

UAW official seeks to defuse worker anger as more infections reported at US auto plants

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In the wake of another confirmed case of COVID-19 at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant (DTP) outside Detroit, local media reports are playing up a token grievance that has been filed by a low-level United Auto Workers official at the plant.

The Ford truck assembly plant in the Detroit suburbs builds the company's popular F-150 pickup truck. Since production restarted on May 18 there have been two confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the plant, and 20 workers are presently quarantined.

Last week there were two confirmed cases of COVID-19 at Ford Chicago Assembly and a case at Lear Seating in Hammond, Indiana, as well as two cases at the General Motors components operation in Lockport, New York. On Tuesday, Ford also reported that it stopped production at its Kansas City Assembly Plant for one hour while it cleaned the work area after a worker tested positive for COVID-19.

Over the last few days there have been reports on Facebook of COVID-19 at the Fiat Chrysler Toledo North Assembly Plant and Jefferson North Assembly in Detroit.

Increasingly nervous articles began to emerge in the corporate media last week acknowledging workers' opposition to the premature return to work and anger over obviously ineffective safety measures. In this context, Gary Walkowicz, a UAW bargaining committeeman at DTP who has cultivated a reputation as a UAW "dissident," filed a grievance, demanding among other things increased testing.

The filing of the grievance was an evident attempt to defuse the explosive situation at DTP.

On May 19, an A crew worker at DTP was sent home and later tested positive for the coronavirus. When A crew workers returning to the assembly line the next day learned that a worker from their shift had tested

positive, they staged a job action, stopping work and forcing management to send the shift home early. There were reports that B crew workers also stopped work for a period, with production resuming later that evening.

A second worker also tested positive on Thursday, according to Walkowicz. Walkowicz attempted to justify Ford's decision not to immediately stop the line to clean the plant by stating that the worker had not been in the factory since Monday.

Initial press reports made no mention of any job action by workers at DTP, merely stating that Ford had stopped production temporarily for deep cleaning.

The media silence on the work stoppage at DTP follows the same pattern of dishonest reporting on the wildcat job actions by Fiat Chrysler workers last March at plants in the US and Canada. The walkouts, which led to a six-week shutdown by all the major North American auto producers, were almost universally blacked out by the media, with the decision to stop auto production presented as the result of talks between the UAW and Detroit automakers.

Walkowicz, a supporter of the pseudo-left Spark organization, has a long history of attempts to put a "left" face on the reactionary, pro-corporate UAW. The relative prominence being given to Walkowicz's intervention by the local media reflects concern that the UAW, mired in corruption and justly hated by workers, cannot contain workers' opposition to a premature return to work.

In remarks to the *Detroit Free Press*, Walkowicz said, "People are worried coming back to work." He continued, "We had the incident on Wednesday evening—there was a lot of absenteeism that day, so they had to double the jobs up, which meant close proximity. So people were very concerned about that and it took awhile before *we could get production*

really going” (emphasis added).

Walkowicz doesn’t say who “we” are, but he is undoubtedly referring to himself and fellow UAW officials who had to step in to coerce angry workers to resume production. A DTP worker contacted by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* said that the threat of the possible elimination of a shift at the plant in particular was being used in an attempt to intimidate workers into keeping silent over safety concerns.

The comments by Walkowicz follow a CNN interview last week by Scott Houldieson, former vice president of UAW Local 551 at Ford Chicago Assembly, who called for testing all workers. Houldieson works with the *Labor Notes* group and is a supporter of Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), which seeks direct election of UAW international officers. Like Walkowicz, Houldieson in his CNN interview made no criticism of the role of the UAW in engineering the premature return to work, which has put tens of thousands of lives at risk from the pandemic.

Another DTP worker said, “The grievance does not take the problem seriously and is not doing anything about it. It’s a few requests, and Ford can just say, ‘No,’ and it’s business as usual.

“If they’re actually worried about safety and they wanted to make a point, they should shut the plant down. They’re just hoping that the company goes along with it.”

Walkowicz’s grievance has zero chance of moving management, as any worker knows who has had the misfortune of undergoing the UAW-company grievance process. Walkowicz’s and Houldieson’s attempts at damage control cannot alter the fact that the UAW gave its blessing to the return to work and has signed off on all the company’s bogus safety procedures.

Workers should place no reliance on the UAW to protect health and safety. This deeply corrupt, anti-worker organization is only dedicated to the defense of its own financial interests. As the ongoing federal investigation into UAW corruption has revealed, top leaders have been filling their pockets at members’ expense while delivering one sellout agreement after another. The 2019 Detroit Three contacts vastly expanded the companies’ ability to use super-exploited temporary and contract workers, while maintaining the

hated tier system.

Following the conviction of former UAW President Gary Jones on corruption charges, his replacement, UAW President Rory Gamble, is facing a federal investigation over allegations that he took bribes and kickbacks from vendors of UAW-branded merchandise.

The Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* have called for workers to take the initiative and build rank-and-file workplace committees to enforce safe and healthy working conditions. These committees must fight for universal testing, reduced line speeds, adequate personal protective equipment, the end to firings and victimizations of workers for speaking out about conditions, and guaranteed income for sick, quarantined, laid-off or furloughed workers.

These committees must link different workplaces across industries and across national borders. The pandemic is a global problem and requires the unified fight of workers internationally. In particular, workers in the US and Canada must support their Mexican brothers and sisters, who work for the same transnational corporations and are resisting attempts to force the restart of production as COVID-19 rages throughout the country.

This fight pits workers against the entire ruling corporate oligarchy. It poses the necessity for the reorganization of society on new foundations, based on socialist principles, including the democratic public ownership and control of the auto industry by the working class.



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