

“Make no mistake, the union supports ramping up production”

UAW threatens job losses at Ford Kentucky Truck Plant over COVID-19-related absences

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Workers at Ford’s Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville, Kentucky, who have taken leaves due to concerns over the danger of contracting COVID-19, are being threatened with the loss of their jobs by the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

According to KTP building chairman for UAW Local 862 Allen Hughes, 1,000 workers at the plant have applied for COVID-19 leave under the federal CARES Act, and 1,350 workers on A and C crew shifts did not report to work on June 4. The plant has 8,500 workers who produce the line of F-250 through F-550 heavy-duty pickup trucks and the Super Duty pickup trucks, among Ford’s most profitable models, as well as the Lincoln Navigator and Expedition.

Hughes wrote in the manner of a plant manager in a memo posted on Twitter Wednesday, attempting to both browbeat opposition to the homicidal back-to-work policy and cajole workers into returning to the factory and exposing themselves to the virus.

“This is a critical time for our plant. Our Super Duty [truck] order bank is back to pre-COVID levels ... With other pending launches at other plants and since the *whole UAW-Ford system* was shutdown for 9 weeks, the company is going to capitalize on the order bank” (emphasis added).

“We have to do all we can to protect C crew, our job security and our products without turning on each other as I have seen on Facebook ... Lives have been lost, health has been lost and some jobs are not coming back when the Cares Act expires.”

Marcus Sheckles, vice president of UAW Local 862 at KTP, further told the *Courier Journal* that if the plant didn’t fill its orders, “they [Ford] will send the work” elsewhere.

Leaves of absence under the federal CARES Act are protected by law through its duration, but the UAW, acting on behalf of Ford management, is making clear that it will do nothing to defend workers who refuse to work under life-threatening conditions.

On the contrary, the UAW’s overriding concern is to protect the “UAW-Ford system”—namely, the system of union-management partnership at Ford and other companies—in order to ensure the continued exploitation of workers and flow of

profits to Ford’s investors, and thus the maintenance of the UAW’s own institutional and financial interests, regardless of the toll on workers’ health and lives.

The support for the automakers’ production increases is by no means limited to UAW officials at KTP. “Everybody is working very, very hard to get people in here, keep them safe and build trucks, all while keeping the safety processes in place. But we’re a very important model to the UAW and General Motors,” Eric Welter, UAW Local 598 shop chairman at GM Flint Assembly, told the *Detroit Free Press*. “We have got to perform.”

The UAW from top to bottom supports the ramp-up in production being carried out across the US. The same *Free Press* article described comments by Brian Rothenberg, the main UAW spokesman and mouthpiece for the companies: “Make no mistake, the union supports ramping up production, Rothenberg said. It benefits the company, shareholders and union members, who get bigger profit-sharing checks when things go well. But the priority must be health and safety protections for workers, which protects factory production long-term, he said.”

Rothenberg concluded, “None of the parties involved want production shutdowns.” Excluded from his comments, yet ever present in the minds of the auto bosses and their union enforcers, is the widespread opposition among workers to the sacrifice of their health and lives for corporate profit.

A worker at Ford Kentucky Truck who has recently been staying home from work told the WSWWS, “I’m concerned about the dirty working conditions. The person that tested positive for the coronavirus didn’t get released to go home for three hours.

“The masks are so thick and it’s so hot in the factory. I had an anxiety attack because I’m worried about having to go work in those conditions as well as being worried about contracting the virus. Legacy people aren’t coming back because they are afraid they will get COVID-19.”

The UAW is attempting to coerce workers back into the plants just as the premature reopening of the economy, forced through by the combined efforts of the Trump administration

and Democratic and Republican state governments, is resulting in an accelerating spread of the coronavirus, an outcome widely predicted and warned about by epidemiologists. Kentucky itself is one of 19 states where the COVID-19 infection rate is rising, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The state's seven-day rolling average of cases reached a new high, 226, just last Saturday.

Coronavirus infections have been mushrooming across auto plants since the restart of the Detroit Three auto plants on May 18. At least one worker tested positive for the coronavirus at KTP within days of the plant's reopening. For six days, the union and company management deliberately withheld information about the confirmed case from workers at both KTP and the neighboring Louisville Auto Plant (LAP).

Six cases have been confirmed at General Motors' Wentzville Assembly plant near St. Louis within the last week. Six cases have also been reported at electric carmaker Tesla's massive operations in Fremont, California, according to workers, and cases continue to emerge across auto parts suppliers such as Lear, Faurecia, and Flex-N-Gate.

The UAW and company management carried out a PR campaign in the run-up to the auto industry restart, claiming that all safety guidelines recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would be followed, including the provision of personal protective equipment, social distancing measures, adequate cleaning supplies and procedures and health screenings for workers. However, these protocols have quickly proven themselves to be largely cosmetic and ineffective, particularly in the absence of universal testing for the coronavirus and systematic contact tracing. Temperature checks and health surveys do nothing to catch those who show no symptoms from coming to work and unknowingly spreading the virus.

Workers are increasingly incensed over the lack of information on cases being provided by either management or the UAW. No tallies of either COVID-19 infections or deaths have been made available to workers at any of the companies or by the UAW.

Following the pattern of labor-management restructuring of the auto industry implemented in every UAW contract since the 2008 Wall Street crash, the UAW and Ford plan to replace higher-paid long-term workers who take leaves out of concerns for their health with lower-paid temporary part-time and temporary full-time (TPT and TFT) workers, who have few benefits and job protections, and are drawn mainly from the younger generations who have suffered the greatest economic impact from the economic depression brought on by the pandemic.

"Since March there has been 795 TFT's hired in at KTP and more TFT's are getting hired in" at KTP, Hughes wrote in his memo.

Workers will confront increasingly unbearable conditions and demands for speed-up from management as the automakers

ramp up production with the assistance of the UAW. The threats against KTP workers came the same day that Ford's Chief Operating Officer, Jim Farley, announced that the company expects production to return to pre-pandemic levels by July 6. Ford has announced that four of its plants that produce profitable vehicles in high demand—Kentucky Truck, Louisville Assembly, Chicago Assembly and Flat Rock Assembly—will shorten their typical summer shutdowns from two weeks to one.

Representatives for GM and Fiat Chrysler expressed their intentions Wednesday to return to pre-pandemic production levels even earlier than Ford, by the end of June and the week of June 22, respectively.

Inside the plants there is an increasing conflict between the mad drive to increase production and profits for Ford's shareholders and Wall Street investors, which is fully backed by the UAW, and the efforts by workers to assert their interests and protect their lives and those of their loved ones.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party urge autoworkers to adopt a collective response and form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corrupt UAW, to oversee the safety measures in the plants, with the assistance of trusted medical and public health experts.

These committees must raise and formulate demands such as full access to information about the spread and location of infections, workers' control over line speed and production, universal testing and contact tracing, the isolation and immediate treatment of ill workers and complete income and job protection for all those on leave or affected by shutdowns. If working conditions are not satisfactory or judged to be dangerous, these committees will have the right to halt production until a safe environment can be guaranteed.

With workers in both essential and non-essential industries being forced to expose themselves to the pandemic, and a broad movement against police violence and other attacks on democratic rights emerging, there is an urgent need for autoworkers to reach out across industries and workplaces, on social media and by other means, and form communication networks in order to organize the fight for workers' rights and interests. A mass political movement of the working class must be built, independent of the representatives of the big business parties, led by the most class-conscious workers, and guided by a socialist and internationalist program. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge workers who agree with it to join this fight and write to us today at autoworkers@wsws.org.



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