

US auto companies pushing for more production as COVID-19 cases rise in factories

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US car companies facing slumping inventory and mounting debts are pushing ahead to restore maximum production levels, particularly for fast-selling models such as light trucks and SUVs. The ramping up of production is taking place as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise in auto factories and the infection is surging in many areas of the country.

Despite the mad dash to crank out vehicles to make up for the extended shutdown due to the pandemic, the longer-term outlook for car sales is bleak, with forecasts for vehicle sales of 12-14 million units in all of 2020 compared to around 17 million in 2019. The US Federal Reserve is warning that recovery from the recession will not be quick, and that unemployment is likely to be in the range of nine percent by the end of 2020, near the high of the 2008-2009 Great Recession. Bank of America Merrill Lynch forecasts that auto sales will only reach 14.5 million in 2021.

The protracted slump in sales makes further downsizing and restructuring in the auto industry virtually inevitable once the immediate inventory deficit is made up. The threat of layoffs will in all likelihood be used to demand further concessions from autoworkers. This is indicated by the announcement by Fiat Chrysler that it will soon carry out its threat to eliminate a shift and 1,500 workers at its Windsor, Ontario Assembly plant and end production of the Dodge Caravan minivan. The job cuts take place ahead of the scheduled beginning of contract talks between the Canadian Unifor union and the Detroit auto companies in August. FCA will undoubtedly use the cuts as a lever to press workers for concessions.

As US auto companies bring production back to close to pre-pandemic levels, new cases of COVID-19 are being reported almost on a daily basis in factories. On Saturday, it was reported that a worker at the General Motors

Fairfax Assembly Plant in Kansas City had tested positive for coronavirus. Five workers at the GM Wentzville, Missouri plant have tested positive and workers have also tested positive at the GM Arlington, Texas plant. A Navistar worker at the Springfield, Ohio truck assembly plant told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* there were five cases at the factory with 20 workers awaiting test results.

Volkswagen says there have been 12 cases at its plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Japanese carmaker Toyota has seen 40 new cases at its US operations since it reopened factories in early May. Tesla has reported six cases at its Fremont, California plant and cases have been reported throughout the auto parts industry including Lear, which last month temporarily closed its Hammond, Indiana plant after one worker tested COVID positive.

In an effort to prevent a repeat of the wildcat strikes in mid-March, which forced the closure of the North American auto industry, corporate management, with the assistance of the United Auto Workers union, is seeking to cover up the extent of the spread of the deadly disease in the factories, even to the extent of encouraging potentially sick workers to report to work.

An auto parts worker at Adient in Belvidere, Illinois told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that management is instructing workers to lie on forms asking if they have been exposed to coronavirus. “We have a female employee who has family who she’s been in contact with test positive for COVID-19. When we returned to work on June 1 this woman admitted to being exposed to the virus on her return to work survey. The HR manager told her to change her answer on the survey so she could work.”

At this point, one of the main impediments to a full resumption of production continues to be a shortage of

parts from Mexico, which is being ravaged by coronavirus. General Motors was forced to push back the addition of a third shift at its Fort Wayne, Indiana Assembly Plant for one week to June 20 due to a shortage of parts. Ford will not resume full production until July.

General Motors in particular is making extra efforts to increase production, since its inventory never fully recovered from the 40-day strike last year. Overall, the shutdowns due to the pandemic eliminated 2.8 million units of North American light-vehicle production for the first six months of 2020, according to a report in the industry publication *Automotive News*. LMC Automotive, which forecasts sales trends, said full-year vehicle output in 2020 will likely fall overall by 3.4 million units, or 21 percent, compared to 2019.

The push for production is leading automakers to disregard even the limited health and safety measures in place. Ford workers writing in to *autoblog.com* complain that Ford is skirting safety procedures. Workers from the Ford Kansas City and Dearborn Truck plants said that tools were not being cleaned between shifts, nor were break areas. At Dearborn Truck, three workers occupied a single nine-foot area, making proper distancing impossible. While previously Ford said it would shut down operations 24 hours for cleaning after a COVID-19 case was discovered, that has been reduced to just 15 minutes.

A temporary part-time worker at Fiat Chrysler Jefferson Assembly in Detroit told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that the company was going all out for production, focusing on its most profitable vehicles.

“So many full-timers have called off on health issues that the company is hiring hundreds of brand new TPTs every day. A lot of the new workers have never worked in a plant before and they're being forced to work 60 hours a week to fill in because of the absenteeism. I heard there was one new worker who works 10 hours a day at Amazon, gets a few hours sleep, and comes here for another 10 hours of work.

“We don't get any information from the company or the union if a worker tests positive for COVID-19. There should be a forum that lets workers know this person on this line was sick, but there isn't.”

He said that since the restart of production, the vaunted safety protocols have been steadily eroded. “When we started back up on May 18, there would be a half-hour before the shift and a half-hour at the end of the shift for cleaning. The line did not move until 5:30 am, instead of 5 am. They issued special, clear plastic gloves for

cleaning, but they literally ran out of them on the second day. The allotted 30 minutes at each end of the shift was cut down to 25, then 20, and now it's just 10 minutes at the end of the shift, and they've tried to take that away.”

“On the B Crew they were stopping the lines at 3 pm and cleaning until the bell rang at 3:30 pm. But now they are trying to make them work until the bell rings to stop working. Workers believe they have the right to clean at the end of the shift. The other day, I heard, workers on B Crew hit the button to stop production so they could clean their workstations before the end of the shift. The supervisor restarted the line, but workers just let the cars go by, forcing the line to stop again.”

The UAW has worked hand in hand with management in ramping up production, regardless of the danger to the health and safety of workers and their families. Local union officials at the Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville have denounced workers for taking time off, joining management in saying high rates of absenteeism were imperiling their jobs. Union officials have repeatedly declared their full-throated support to restoring full production.

In the face of these life-and-death issues, workers must take the initiative to protect themselves. In every factory, workers should elect rank-and-file safety committees to assert their right to decent and safe working conditions. This include control of line speed, working hours, and safety conditions. If conditions are not safe, workers have every right to stop production.

The well-being of workers and their families must take precedence over management's mad drive for profit, but this requires a struggle. It will not come from the UAW or corporate-dominated government agencies such as OSHA, but only from workers themselves.



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