

“This is not a game that I want to play with my life”: US autoworkers denounce premature return to work

Our reporters
26 May 2020

As US workers began returning to their jobs at major auto assembly plants amid the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, many are speaking out over the dangers posed by the premature return to work.

In the last week alone, cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed at several auto plants, including one at Ford Dearborn Truck, two at Ford Chicago Assembly, two at the General Motors Lockport, New York components plant, one at Toyota Georgetown, Kentucky assembly and one at Lear Seating in Hammond, Indiana. These are in addition to other unconfirmed reports of cases on Facebook at Fiat Chrysler facilities.

Workers expressed skepticism over the screening procedures being implemented by the auto companies in collaboration with the United Auto Workers and explained how economic blackmail is being used to force workers back into the plants. These conditions underscore the importance of the call by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* for the building of rank-and-file workplace safety committees independent of the UAW to protect workers on the job. These committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers, should implement such measures as full testing, limits on line speed, full access to sickness pay and universal access to information.

Over the weekend the *Autoworker Newsletter* reached out to autoworkers in the Midwest to discuss their experiences.

An autoworker who wished to remain anonymous for fear of retribution said, “It’s crazy. I called to find out what the stipulations are for someone getting sick, and they put me out without pay for 72 hours. They said I shouldn’t have been asking, that I was probably sick. When we do huddle-ups at the start of the shift they said that if you have muscle aches, fever, sore throat, coughing, to let your supervisor know.

“They said I was poking around when I asked what symptoms qualify. I told my committee person that I felt as though I’m being punished because I asked a question. I feel like there could be infections, this seems like some hidden lawsuit in here. It felt like they’re hiding something, that this is bigger than me.

“I don’t like the reopening plans, I don’t think it’s safe. Trump knows it’s not safe to return back to work.

“There are no confirmed cases at my plant that I know of, but they might not be telling us everything. They say people who were in quarantine were all cleared, no one was sick. A lot of people are taking the layoff pay of \$260/week. If everyone’s there, it’s probably 400 people including first and second shift.

“How many people will actually get sick here before they do

something? We should have access to information about if a person is sick or not, because we could have had contact with that person. They’re making sure we don’t ask questions.”

FCA Belvidere Assembly

A worker from FCA Belvidere Assembly in northern Illinois said, “When we go back to work, the email I received said they’re going to bring back one shift for the first two weeks and then play it by ear.

“There are a lot of people that are vulnerable. People have been through cancer fights, trying to stay alive, diabetes, no spleens.

“There’s no air conditioning, no fans. I heard there would be goggles and shields, plus facemasks. There will be people not standing by the end of a shift. They’re talking about separation at break areas, and at your workstations. We all work pretty damn close, so I don’t see how this is going to work. People are less than six feet apart from each other.”

FCA Mopar

A worker at a Detroit area MOPAR parts distribution facility said, “We have already lost three people at our plant. This can be stressful and overwhelming. Every day last week I went home with a headache. I think it is from breathing in that mask all day.

“The safety precautions are all fake. They don’t want to look at the truth. They only want to look at things that will cause the business to grow. If I died tomorrow, they would just replace me.

“You have to wear gloves, facemasks and safety glasses 100 percent of the time you are in there. If you know anything about these plants, they get extremely hot and we are going into summer season. They say they care, but if they really cared we wouldn’t be here. They basically care about their bottom dollar.”

The worker described the screening procedures being implemented by management.

“They have an app where you have to answer questions before you go into the building. If you answer ‘yes’ to any of them you have to quarantine for 14 days. The problem is that there is no proof you are

not ill. They have questions like ‘have you been outside of the US via airplane.’ If you answer ‘yes’ they quarantine you. But they don’t have it set up where you get paid. You have to file for sickness and accident, which can take weeks.”

The worker explained how the auto companies were using the federal unemployment supplement to pad their own profits. “Because the federal government was giving \$600 additional unemployment benefits that kicked out our SUB pay. They said they accidentally gave us our pay, so now we have to pay it back. You know they got a federal bailout. They are double dipping. Not only are they getting money from the government, they are making us pay back the money they agreed to pay us if we went on layoff.”

FCA Sterling Heights Assembly

“I work on the line crew where there is no way to social distance. We are right up under each other. It takes two of us to do the job that I do. I do not feel safe going back. I don’t feel comfortable being up under people and we cannot be six feet apart. I also have a child who is disabled. So, I have more than myself to think about. We know that this can kill children, too. Remember the five-year-old that died; her parents were first responders.

“Our jobs are not essential. Making cars is not essential. They have inventory if they want to sell cars. We do not have to go back yet. This is not a game that I want to play with my life.

“History is going to repeat itself if we get this wrong. Remember 1918 and the flu pandemic. I know that part of flattening the curve is the social distancing. It’s not just using a mask. That’s only half of the equation to cover up coughs and sneezes and particles that come out. On certain jobs because it is so loud we have to shout and particles will come out. So the social distancing is as important as having a mask that is just half of the equation.

“It’s also hot on the floor so we are working in masks where it is already hot before using the mask, and much hotter after having one on. Another factor is people having underlying conditions such as asthma, or they are a smoker. Someone I know who has already started told me that some people are already putting holes in their masks because they are having trouble breathing; someone takes it off and they infect another person.”

FCA Tipton transmission

A worker at the FCA Tipton plant outside Kokomo, Indiana said, “Thousands more will be lost especially the way it’s set up at the Tipton transmission plant. Look back at everything that has happened and everything that’s been done to the UAW workers, and now everyone who stole our union dues, and it was in the millions and millions, is not even being punished. If you or I did that we would be sent away period.

“As far as COVID-19 goes, this company and the corporate union doesn’t give a damn about any of us workers. They don’t step a foot in any plant, but it seems like we raise hell and stand up for what’s right and we still get run over, lied to on a regular basis. There have

been no changes since everyone got arrested for stealing and embezzling millions. Rory Gamble is a damn joke and we will continue to be done dirty. We have nobody that can or will do anything about it or help the workers directly on the floor.”

GMCH Grand Rapids

“I don’t agree with it at all. They told me I could take 30 days off, but it would be without pay. My unemployment just stopped, I’ve gone through all my funds. I’m out there, and at their mercy. I applied for unemployment and got it for last month and the first part of this month, and for the end of May I haven’t gotten anything.

“You can’t talk with unemployment, it’s impossible. I don’t have a choice but to go back to work. I don’t know if they’re messing with our money; I know a couple more autoworkers that haven’t gotten their unemployment checks. That’s strange how we were getting them and now we’re not, right when they’re reopening the plants.

“They say we’ve got to do social distancing, but when you’re working on the line at different spots there has to be two people. I don’t see how this will work.

“We need safety committees in all the shops. They do a lot of dirty stuff in those shops that people don’t know about, and they need to know about it. We need our safety committees to get in there and make them do what they say they’ve got to do, not just talk about it.

“We should be able to be tested. Why do the UAW reps get tested and we don’t? Before all of us went back to work, it should’ve been that everyone got tested. We could have it and don’t even know it.

“We’re just a number and they just want their parts, so the rich can get richer. It’s all about money. They tried to tell me it’s ‘due to demand,’ but what demand? Nobody’s buying new cars right now. The demand is the demand for money to go into rich people’s pockets. I asked my supervisor to explain this to me, and he said he couldn’t, but I know he knows.

“Everyone can see that Trump doesn’t care about anyone but Trump, and that is clear. My feelings are that he’s the worst president ever, but it’s all of them, the Democrats too.”



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