, or abuses by supervisors and human resources.”

She explained “there have been at least four cases of

coronavirus in the company,” including a co-worker who has been tested positive on three separate occasions. “The company sent her to IMSS [a state insurance and health care agency] since, according to the Schumex contract, sick leaves of three days are unpaid and considered ‘an excused absence’ by the company and after the fourth day the IMSS begins to pay.”

The IMSS, however, is “refusing to provide medical attention arguing that she should have abided by the stay-at-home orders instead of working.” Her infected co-worker was being treated like a ping-pong ball, she reported, because “the company refuses to be liable since those who worked during the shutdown were so-called ‘volunteers.’ So, no one does anything about it and the company denied this reality again today [Friday], claiming it has taken all the necessary measures to avoid an outbreak.”

Workers at Schumex struck on April 4 and forced the closing of the plant, she reported. However, the company and SITPME agreed to pay workers only 80 percent of their salary and re-start production almost immediately by offering workers a bonus. Then Schumex called all employees back to work on May 4, dismissing workers in at-risk groups, including those with high blood-pressure and other ailments common to impoverished workers.

Asked about the conditions at the plant, she said, “At the entrance and exit, they set up a sanitizing tunnel where accidents have occurred from falls due to the liquid chemicals we are sprayed with in the morning and night. There have been workers fainting since we

are using face masks and are threatened with being reported if we take them off... At the lines and cafeteria, they put cardboard cartons to separate chairs and tables.”

She explained that workers who refused to work, citing the official decree from the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador that supposedly delayed the reopening of factories until June 1, were being fired and blacklisted. “We are compelled to work because some co-workers wanted to enforce the decree by not showing up, and they were fired.”

Such experiences are common at a growing number of plants in Matamoros, while most maquiladoras are planning on reopening over the coming week.

Complaints on social media groups already abound. On Thursday, for instance, a worker at Spellman High Voltage Electronics reported, “We were just informed that a person in Plant 4 tested positive to COVID-19 and that this person left on May 12; they have not informed us until now, while the company hides information.”

On another website, a worker at the Álbea-Cepillos cosmetics plant wrote, “COVID-19 infections continue. This time it was a manager, so they sent all the office personnel home. This is not what they do when the infected people are operators, and they keep ignoring health authorities. The hospital is full.”

Hugo López Gatell, the Mexican sub-secretary of health and chief coordinator of the COVID-19 response, announced that the social distancing measures and closing of nonessential activities will be lifted on June 1. It will be replaced by a “semaphore system,” in which nonessential activities will only be ordered to close if hospitals are more than 65 percent full in the municipality or if hospitalizations have increased continuously for two weeks.

The manufacturing of transportation equipment (including auto and aeronautical parts and assembly), mining and construction have been classified as “essential,” and have been allowed to re-open before June 1 if the Health Ministry approved a form on the safety measures being taken at each plant. The government already allowed the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions in 323 municipalities which were supposedly without cases within or in the neighboring localities; however, *El País* reported that 67 percent of those have not received tests and 6

percent actually have had positive cases.

As of this writing, there have been more than 1,300 confirmed cases in the state of Tamaulipas and 245 deaths, while the toll across Mexico has surpassed 66,000 cases and 7,200 deaths. Infections in Tamaulipas are growing at an accelerated pace and most new cases are being registered in Reynosa and Matamoros, two maquiladora centers. Earlier this month, 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. Last month, at least 18 workers at a Lear Corporation factory in Ciudad Juárez died, sparking wildcat strikes and other protests.

Hospitals in Matamoros are already overwhelmed, while the lack of adequate protective equipment has led to a broad spread of the disease to nurses and doctors.

The saturation of the hospitals in Mexico City, Mexicali, Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez and other locations has resulted in a massive increase of deaths from COVID-19. Infected workers are regularly denied entry into over-filled hospitals or finally let in when it is too late. Others are left to die at home. In many cases, these fatalities are not being counted in official COVID-19 figures, according to several studies looking at death certificates and excess deaths.

On Thursday, hours after the death of the Schumex-Schumacher worker Blass Camacho at the Zone 13 Hospital in Matamoros, the nurses and doctors closed down the COVID-19 treatment area to protest the lack of PPE, which has led to the death of three co-workers and the infection of at least 40 other health care workers.

In late April, *Infobae* reported that the authorities prepared a mass grave in the Matamoros municipality, at the Rusias Ejido cemetery, specifically for bodies currently overwhelming local funeral homes and hospitals.



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