

“It’s up to workers to fight this virus”

Fiat Chrysler threatens to fire workers who stop production over COVID-19 concerns

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30 June 2020

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter will assist autoworkers and other workers in establishing rank-and-file safety committees. Email us at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more.

Just days after Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers at two Detroit area assembly plants shut down production over concerns about the spread of COVID-19, anger continues to grow over unsafe conditions and the cover-up of new cases by management and the United Auto Workers union.

Workers at Jefferson North and the Sterling Heights assembly plants set up rank-and-file safety committees to protect the lives of workers in the plants and to coordinate action with workers across the auto industry and in other factories and workplaces. In response to this courageous action, the committees have been contacted by workers throughout the US for information on how to set up rank-and-file safety committees in their own plants.

One inquiry came from a Kansas City Ford worker, who wrote that workers at his plant “do not trust the corporation and union right now about these coronavirus issues” and would like to “know how we can form a Rank-and-File Safety Committee in our plant. We haven’t been given updates from Ford and UAW after we heard rumors about employees being sent home due to having this virus. We need this system out here ASAP.”

The Jefferson North and Sterling Heights rank-and-file safety committees issued six demands, including immediate notification of any cases of COVID-19, the closing of the factory for at least 24 hours after a case is confirmed for deep cleaning of the entire plant, social distancing when entering and exiting the plant and during all breaks, and the halting of production for 10 minutes every hour to enable workers to take off their masks, rest and cool off. They also called for regular, universal testing and the right to refuse to work, without retaliation from management or the UAW, if conditions are not safe.

In response to this growing initiative by workers, corporate

management and the UAW have launched a campaign to threaten workers with termination if they stop production to protect their lives.

On Monday, supervisors at FCA facilities across the country temporarily halted production and visited each workstation to read a provocative letter from a top corporate executive. According to a recording of one of these sessions that workers sent to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, the executive said, “Unauthorized work stoppages in our facilities create both disturbances and potentially safety concerns and therefore cannot be tolerated.”

It continued, “FCA will investigate any unauthorized work stoppage and will appropriately, immediately and decisively act on the employee that was found to have unnecessarily instigated such activities.” The letter threatens, “In addition to appropriate disciplinary action, unauthorized work stoppages will result in zero pay. These protocols apply to all represented and non-represented employees regardless of where they work.”

The letter falsely claimed that FCA and the UAW had “put in place a number of processes to address safety concerns” and instructed workers to rely on “your supervisor, your team leader, environmental health, your UAW representative, human resource representative, and FCA ethics hotline” to report dangerous conditions. In other words, workers should place their faith in the very same people who have been covering up the truth and demanding that workers sacrifice their health and the health of their loved ones for corporate profit.

One of these new measures include a “hydration system” to supposedly address the problem of workers passing out from having to work with masks on in extremely hot factories. With unbounded generosity, FCA will now supply workers with two bottles of water per shift!

After reading this letter, the supervisors instructed workers to sign a list indicating that they had been informed of this new policy. If they decided not to sign, workers were told to

write “RTS” (Refused to Sign) next to their name. Managers claimed not to know whether this would prompt retaliatory action against the resistant workers.

Before signing, workers asked if they could get a copy of the letter or take a picture of it with their phones. Managers said the company explicitly prohibited this, leading many workers to refuse to sign. “Just had management try to read some letter to us about Covid and have us sign a paper,” one worker at Jefferson North reported. “Several said they couldn’t even hear [what] was being said over the noise of the machinery, while others refused to sign without a copy and walked away.”

The UAW, which has long operated as a bribed tool of the automakers, has been silent about FCA’s threats and did not respond to an inquiry by WSWS reporters about the letter.

The Jefferson North Rank-and-File Safety Committee quickly denounced this attack against the rights of workers who acted collectively and justifiably to protect their lives. “The company and the UAW would not resort to these threats if conditions in the factories were really safe. Management and the union continue to cover up the spread of the virus and the unhealthy conditions in the plant. If any worker is victimized for standing up for a safe working environment, then every worker in the plant should stop work until they get their job back.”

“Wow. Firing instigators, these are fear tactics, plain and simple,” said Johnny, a worker at the Toledo North Assembly Plant, where the message was also read to workers. “These are blatant violations of labor laws and OSHA [the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration], which allow for work stoppages over safety concerns,” Johnny reported, saying he thought that is why managers refused to give workers a copy.

“Keep the line moving, that’s all management and the UAW are concerned with,” another Jefferson North Assembly worker said. “They haven’t taken any serious measures. They tell us we’re having our temps taken but the majority of infections are being spread by people who are asymptomatic. They want us to sign these papers to deflect from their liability.

“Trump and the Congress are only concerned about Wall Street. They don’t care if a bunch of older workers die, then they won’t have to pay out Social Security. But we have rights, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution that our right to life is non-negotiable. The UAW is not our voice. OSHA isn’t helping.” OSHA has issued only one citation after receiving more than 5,000 COVID-19-related unsafe workplace complaints.

“We, the workers, have to be the responsible adults in the room. It’s up to us to fight this virus. Workers don’t want to die or see their families die. They want to take away

unemployment benefits and force people back to work. This is class war. It’s a war, not over something ridiculous like taking oil from Iraq, but for life.”

These sentiments were echoed by a Tennessee auto parts worker, who told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, “Regular workers like myself are the frontline bullet-catchers who are replaceable.” Mid- and high-level managers who work from home, he said, “were protected like the officers, and corporations are the generals who have nothing to risk except their reputation in stock and finance.”

Workers from FCA Trenton Engine, 30 miles south of Detroit, reported that news of the work stoppages at Jefferson North and Sterling Heights Assembly had swept through their plant.

Denouncing the phony safety measures at their plant, one worker said, “They tell the news media they are cleaning everything, but they are not wiping down stations and work areas. They have stickers on the floor just for show. ‘Let’s pretend like we are making everybody in the plant stand on these x’s so that we have social distancing.’ But that is not what they are doing at all. Everything is a lie and a fake.”

On Monday morning, word went out that a worker in the south plant of the Trenton complex had tested positive. Fearing that workers would halt production, management sent four teams to the break room and organized a hasty cleaning of the area. “Instead of sending us home,” one worker reported, “they quarantined four teams inside the plant. We should be shutting down for 72 hours, since the virus stays on surfaces that long. FCA doesn’t need more money! It’s a prison working there.”

The worker said he agreed with the rank-and-file committees at Jefferson North and Sterling Heights. “We need a fighting organization that will take up the question of safety for the workers,” he concluded.

The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* will do everything to assist workers in forming rank-and-file safety committees and broadening the struggle across all industries and workplaces to fight the pandemic and save lives.



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