

Bridgestone tire defends safety “playbook” as infections rise at Iowa plant

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In factories and plants throughout the country COVID-19 infections have continued to rise among workers, despite assertions from companies, and trade union toadies, that all efforts are being made to maintain worker safety and mitigate the spread of the virus.

It has been nearly two months since Bridgestone Americas, Inc.’s Firestone agricultural tire plant in Des Moines, Iowa, resumed production after shutting down from March 21 through April 13. Since restarting production, with the help of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 130, COVID-19 infections have continued to steadily rise at the facility and in surrounding Polk county.

The WSWs first reported on May 8 that eight infections were confirmed at the giant tire facility, which can produce up to 4,000 tires a day for agriculture equipment and large farm machinery. The plant employs 1,050 workers, of which United Steelworkers Local 310L claims to represent 90 percent.

In a statement to *Tire Business* on May 26, Bridgestone public relations confirmed the number of positive cases among workers at the plant had tripled in just over two weeks to 24. Despite the rising number of infections at the plant Bridgestone has no plans to cease production or modify its existing safety measures, which have so far proven ineffective.

In a bald-faced lie, Bridgestone claims that “the well-being and safety of employees remains the company’s most important value.” Despite infections rising at the facility the company asserts that “the playbook has not changed.” The statement ended with reassurance to shareholders that no matter how many workers become infected, “the Des Moines plant continues to operate on a regular schedule and in alignment with the latest

safety protocol guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to support a safe and healthy environment for employees.”

In a letter to workers dated May 7, plant managers and supervisors tried to cover for their own duplicitous role in facilitating the spread of the virus by seeking to blame workers for not adhering to social distancing guidelines outside of work and therefore shift the blame onto workers for the continued spread of the virus within the plant.

“In our larger community, we are seeing an increase in cases, and as members of the community, we want to do our part as well. I am asking that you continue to exercise safe interactions outside of work and am attaching guidelines from the CDC as a reference for you to share with your family and friends and serve as a reminder that we are all counting on each other—now more than ever—to be as safe as possible,” management wrote in a letter.

As part of the “safety playbook,” which was discussed in detail with Steve Vonk, president of Local 310, prior to the plant’s reopening in April, Bridgestone put forth a number of new policies, which included nebulous action items such as “reworked areas that require frequent employee handling or touching” and “limited the number of people in common areas.”

These half-hearted measures were never intended to actually keep workers safe, but instead served as a cover for the company’s inaction so production could continue with minimal disruptions or costs. The company and union also used the pretext of the virus to cancel “start of shift” and “plant operational meetings.” The elimination of meetings is a tried and true tactic of management to keep workers isolated and uninformed.

While workers continue to fall ill, union president Vonk has continued to sow illusions among workers

that the company is looking out for their safety, asserting to *Tire Business*: “[Bridgestone] has been pretty decent about responding to this.”

Exemplifying the role of the USW as nothing more than a labor police force for the company, the union’s homepage—while remaining silent on the rising number of infections among its members—proudly displays a video from USW President Tom Conway explaining why the union executive committed to endorse Joe Biden for president on May 20.

In the just under seven-minute video, Conway vaguely listed the reasoning behind the USW’s “proud” endorsement of the Biden campaign. Without offering any concrete proposals or plans, Conway claimed that a Biden presidency offered “progressive new good ideas.”

The real reason behind the USW’s endorsement, besides the fact that the Trump campaign didn’t even bother to return the union “questionnaire” sent out, is that the Democratic Party still makes use of the nationalist USW due to the crucial role it plays in suppressing the class struggle and isolating workers.

Conway noted that Biden “understands” the relationship between the “union and labor as a partner ... moving forward.” Conway wrapped up his video with a droll plea for workers to “get excited” about “playing a role in the campaign and the future of our country and how things oughta be.”

Joe Biden and the Democratic Party, no less than Donald Trump and the Republicans, wholeheartedly support the back-to-work drive and, with it, the continued infection and mass deaths of thousands of workers in the US and throughout the world in dangerous factories and plants.

The only “progressive” social force capable of thwarting this genocidal policy, which is shared by the ruling class in each country, is workers themselves, politically armed and linked internationally through independent rank-and-file committees. Workers and youth interested in forming such committees are encouraged to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and take up the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: