

“They treat us like we are slaves”

Detroit Flex-N-Gate workers denounce sweatshop conditions

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“The rules at Flex-N-Gate are basically the same rules at Chrysler. It’s ridiculous. It makes no sense. I don’t feel safe. I don’t know what people coming into work are bringing from home. They have it set up to where we’re supposed to be six feet apart or whatever, but who’s practicing that? We’re in the workspace, you know what I’m saying?”

Workers from the Detroit Flex-N-Gate auto parts plant reported to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* on Wednesday that half the day shift considered walking out of the massive plant due to the heat. Temperatures soared over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and the company has covered the fans near the work areas with plastic bags and kept just a few ceiling fans moving.

“How are those fans on, that aren’t keeping us cool, they’re really just keeping the dust and shit out of the air but it ain’t keeping us cool. It’s hot!” declared one worker.

A worker waiting on his girlfriend outside the plant Thursday afternoon said, “They won’t turn on the fans or air conditioning. They won’t provide sleeveless uniforms or thinner materials to accommodate for the heat. It’s hard enough with masks on fighting to get enough air. The air is hot as hell and you can’t take your mask off because you could get COVID—it’s a Catch-22.”

A worker heading in for the second shift said, “We’re suffocating in there. There is no air or air conditioning and it’s hot as hell.”

Another said, “Cars are not essential, nobody should be back to work. They only care about their money, not people.”

Auto parts workers supplying FCA, Ford and General Motors have been forced back to work in unbearable conditions to feed the relentless supply chain of the automotive industry. Several workers from Flex-N-Gate in Detroit spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the situation they now confront as they return to work under the shadow of COVID-19.

Describing the failure of the company to provide safe working conditions, a worker we will call Sharlayne said, “Before the corona, it was nasty. They hired a shift person to clean the bathroom because at first it was bad; we could smell the sewer for 10 months.

“Now, they think we’re supposed to come in here and clean up. They want us to come in every day and wipe down our station. They got a check list they’re passing around where you’re supposed to check off everything you’ve wiped down. Nobody is wiping anything down! They’re just checking it to be checking it!

“Why should I have to come in here and wipe down the machine? That should be done [by the company]! They want us to wipe it down before we leave and when we come in for our shift? The fans are covered, there’s no partitions, there’s no hand sanitizer, there’s no masks.”

Sharlayne’s coworker, “Tonya,” chimed in, “You try wearing a face mask for eight damn hours and it’s hot. You can’t breathe just getting out of the car and going to the grocery store! When you get out of the store, you’re hurrying up snatching that mask off trying to breathe. So, imagine wearing it for eight hours!”

The city of Detroit has been one of the country’s hardest hit with coronavirus. Of the 59,287 cases in the state of Michigan, 11,280 have been confirmed in Detroit, with 1,409 dead. With the auto parts manufacturers desperate to resume profit-making after nearly three months of zero deliveries to the auto manufacturers, Flex-N-Gate is forbidding workers from taking any time off. The company works on a “points” system, punishing workers with dismissal after accruing nine points for infractions such as unapproved time off or tardiness of a few minutes.

Tonya, who has lost six family members to COVID-19, said the company refused her request for a day off to attend a funeral. “These people would not excuse me for going to my family member’s funeral. They did not even want me to use vacation time. This is when I found out they’re not approving anyone’s vacation time. I even asked if I could use one of my vacation days and they said no. So, I had to call off because I am not going to just not go to my family funeral.”

Sharlayne, who along with a number of other workers has been fired by the company, which claims that they were “no-call, no-shows,” also faces losing her unemployment benefits. Sharlayne described how she reported, as required, being

exposed to a relative who was diagnosed with COVID-19 and was advised to get tested by administrators at the plant. Before her test results even came back, she had received a notice that she was fired.

Although there is no local of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union at the Detroit plant, Sharlayne explained there is a “union rep” that she approached about being fired and about unpaid vacation days. “When I called him, he basically said, ‘There’s nothing I can do for you, just write it up and I can take it to the front,’ like, principal-teacher-type stuff.”

