

Companies vow no more shutdowns for COVID-19 as US auto plants resume full production

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US automakers Ford and Fiat Chrysler (FCA) report they will resume full production at all their North American plants on Monday, ahead of their previously announced schedule despite continued concerns over the spread of COVID-19.

FCA said the second shift at its Belvidere, Illinois assembly plant, which produces the Jeep Cherokee, is set to return on Monday. It was the last FCA plant to return to pre-pandemic levels of operation.

Meanwhile, Ford will return third shifts at assembly plants in Chicago, Dearborn Michigan and Louisville Assembly and Kentucky Truck in Louisville. The plants build SUVs as well as bestselling F-Series pickup trucks.

General Motors has confirmed that it will resume full North American production by the end of June.

The auto companies are still keeping a tight lid on the number of COVID-19 infections among plant employees even as infections have been reported at plants of all the major automakers.

There have been cases at Ford plants in Chicago, Dearborn, and Kansas City, Missouri. There have also been reports of cases at General Motors plants in Arlington, Texas; Wentzville, Missouri; Kansas City, Kansas and Spring Hill, Tennessee as well as Fiat Chrysler plants in Toledo, Ohio and the Detroit area. At least 4 workers have tested positive at electric carmaker Tesla, which operates a giant factory in Fremont, California.

Auto factories in the South operated by Japanese and German automakers have seen a rise in cases as the novel coronavirus surges in the area after the premature reopening of local economies.

Toyota has reported 40 cases at its US facilities,

including its huge Georgetown, Kentucky facility. Volkswagen has reported 12 cases at its Chattanooga, Tennessee plant since restarting production last month as COVID-19-related hospitalizations have surged in the state. Nissan has confirmed three cases at its Canton, Mississippi plant. Mississippi has the second fastest growth of new coronavirus cases of any US state.

On Thursday German carmaker BMW reported 14 cases at its plant in Spartanburg, South Carolina. The plant employs 11,000 workers and builds a wide range of SUVs, most of which are exported to overseas markets, including China. The same day that BMW reported the outbreak at its Spartanburg plants South Carolina saw a record number of new COVID-19 cases, 987, and four deaths. The state was one of the first to remove lockdown restrictions.

BMW claimed that all the new COVID-19 infections were unrelated and that the individuals have been quarantined and their work areas cleaned. Production at the plant continued without interruption.

A worker at the Spartanburg plant wrote on Facebook, “No one's checking temps on night shift. We're all required to wear masks; we can be walked out if we fail to do so. And we have been hearing rumors about the 4-14 infected (as the stories changed) that tested positive and were sent home for the last two weeks+/-.

“I do believe the bathrooms are disinfected between shifts, and there are signs everywhere reminding us to distance and wash our hands and wear our masks. I don't think they care at all, but they've done a good job covering their bases when they are asked ‘what did you do about Corona?’”

Another wrote, “We got three confirmed cases where I’m working and we [are] not getting hazard pay or nothing, but we have to work or have no job, this is not right at all.”

“They care nothing about their employees,” a third worker noted. “The safety NOR the wellbeing. I reported a positive [case] exposure last Wednesday to MY BOSS and on the 7th day, got in touch with HR and was told he never even made a case or reported it.”

All the major carmakers have expressed their determination to continue production without interruption even as COVID-19 cases surge in many areas of the US. In their effort to prevent disruption, car companies are attempting to cover up coronavirus infections at their factories and provide as little information as possible. This reckless attitude thwarts the possibility of contacting and quarantining workers who may have been exposed to the infection.

Workers continue to express anger at the policy of cover-up, which places workers’ lives in danger. A worker at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant posted on her Facebook page, “Today after work I was told by a friend that 2 people have tested positive for coronavirus. Isn't it illegal for them not to inform us? Aren't they supposed to tell us?”

A worker at the FCA transmission operations in Kokomo, Indiana wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about conditions at the factory. “At the Tipton transmission plant in Indiana it is a joke. There are people dropping left and right every night in all the Kokomo plants, and the Tipton plant is off the charts. They are threatening to fire us workers if we go to medical.” The worker reported that cleaning in the plants was atrocious, “nobody wants to admit we should not be inside these plants.”

A worker at the GM plant in Wentzville, Missouri told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “The talk is a member of management got tested, worked the full day and didn't tell anyone. Tested positive. They say he was working at the front door handing out masks...35 workers demanded to be tested immediately...”

Behind the homicidal focus of the auto companies on production are financial pressures, including the massive growth of corporate debt. According to a report Wednesday in the Wall Street Journal “As of June 16, car manufacturers and their suppliers had raised \$21.7 billion in extra long-term debt as a result

of the Covid shutdowns ...” The *Journal* noted that the additional debt brought their total debt load to \$1.1 trillion. That was 3.4 times total auto company earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization. At the end of last year the ratio stood at 3.0.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit auto companies were facing lower returns on investment as they faced the added cost of research and development of electric and autonomous vehicles. Further compounding the pressure on auto companies have been stagnant or declining sales in their major markets; the US, Europe and China.

These debts must eventually be paid, and that can only come through the intensified exploitation of the working class. To carry this out they are determined to suppress all opposition to the ramp up of production, which is being carried out with the full support of the United Auto Workers.

This raises urgently the need for workers to take the defense of health and safety into their own hands by building rank and file safety committees, democratically chosen by workers themselves, in every work location. This is connected with the fight to end the subordination of production to the demands of Wall Street through the nationalization of auto and other basic industry under the democratic ownership and control of the working class.



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