

COVID-19 spreads in US auto plants as officials hide information from workers

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Three workers at General Motors' assembly plant in Wentzville, Missouri are confirmed to have COVID-19, according to a company statement released Monday. Over 4,000 hourly and salaried workers are employed across three shifts at the plant, building the profitable Chevy Colorado and GMC Canyon midsize trucks, along with the Chevy Express and GMC Savana vans.

The company said in the statement, "We believe there is very little risk that anyone inside the plant has been exposed to the virus at work because everyone, including the individuals, have been following our extensive, multi-layered health and safety procedures."

"Oh, it's going to be more," a veteran worker at the plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, dismissing GM's claim. "Imagine how many could be infected. Two of the [infected] people last worked on June 3rd, and GM didn't tell us for five days. Most were questioning that and wanting them to close down for 14 days because it's so many folks there, you can easily come in contact with those who were infected and those that came in contact with them."

She said that management only briefly paused production when they announced the first case. "They read us a statement saying we weren't at risk, that they have everything in place to protect us." A little while after, supervisors came back to say another case was confirmed.

The auto companies and their accomplices in the United Auto Workers union, having forced workers back into the plants with criminal recklessness last month, are now doing their best to cover up the further spread of the virus, releasing no tallies of the number of cases or deaths.

In the weeks prior to the production restart at plants owned by the Detroit-based automakers across the US on May 18, the UAW worked with company executives and state governors, including Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, to organize a return to work

without serious safety measures or comprehensive testing in place, despite the ongoing spread of the pandemic.

A worker at GM's assembly plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee expressed the widely held belief that the return to work was premature, saying, "I think it was way too early [to restart], just as many of my coworkers do. Here in Maury County, [case] numbers are rising but we are just line dogs to these big companies.

"[GM CEO] Mary Barra had the audacity to say how she and upper management were working from home to stay healthy and safe, and we, the workers who build these quality vehicles to make 'them' their millions, all the while we all were in these plants STILL working as THEY stayed safe. They do not care, nor will they ever."

Prior to the production restart, the UAW undertook a PR campaign on behalf of the companies, telling workers that effective personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing measures would be in place and that the plants would be cleaned according to CDC guidelines each day.

Other measures such as daily wellness questionnaires and temperature checks have also been touted, but offer little more than a false sense of security, as these do not identify asymptomatic carriers of the virus, which the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates account for 35 percent of those infected.

The UAW and corporations are well aware that without mass rapid testing and contact tracing programs, there is no way to effectively limit the spread of the disease in the auto factories, but they insist on keeping plants open under unsafe conditions in order to ensure the flow of profits continues uninterrupted.

"Until we have a vaccine that's out there 100% and more testing is available over the next few months, then I think we'll still have cases," Ford Chief Manufacturing Officer Gary Johnson told *Bloomberg* earlier this week.

Once again revealing the procorporate character of the UAW and its indifference to workers' lives, President

Rory Gamble recently told *Automotive News*, “We see ourselves probably in this mode for another year, realistically maybe a year and a half. We’re dug in for the long haul.”

Gamble admitted the testing delays mean the virus could quickly spread undetected at plants. “There’s too much lag time in getting results back. While you’re waiting on the test results to come back, you could contract the virus.” He went on to refer to the spread of the potentially lethal virus among autoworkers as “glitches” in the companies’ restart.

Neither the UAW nor the auto companies have indicated a timeline for implementing rapid testing on a mass scale, although UAW officials all received testing before returning to their comfortable office jobs. Both company executives and union officials continue to make vague promises about increasing testing “when available,” while the vast majority of workers enter the plants every day not knowing if they or their coworkers are carrying the virus.

“There is no reliable, scalable test currently available to test asymptomatic employees every day,” Mark Stewart, Chief Operating Officer of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles North America, said in a statement to the *Detroit Free Press*. “We will continue to monitor new developments in testing and will look for more capability if it becomes available.”

Gamble, in a recent UAW press release, made the worthless pledge, “In terms of testing, we continue to be resolute in asking for as much testing as is possible at the current time. We are asking for a commitment for full testing as soon as it is available.”

Epidemiology Professor Michael Mina of Harvard University’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health told *Automotive News* that rapid testing at the necessary scale for the auto industry is likely months away.

Implicitly pointing to the conflict between the needs of workers for mass testing and the companies’ bottom lines, the *News* noted, “Cost could make widespread distribution an issue, unless companies receive financial assistance and the price per test continues to fall.”

Union officials are increasingly nervous over the unrest brewing among workers and are desperate to head off a new wave of walkouts and job actions like those which led to the shutdown of the industry in March. Seeking to placate widespread anger, UAW Local 249 at Ford’s Kansas City Assembly Plant recently asked workers on Facebook to submit individual safety concerns to the union directly, claiming that it would begin to write safety

complaints on behalf of workers, knowing full well they will have no substantive effect on the company’s policies.

The virus is by no means confined to the Detroit’s Big Three auto plants. Workers at electric carmaker Tesla’s plant in Fremont, California recently learned in meetings with their supervisors that at least two of their coworkers at the plant tested positive for COVID-19, according to a report in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The Fremont plant, where 10,000 workers build Tesla cars, was opened for production on May 11 by billionaire CEO Elon Musk in defiance of local government orders, which were ultimately shelved in the face of Musk’s threats to move Tesla to another state.

“No social distancing at all when clocking in/out [because] people are... in a hurry to go home or get back to their work station,” a Tesla seat assembly worker told the *Washington Post*. Managers “don’t say anything to the associates,” he continued, “[because] they’re not doing it either. It’s like nothing but with a mask on.”

Any decisions about workers’ protection from the disease that are left in the hands of the corporations and unions will be made in the interests of profit, not those of workers.

To defend their lives and those of their families, workers require new organizations, independent rank-and-file safety and health committees, to take up the demands for universal testing, adequate PPE, shorter shifts and longer breaks, with no reductions in pay for those affected by shutdowns. With the advice of trusted public health experts, workers must exert oversight over health and safety measures in the plants and retain the right to stop production when conditions are deemed unsafe.

The opposition of workers to working in plants which have been transformed into death traps coincides with the mass multiracial and multiethnic demonstrations around the world against police brutality carried out by the state against the entire working class. The fight for safe working conditions must be fused with the struggle against police violence and for all the democratic and social rights of the working class based on a socialist program.



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