Sharlayne and Tonya explained that many of the workers who had been made full-time last year did not return when told the factory would be reopening May 18. Flex-N-Gate has hired in dozens of temps, at least 60, possibly as many as 150. Companies are using the coronavirus pandemic as a means to profit at the expense of their workers’ lives and livelihood.

Flex-N-Gate opened the 480,000-square-foot high-tech facility in October 2018. To great fanfare, the company announced it had hired 100 workers from the city out of a workforce of 230. Built on the ruins of a massive Chrysler complex on the northeast side of Detroit that once employed tens of thousands, Flex-N-Gate builds vehicle front-end parts, such as headlamps and bumpers, for automotive manufacturers.

Ford Motor Co. awarded the company a long-term contract to manufacture parts for the Ranger SUV. Wages started at \$14 an hour. Due to the betrayal of a series of parts strikes by the UAW in the 1980s and its imposition of wage cuts to lower costs for Big Three auto companies, wages and working conditions in the industry, particularly for auto parts manufacturing workers, have been driven down to poverty level.

Much of Detroit has become a virtual free-trade zone for global manufacturers who take advantage of the high unemployment rate and incentives offered by the Democratic Party political establishment to attract investment and market the supposed “rebirth” of the Motor City. Flex-N-Gate was awarded \$5.9 million in property tax abatements, as well as federal funds for road construction, before setting the first stone.

The worker waiting for his girlfriend told the WSWs, “These companies and the politicians never cared about anyone but the rich. It’s like the popular meme out there: a CEO is polishing his Ferrari and a worker comes out and says, ‘Nice car.’ The CEO says, ‘If you work real hard, never miss a day and bust your knuckles, by this time next year, I’ll have another one. Meanwhile, here’s some bus tickets.’”

In fact, many Flex-N-Gate workers have to pay their own fares to travel for hours to get to and from the factory.

Despite never having been contacted by the company about a return-to-work date, Tonya told us she reported to work on May 18, as she did not want to lose a job she fought so hard to get a year ago. She expressed astonishment at learning that these newly hired temps are hired in at \$14.75 per hour. “I have been

working in that plant for a year next month, and I make \$14.85. Ten cents more than a new person who just walked in and is working a week—and I’ve been here eleven months? ... I actually prayed to get this job and it’s actually my first time having a job that actually has benefits. And that’s why I was so excited to get in.

“I worked 90 days without missing a day because we weren’t allowed to miss three days in a 90-day span, so I worked hard to get hired in. But it’s all pointless because I’m working 40 hours, 48 hours if I work a Saturday, and I’m getting taxes taken out, I’m getting money out of my check every week for benefits that I have to pay for. Why am I paying for benefits? The benefits are expensive, because I still have to pay a copay, I still have to pay for all my prescriptions, and I’m still spending money. So how am I supposed to pay my bills? Why am I working at a billion-dollar plant and I’m only bringing home \$400 maybe every week? Come on now!”

While Tonya can’t attend a funeral or pay her bills, and Sharlayne is fired and cut off of unemployment benefits, Flex-N-Gate’s owner, multibillionaire owner Shahid Khan, who also owns the Jacksonville Jaguars NFL team, is trying to cash in on the outrage over the murder of George Floyd, making news as “a person of color” who is offended that “people spew racist language in my presence when talking about other people of color—apparently ignorant of my ethnicity...”

This has not stopped him from backing the fascistic president in the White House. According to Yahoo News 2016, Khan donated \$1 million to Donald Trump’s inauguration committee.

“My overarching goal, or mission, is to do my part to level the playing field so everyone has the same access and opportunity to achieve the American Dream, without fear or compromise,” Khan is quoted as saying.

Like the rest of the capitalist class, Khan, whose net worth is \$11.8 billion, inhabits an entirely different universe from the workers, black, white and immigrant, who produce his profits.

“They never want to hear our side and what we’re feeling,” Tonya said. “All these jobs—it could be a better place for workers. They are just money hungry. It’s horrible. They give you no leeway up in that plant. They treat us like we are slaves.”



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