

# Automakers, Unifor and Ontario government push plant reopenings as COVID-19 continues to spread

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Canadian autoworkers at Ford, Fiat-Chrysler and General Motors began a partial return to work last week after a two month shutdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. Toyota and Honda workers had returned the week before.

The back-to-work drive in Canada's auto industry is being spearheaded by hard-right Ontario Premier Doug Ford in concert with the auto corporations, the financial oligarchy and, in the case of the Detroit Three companies, the Unifor union.

The back-to-work drive, which is forcing thousands of autoworkers to congregate in large plants with inadequate safety protections, has been imposed in open defiance of the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other medical experts.

Auto assembly and auto parts production were classified by the Ford government as "essential services" from the outset of the province's COVID-19 lockdown, meaning that they have been free to operate. If the auto sector was shut down since mid-March, it was only because North American autoworkers took matters into their own hands, staging job actions to protest unsafe working conditions at the Fiat-Chrysler assembly plant in Windsor and various Detroit Three plants in the US. Subsequent labour stoppages by highly-exploited *maquiladora* workers in the network of auto parts plants in northern Mexico further complicated auto assembly production, forcing the automakers to grudgingly announce a shutdown.

Almost immediately after the plants were closed, Unifor and the United Auto Workers in the United States set about working hand-in-glove with the automakers to quickly reopen them. In Ontario, Unifor drafted a series of safety regulations in cooperation with the Detroit Three and the Ford government's Ministry of Labour.

Plexiglas has been installed in some plants and ventilation adjusted. Workers at some Ford Canada plants are reportedly wearing armbands that vibrate when they come too close together. Masks and gloves are also mandatory under the regulations. Some workers have pointed out that this provision will be impossible to observe in the plants as the weather heats up.

The reality is that these measures are totally inadequate. As

they have done at their facilities in the United States, the Detroit Three have refused point blank to regularly test their workers for the coronavirus. Instead, temperature checks are being carried out as part of a so-called screening process when workers arrive, which leaves asymptomatic cases undetected. Experts believe that asymptomatic carriers of the virus could account for about half of all transmissions.

Within hours of the reopening of auto plants in the United States last week, several autoworkers tested positive for the virus. By week's end, just as in March, work stoppages began again as more workplace infections were announced.

The total disregard for the well-being of autoworkers on the part of corporate management and the union bureaucracy alike flows from the fact that they view the coronavirus as a challenge to the Detroit Three's profit-making operations, not a health problem. They know full well that workers will get infected, but this is seen as just one of the costs of doing business. As Kristen Dziczek, vice president for industry, labour and economics at the Centre for Automotive Research, a key industry think tank that advised automakers on reopening, put it recently, "The supply chain is everywhere, so if there's a disease outbreak or surge in an area, that's going to cripple manufacturing elsewhere. I think we're going to see hotspots keep popping up and that's going to be one of the disruption factors in automotive production."

In other words, hundreds or even thousands of autoworkers in Canada will get infected over the coming months, leading to a mounting toll of deaths among them and their families.

The right-wing Ford government stands fully behind this reckless agenda. Even as autoworkers began returning to the plants, Ford acknowledged that basic public health measures that are essential to safeguarding working people, including mass testing for the virus and contact tracing, remain mere aspirational goals. "We want to go into areas of the automotive sector and start testing people in [the] automotive sector right across the province," said Ford, himself a multi-millionaire business-owner who until recently boasted about his admiration for Donald Trump.

Ford's claim to be concerned about the lack of systematic

COVID-19 testing among auto workers is so much hot air. Last month, he blustered about how Ontario would be conducting 20,000 COVID-19 tests per day by the end of April. Last week, the number of tests carried out across the province fell well below 10,000 on two days, and barely surpassed 10,000 per day during the rest of the week. Medical experts are warning that the lack of testing means authorities have little idea about where the virus is spreading.

The opening up of auto plants and the rest of the economy is being done under conditions where hundreds of new coronavirus cases are being reported across the province each day. Ontario reported 460 new cases Sunday, and 25 deaths. Infections have been trending upwards over the past week and total COVID-19 deaths in Ontario have now surpassed 2,100.

The forcing of thousands of workers back into the plants under these conditions could not have been carried out without Unifor's full support. Unifor President Jerry Dias admitted to reporters that whilst workers were "nervous" about returning to the plants, he believed that safety is the "number one priority." "We haven't heard this big outcry saying 'Don't do it, it's too early.' We haven't heard any of that."

If the Unifor president hasn't heard an outcry it is because his ear is turned, as always, to the demands emanating from the corporate boardrooms and not the legitimate concerns of the workers he purports to represent.

In response to the restart plans, workers have expressed their outrage on social media. "Refuse to work," "It's still unsafe," "Union leaders, management and government all in bed together," "They care about their profits, not our lives," "Don't go"—these are just a few of the hundreds of comments from autoworkers.

Auto executives and industry analysts have responded to a dramatic plunge in auto sales in both March and April by calling into question the viability of current levels of Canadian auto assembly.

With contracts at the Detroit Three's Canadian operations set to expire in September, Unifor will soon be heading into contract negotiations with the auto bosses. Already, the threat of further layoffs, company demands for further wage and benefit concessions to "make up" for plunging profits and the possibility of plant closures loom large for Canadian autoworkers.

In addition to the collapse of auto sales, the new Canada, US, Mexico trade agreement is scheduled to take effect July 1. Changes to supply chain rules and regulations will combine with ongoing auto parts shortfalls produced by disruptions in the parts sector from work stoppages and other production impacts stemming from the pandemic.

Responding like a corporate manager, Dias has rushed to assure the automakers that Unifor will not consider strike action under these conditions, and to try to cover over the fact that the auto bosses, as always, will respond to profit shortfalls by demanding a pound of flesh from workers.

If "after months and months and months of reduced volume based on the pandemic" things are "starting to get back to a resemblance of where they were pre-crisis, no one is going to want a disruption," Dias told *Automotive News Canada*. "And I mean nobody; both the workers and the automakers."

These remarks underscore that in their struggle to secure safe-working conditions amid the pandemic, and to defend their jobs and working conditions in the face of the auto bosses' demands for "sacrifices" to guarantee corporate profits, workers confront a mortal enemy in Unifor.

Workers must oppose the drive to push them back into the plants without proper and regular testing and contact-tracing protocols. Rank-and-file health committees must be formed, independent of and in opposition to the pro-company Unifor apparatus. These committees must ensure that safe production is overseen by workers and medical experts, who must be on hand in every plant.

Through these committees workers should also prepare to answer the coming assault on their jobs and living standards by reaching out to and uniting their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in auto plants in the United States and Mexico. All this must be linked to the fight for the Detroit Three and other automakers and parts plants to be transformed into publicly-owned utilities under workers' control, so that their production can be organized to fulfill social needs, rather than enriching investors.

*The author also recommends:*

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