

Faurecia workers denounce unsafe return to work

Tim Rivers
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“The safety measures are not right. We have some separation; but if somebody coughs, the flimsy masks they give us are not going to protect anyone. The cough is going right through it. We are not even six feet apart—more like two to three feet. They say with a mask on, you can be closer than six feet. But I don’t believe it.”

Workers from the Faurecia plant in Saline, Michigan, 44 miles west of Detroit, reported to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that conditions at the 1.3 million-square-foot facility, which manufactures interior components for Fiat Chrysler, Ford and Tesla, are reaching the boiling point.

From a roster of 1,900, hundreds of workers are absent on any given day because of the unsafe conditions. The company backed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union is turning the screws to force workers into the shop in spite of the presence of COVID-19. In just two weeks since the plant reopened, threats of firings and the termination of unemployment benefits have reached a fever pitch.

“They don’t care about the workers,” continued the worker we shall call Sharon. “They don’t care about our health. They clearly don’t. Because if they did, they would not be so quick to send us back to work.”

“The return to work in the auto industry makes no sense. How are you going to let less than five people into a store at a time, but you let thousands of people into a plant at one time? That doesn’t make any sense to me. We are all in confined spaces close to each other. We are bound to catch it.”

“Why do you think a whole line is calling off at one time? We are working in a confined space, and we are scared we are going to catch it,” Sharon said.

CDC guidelines recommend a 24-hour cooling-off period for an entire facility to allow virus particles suspended in air to settle before beginning the process of sanitizing a work area that has been exposed to COVID-19. But when a worker tested positive on the Jeep line at Saline, they relieved that crew for the afternoon, kept the rest of the plant at full production, and brought the Jeep line back to work the

next day.

“When the union did say something about the worker testing positive,” added a co-worker Tamisha, “it seemed like they had to admit that because people were finding out about it. They just do the bare minimum. And they are trying to make us come to work as if they are management. It just seems like the union does not have our best interests at heart because they are only trying to get us back to work.”

“If people are catching the virus inside the plant, they shouldn’t make us go to work,” Sharon continued. “They should care, instead of just going into their offices. They say they’re going to clean the place, but only so they can send us back to work.”

Workers are turning to social media and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* because they fear the company and the union are concealing the spread of the disease.

The state of Michigan is among the hardest hit by coronavirus. If we add probable cases and deaths to the confirmed numbers, it brings the totals in the state to 66,000 cases and more than 6,000 deaths. Desperate to resume profit-making after nearly three months without deliveries to customers, Faurecia is preventing workers from taking time off.

The company works on a “points” system, punishing workers with dismissal after accruing eight points for infractions such as unapproved time off or tardiness of a few minutes. Its enforcer for the policy is the UAW.

In an April 30 post on the UAW Local 892 Facebook page, a union rep wrote, “I just want to clarify a few things. 1. The union is all of us. 2. We do not allow, advocate, nor negotiate layoffs. 3. The world globally is in a crisis. 4. Ford Motor Company has declared a \$2 billion loss in the first quarter. Unfortunately, our members are bound to be impacted. ...”

“That tells me that they are just for the profit of the company,” Sharon said. “All you care about is money. You don’t care about our health. We have had this problem so many times. I just feel like this is the last straw.”

“They are doing the safety measures only halfway; and

when people are getting sick, they try to hide it. I've had co-workers come up to me and say, 'three people on my line have coronavirus.' And they don't even know who they have been in contact with. If one person on the line gets it, it can spread to the whole line.

"They said they were going to clean the line down. I saw them, and it just didn't look like they were doing it thoroughly. The union reps came out and said it was just one salaried employee infected. But who knows?"

Tamisha agreed. "As soon as there was a positive case, we should have sent them all straight out the door. Don't let other people come into contact with people who could have possibly contracted the disease.

"The union just came around telling everybody that it was a salaried employee that had it and that they were going to clean the line...and, basically, we should keep working. They want somebody to work during the pandemic. That's their main reason for saying that."

Sharon went on to pinpoint the financial motive behind the rush back to work. "That is what it seems like they are saying, 'We expect you to work because we lost so much money as a company during the pandemic.' They said that Ford lost \$2 billion because of the pandemic. The union rep definitely brought that up as the reason why we need to be at work."

Faurecia, a French-owned transnational corporation, is the sixth-largest auto parts maker in the world, with factories in 35 countries. In the last five years, the company raised its profitability from 4.4 percent of sales or just over \$1 billion in 2015 to 7.2 percent of sales or \$1.44 billion in 2019. The Saline plant accounts for about 5.5 percent of total global sales, or \$1.1 billion out of total sales worldwide of \$20 billion.

"The guys in the union are just lying," Sharon said. "Every time we go to the union about anything, we are going to be waiting forever. Now they are backing the company: 'You must come to work. We are not accepting any call-offs.' They sound just like the company. They don't say anything about anybody's health. They say a little something, like, 'Safety first,' but it doesn't mean anything."

Another worker added, "The union is just making money off the workers. They do nothing for us." He went on to describe conditions in the plant, wearing a mask and face shield while working around heat-producing machinery. "We are sweating in there in the winter. Now it is unbearable."

"For us the whole thing is very stressful," Sharon added. "They have employees working there for years and years, and they are not worried about their health. Then why would I care about the company?"

Following an overwhelming strike vote last fall, the UAW pulled the Faurecia workers out on a stunt that lasted just eight hours before forcing them back to work with a sellout contract.

"We had the same problem when we were picketing," she added. "It was like we were begging them. And we weren't asking for that much. But they were just not going to care because they are only concerned about their money. They have so much money. Now they are falling short a few millions, and they want us to jump up.

"Oh, now you have a problem. But what about when we needed more money? You didn't want to work with us at all. But now you want us to work with you. What about all that money that you guys got from the CARES Act? And you are acting like \$2 billion is pure loss. So, they are trying to sugar-coat it like, 'Oh, we lost this much money. So, we only have just a little bit left.'

"The Democrats and Republicans voted for the CARES Act because they want to keep these big companies running. All they care about is the money.

"That money should be used for the workers. We are the most important. They always preach about 'safety first.' But that includes the coronavirus. If that means we need to stay home a little bit longer, then that is what we should do.

"The unions do whatever the company calls for because they are bought and paid for. Their interest is in profit. We need to be in charge because we are the ones who are going to work, the ones who know our struggles. We need to be in charge of things. We are the ones who care."

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its statement, Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives!

This is why workers require their own organizations. In every factory, workplace, and office, workers should organize and elect trusted and respected workers who will represent them. They should utilize all available tools, including social media, to reach out to workers throughout their industry and in other sectors to coordinate their activities and share information.

"All workers should unite," Sharon said. "A world awareness should be brought among workers so that they can understand that. I feel like we are turning a new leaf. Anything is possible. It is only a matter of time before the workers rebel."



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